Instant Mentoring: Sharing Wisdom and Getting Advice Online with E-Mentoring

The concept behind mentoring has existed since as early as ancient Greece, when Odysseus placed his friend Mentor in charge of his son Telemachus while he went off to fight in the Trojan War in the late 12th century BC. Obviously, we've come a long way since the days of Homer's Odyssey, but only recently have technological advances allowed for changes in the way mentoring is conducted, removing the necessity of meeting face-to-face whenever the mentee has a question or the mentor an idea to share. E-mail and the Internet have opened up new avenues for mentors and mentees to find and connect with each other—whether they work in the same office or on opposite sides of the globe. Today, nearly everything can be done through the Internet, from talking to friends across the world to ordering take-out from a neighborhood restaurant to paying bills without leaving your desk—but what about getting personalized training or advice to advance your career as a food and nutrition professional? Web-based mentoring, or e-mentoring, if used correctly, shows that online mentoring relationships can be just as productive and fulfilling as traditional ones (Figure 1). After establishing the basics of the traditional mentoring relationship in last month’s Journal, this article concludes our two-part series on mentoring in the modern workplace by exploring the nuances of mentoring online.

When a mentoring relationship moves into cyberspace, people are often concerned that human connections may get lost in what seems to be a correspondence with a computer screen. Randy Emelo, CEO of Triple Creek Associates, a developer of e-mentoring programs in Greenwood Village, CO, says not to worry. While technology is the main tool for this mentoring relationship, Emelo says the program is still powered by and centered on humans. A good Web-based mentoring tool matches people up in an organization or group based on expertise and skills that the mentee wants to learn (Figure 2). The program as a whole and the individual mentoring relationships should be focused on knowledge acquisition. Like traditional mentoring, e-mentoring is not counseling or a therapy session. Although personal issues may naturally arise during the mentoring relationship, it’s important to maintain a focus on professional development (1,2).

In a traditional mentoring program, administrators had mentors and mentees fill out paper questionnaires to make the appropriate match. With Web tools, participants can fill out forms online and create profiles. This allows the mentor, mentee, and program administrators to easily search for information about participants in order to create optimal matches. The technology also helps administrators to coordinate projects, and a variety of modes of communication, including e-mail, chat functions, video conferencing, and phone conversations, help to facilitate the mentoring relationship (3) (Figure 3).

E-MENTORING PROGRAMS

E-mentoring comes in a variety of different shapes and sizes and can be used in almost any situation in which relationships form. This could mean peer-to-peer mentoring, adult-to-child mentoring, or career mentoring. Programs may be general in focus or targeted toward understanding a particular topic or developing a specific skill. E-mentoring can also be used to reach groups instead of individuals and provide a venue for networking.

For example, MentorNet is an e-mentoring program in the science and engineering field that caters specifically to women and other underrepresented groups in the industry. The program offers encouragement to these groups and aims to further their progress in scientific and technical fields through the use of a technology-supported mentoring network (4). It is designed to provide information, encouragement, and support to community college, undergraduate, and graduate students, as well as postdoctoral scholars and untenured faculty. The system matches mentees with mentors who have work experience related to the interests of the mentee, and provides training and support on how to carry out a mentoring relationship. Typically, the relationship lasts about 8 months and the program recommends at least 20 minutes a week dedicated to mentoring (4).

E-Mentor Illinois is “a system of electronic conferences in which new teachers participate in conversations with experienced teachers from across the state of Illinois in order to engage in professional conversations about teaching and learning and in order to both give and receive advice” (5). This e-mentoring program uses customized software that offers discussion areas, e-mail, newsgroups, mailing lists, instant messaging, chat, blogs, wikis, and file transfer capability, allowing mentors and mentees to find the best way to share ideas.

The American Society of Agricultural and Biological Engineers provides an example of e-mentoring on an association-wide level. Student and young professional members are matched with experienced mentors using electronic profiles describing each mentor’s work experience and technical interests, which are then posted anonymously online for poten-
mentees to choose from. Once matched, mentors are asked to contact their mentees every other week during the year and encouraged to “initiate discussion and give advice and guidance freely, based on your experiences as an engineer and your mentee’s learning needs and development areas. You are expected to be the expert in this relationship or, if need be, willing to help the mentee find access to the appropriate experts” (6).

In dietetics, there are programs that drill down to a more specific interest. The Dietitians in Business and Communications (DBC) dietetics practice group (DPG) offers a mentoring program geared to offering guidance to up-and-comers in the field (7). Jaime Schwartz, MS, RD, account supervisor, Food and Wellness Group, Ketchum Public Relations, first experienced mentoring through the DBC program. She was a mentee for 4 years and for the last 4 years she’s served as the Mentor Program chair. Schwartz says the relationships are typically informal and are mostly carried out using e-mail and phone.

“My mentees usually first want to know about what I do as a dietitian in public relations and how I got there. When they ask for specific advice about how to get their foot in the door, I always try to tailor my replies to their own career interest and expertise, and give them meaningful direction so that they can start shaping and achieving their own goals.”

There are also smaller-scale mentor programs. Jennifer Westerkamp is a dietetic intern at Massachusetts General Hospital, and she’s the co-founder of All Access Internships. She developed her own method by simply matching herself up with a potential mentor.

“My first mentor was Julie Burns, MS, RD, a Chicago-based dietitian and owner of SportFuel and Eat Like the Pros. When I ‘Googled’ Chicago dietitian and she popped up, I sent her an e-mail and told her how interested I was in her career. Then, she offered me an internship with her two companies. Our mentorship relationship was more valuable to me than any traditional dietetics student job or any course in school.”

Westerkamp has had other mentoring relationships, including the Nutrition Entrepreneurs’ Mentoring Program, but this one was something she tailored herself. Now, Westerkamp acts as a mentor to dietetic students herself.

The benefits of e-mentoring

Meredith Hink, MS, RD, Corporate Nutrition Services manager with Rein-hart Foodservice in La Crosse, WI, recently started her own e-mentoring program. The program she helped launch in October 2008 is a way for students to connect with participating members of the Vegetarian Nutrition dietetic practice group. Hink says that although the program is young, she’s already seen some of the benefits of providing mentoring electronically. “We have been able to provide an atmosphere where nutrition professionals and students are able to network in a cost- and time-efficient manner.”

One of those students is Jennifer Eatman at Arizona State University. After graduation she hopes to find a career educating people on how to live a healthy and sustainable lifestyle through diet. She also works as a sous chef and hopes her career involves work with actual food preparation in a private or a group practice. Eatman chose to join Hink’s mentoring program to help move her closer to this kind of career. She was matched up with Ryan Andrews, MS, MA, RD, director of Education at Precision Nutrition in Arvada, CO. Now, Eatman and Andrews carry out their mentoring relationship through e-mail. “This has helped me with confidence as I work through my program and excitement to get into the working field. Mr Andrews seems to really enjoy what he does, and I look forward to that being me someday.”

“E-mentoring has the advantage of quick responses,” say Eatman. “As soon as I have a question and hit send, Mr Andrews responds back rather quickly, and that cuts out waiting for the next face-to-face meeting and keeps things fresh and up to pace. The convenience is great as is the quality of the advice.”

Andrews agrees that e-mentoring allows for a quicker response. “It’s nice to have access to the mentor at any time. You can say, ‘Hey, I’m thinking of something right now. I’m going to e-mail them’ versus, if you have an advisor in college, you have to schedule an appointment. They have to be ready to actually sit down and talk to you, which can be difficult if your advisor is busy or has other things going on.”

Paradoxically, the same technology that allows for instant responses also

### Table: Traditional mentoring vs E-mentoring

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<tr>
<th>Traditional mentoring</th>
<th>E-mentoring</th>
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<tr>
<td>Local; pool of mentors limited to those in the geographic area</td>
<td>Global; pool of mentors is unlimited; matched according to background, interests, and area of expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td>One-on-one; face-to-face</td>
<td>Mentors and mentees may electronically participate in multiple mentoring relationships simultaneously; allowing participants to expand their professional networks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scheduled meetings</td>
<td>Mentoring conversations may occur any time the mentee has a question or the mentor has advice to share, often with instant feedback, as often or as rarely as necessary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extemporaneous conversation</td>
<td>Written discourse provides time for thoughtful reflection and greater candor</td>
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<tr>
<td>General in scope</td>
<td>Ability to have multiple mentors allows for narrow scope of subject matter discussed with each; more intense, focused mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Typically long term</td>
<td>May be long-term relationships, project-length collaborations, or brief mini-mentorships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization-wide traditional mentoring programs require significant staff time and money</td>
<td>E-mentoring software eases the administrative burden of a large mentoring program and costs less than bringing mentors together in person</td>
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Figure 1. Traditional mentoring vs e-mentoring.
provides more time for reflection, as a mentor can pause to consider a mentee’s question rather than having to provide an immediate response in a face-to-face meeting. “Once you remove extemporaneous communication from the equation, people get more thoughtful,” explains Randy Emelo. “Extroverts become more introverted; introverts become more extroverted. The dialogue becomes more context-rich. It becomes more intentional. People spend more time framing up issues instead of pushing information at each other. It becomes more collaborative and more reflective in nature.” In addition to providing the opportunity to reflect on a mentee’s question and provide more considered feedback, communicating electronically can also make both mentors and
mentees more comfortable exchanging ideas they might be more reluctant to express in a face-to-face interaction. A study of online mentoring
in an undergraduate nutrition course found that “online communication provides students and mentors with the opportunity to be candid in their questions and responses” (8).

Eatman recalls a time when her connection with Andrews provided valuable advice that shaped her studies. They were discussing the direction in which Eatman wanted to take her studies, and she mentioned in one of her e-mails that she was not interested in her clinical classes. “He pointed out that he enjoys working with any client who has an open mind for improving their health. Ever since then, I have a new attitude with those classes and have found I actually have a knack for clinical situations and problem solving.”

Jaime Schwartz had Roberta Duyff, MS, RD, FADA, as a mentor. Schwartz says she remembers a time when her e-mentoring relationship helped her open the door to opportunity. “I knew that I wanted to work in nutrition communications, but didn’t know how to get there and was facing the catch-22 of needing experience to get experience, but couldn’t get experience without having it. Roberta wasn’t necessarily looking for options for me, but when a colleague of hers mentioned she needed a graduate student to work with her, Roberta from St Louis recommended me in New Jersey. It was a perfect fit. That Roberta simply recalled our e-mail conversations even though we had never met and she was so busy at the time and took the time to make introductions between me and her colleague meant the world to me.”

Jennifer Westerkamp prefers e-mentoring because the relationship isn’t restricted by location. “You can access RDs [registered dietitians] from anywhere in the country through e-mail and you do not have to be limited to your area.” This is especially important for food and nutrition students or professionals in remote or rural areas who don’t have many options for finding a mentor in their area. E-mentoring allows such individuals to find mentors from a wider range of specialties and practice roles than would be available locally (8).

The ability to mentor more than one person at a time, or for a mentee to have more than one mentor at once, is another advantage of e-mentoring. Ryan Andrews mentors both Jennifer Eatman and another student. The students are at different levels in their education, but they both have questions on what to expect once they graduate. Whereas it would be difficult to schedule multiple face-to-face meetings with a variety of mentors or mentees about several different topics, once e-mentoring relationships are established, it’s relatively easy to e-mail one mentor, chat online with another, and get feedback on a shared document from a third, potentially all in the same day. And all mentorships need not be created equal. Some can take the form of a mini-mentorship, a shorter-term relationship, often with a more narrowly defined goal or topic, which allows the mentee to focus on developing a particular skill or knowledge base.

“I have been involved in mini-mentorships with quite a few RDs,” says Jennifer Westerkamp. “They have all given me different perspectives on my career, my job search and also advice on how to excel in my internship.” The E-Mentor Illinois program emphasizes the importance of getting different perspectives, noting that in traditional one-on-one mentoring, the mentee can sometimes feel as though “the mentor’s way is the only way. Through electronic mentoring, a community of educators provides a forum in which many ideas are shared and specific practices are debated within a variety of contexts” (5).

Establishing multiple mentorships also simultaneously creates a professional network that will serve a student or young professional throughout his or her career. “It is great to reach out to a lot of different professionals and get a variety of opinions,” says Westerkamp. “It is also a great way to network. I use Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIN to find RDs whose careers interest me and then I reach out to them, simply because I want to know what they know.”

Social networking Web sites like those mentioned by Westerkamp can serve as useful platforms for e-mentoring. Such sites give individuals who may not have access to an organized e-mentoring program through their school or organization the opportunity to browse profiles, find others with similar interests, establish communication, and join groups and discussion forums with like-minded individuals. While they don’t offer the customized matching of more sophisticated e-mentoring programs, social networking sites can make up for their lack of specificity through sheer volume. Facebook, for example, has an official American Dietetic Association (ADA) page that more than 13,000 people “like” and a Dietitian/Nutritionist group with over 7,000 members and an active discussion board where potential mentors and mentees could find each other (9). Meanwhile, LinkedIN is home to

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**Figure 3. E-mentoring tools.**

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<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>The most basic e-mentoring medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online discussion groups</td>
<td>Allows a mentor to reach more than one mentee at once</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instant messaging and chat</td>
<td>Provides the immediacy of direct conversation without the need to meet in person</td>
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<td>Video conferencing</td>
<td>Puts faces to names and personalizes the e-mentoring relationship without the difficulty of travelling to meet each other</td>
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<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Allows mentors and mentees to record their thoughts and share them with others as they occur, and allows others to comment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>Allows mentors and mentees to create a collaborative Web site with information about both mentoring and their profession</td>
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<tr>
<td>Document sharing</td>
<td>Allows mentees to solicit input from mentors on documents they’ve created; allows mentors to share educational materials</td>
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more than 10,000 members who work in dietetics and offers several groups specifically for food and nutrition professionals (10,11). A quick search of these members or a message board post soliciting a mentor could quickly establish an e-mentorship. And with the ability to e-mail, chat, and post links, pictures, and video, social networking sites offer much of the same connectivity and functionality as professional e-mentoring software, at no cost.

**WORTH THE COST**

Many agencies and organizations are struggling during the current economic downturn. Offices have downsized, and things like mentoring programs are sometimes cut from the budget. The University of Minnesota Alumni Association’s Mentor Connection program, for example, has a budget of $7,000 per year to cover the cost of training materials, workshops, and social events for mentors and mentees. And that’s on top of the cost in staff time, as a staff member must act as a coordinator to plan events and maintain matches (12). In today’s economy, such expenditures may be viewed as luxuries.

But with e-mentoring, it’s possible to cut costs without sacrificing results. While many organizations value the benefits of traditional mentoring, Emelo makes the case for why e-mentoring is even better on the budget of any organization. “The downturn has been good for us because [clients are] realizing the expense of classroom training. Not only just flying people around the country to attend these physical training events, but also the limited effect they have, [and that they] are very costly and are a huge financial drain. So it’s much more cost-effective to allow the experts within the organizations to in a sense be a teacher and connect with other people.” Many e-mentoring programs are low-cost, high-impact tools, some of which can cost as little as $10 per user per year.

And the cost of e-mentoring could run even lower than that of a service like the Triple Creek program. Meredith Hink says her Vegetarian Nutrition e-mentoring program is mostly based on email. What does it cost a student to match up with a mentor?

“No cost other than Internet access, which most people can easily get access to in an inexpensive way,” Hink says. Zafi Hussain, editor of the book *Virtual Coach, Virtual Mentor*, explains that technologies such as instant messaging and audio and video conferencing allow people to connect with mentors anywhere, anytime. “It’s very cost-effective, it hugely reduces travel time, and it opens up access to mentors and coaches around the world,” says Hussain (13).

Companies with mentoring programs have also found that they can pay for themselves by reducing staff turnover rate and strengthening the culture of the organization. According to the Spherion Emerging Workforce Study, “employees with less than one year of service are twice as likely to seek employment elsewhere if there...
is no mentoring at their current workplace. Furthermore, the study reveals that the average cost of replacing these employees is approximately equal to one year’s benefits and salary” (14). Stephen Callender, EdD, who designs and implements corporate mentoring programs for Personnel Decisions International, also points out that employees who participate in mentoring programs, “are typically people you don’t want to lose—the high potentials, the next generation of leaders, the valued experts, the star performers” (14).

GETTING STARTED

After reading the Journal’s two-part series on mentoring, we hope you’re excited to get involved in the process—online or in person, as a mentor or mentee. We encourage you to avail yourself of the many opportunities currently available through ADA for both mentors and mentees. You can access these on the eatright.org site by clicking the Career Center link in the Student or Member sections and selecting “Mentoring Programs” from the pop-up menu for a list of opportunities for potential mentors and mentees to connect with each other in a variety of practice areas.

If you’re an individual looking for a mentor, but you can’t seem to find a formal program that’s just right for you, you can take matters into your own hands the way Jennifer Westerkamp did by seeking out the advice you’re looking for without the help of an established mentoring program. “Don’t be afraid to take initiative and ask for help. Find RDs that have interesting careers and just contact them. They might not have time to help you out, but they might know someone that does. Either way, you have nothing to lose.” For ADA members, participating in state and local affiliate dietetic associations, joining ADA groups, and subscribing to listserves is a great way to get in touch with potential mentors.

Whatever method you use, the mentors and mentees interviewed agree that e-mentoring has been beneficial not just personally, but to the food and nutrition field as a whole. Ryan Andrews volunteered to be a mentor not only to help others in their careers, but as a reminder that the food and nutrition field has so many options. “I like to think I’ve given them pretty good advice moving forward with how they approach their schooling and their internships. Most importantly, how they can better prepare themselves to be dietitians. You don’t have to wait until you have your dietitian credentials. You can start learning things, shadowing people, talking to clients, and getting involved now.” Andrews says that he can already see how students will come into the field with more knowledge and practice. “I think it’ll help getting younger students and interns involved sooner. It goes from textbook world to practical world almost overnight, so if you can transition into it sooner and get these tips from mentors and say, ‘Hey, I can shadow a mentor, I can go volunteer at this clinic,’ you’re getting that practical applied experience already.”

Hink says with the use of e-mentoring, a positive change for the field comes even easier. “We all lead very hectic schedules, no matter at what stage in our career or education. People constantly use Web-based programs to stay in touch because it allows them to multitask—converse, send photos, attach information, and attach links—in a cost-efficient and time-efficient manner.”

References