

MENTORING AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Katarina Tiklova¹ - Marian Holienka²

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to analyze the experiences with entrepreneurship mentoring in Slovakia and, based on the obtained findings, to propose practical recommendations for further development of this area in Slovak business practice. Data used in our study were obtained by personal/telephone semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, and were analysed using the content analysis and narrative analysis approaches. Based on our findings, we concluded that mentoring in business is a relevant topic and a subject of interest among entrepreneurship community in Slovakia. On the other hand, this field still has potential for improvement. Thus, we propose some specific recommendations in the short, medium as well as long term perspective.

Keywords: mentoring, entrepreneurship, Slovakia, mentor, mentee, narrative analysis, experiences, recommendations.

Introduction

The current young generation is characterized by the fact of rejecting the established way of building a career as an employee in various companies. Compared to previous generations, in nowadays society there are many young people with fundamentally different approach to the work that should earn their living for many years. It is not trendy anymore to obtain a stable job in a well-known and prosperous company, but to build an own business which fulfills dreams, transmits even the craziest ideas out of the head into the real life and ensures the independence and freedom together with the feeling of pride. The fact, that young people are becoming more and more courageous to throw themselves into the volatile waters of business, is extremely commendable, but it should not be forgotten that Rome was not built in a day. Despite of the fact that educational institutions try to prepare their students for current socio-economic context, most of them still prefer theoretical knowledge over practical experience. For this reason, starting businesses should consider the use of mentoring and collaboration with an experienced partner.

The contribution of this article lies in its focus on the practical aspects of mentoring in entrepreneurship and subsequent formulation of practical recommendations that could improve this field in Slovakia. The research question of this article is to identify what are the

¹ Mgr. Katarina Tiklova, Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Management, Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship, Odbojarov 10, Bratislava 820 05, e-mail: tiklova.katarina@gmail.com

² Mgr. Marian Holienka, PhD., Comenius University in Bratislava, Faculty of Management, Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship, Odbojarov 10, Bratislava 820 05, e-mail: marian.holienka@fm.uniba.sk

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experiences of novice and skilled entrepreneurs in Slovakia with mentoring, what they consider most beneficial, and where they see the most urgent needs for improvement.

1 Literature review

1.1 Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the tools of guiding and counseling in the workplace and should be read as a method of transfer of knowledge and experience. It describes the operation of skilled people who pass on their knowledge to an inexperienced person. In the foreground of mentoring there are two members, often from the same organization who share knowledge. Important aspects in this relationship are trust, openness and mutual respect (Edelkraut and Graf, 2014).

M. Jacobi collected different definitions of mentoring, some of which are listed below: (Jacobi, 1991, p. 4-5)

- „Mentoring ... is a process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct, counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as protégés“ (Blackwell, 1989).
- „Mentoring as a function of educational institutions can be defined as a one-to-one learning relationship between an older person and a younger person that is based on modeling behavior and extended dialogue between them“ (Lester & Johnson, 1981).
- „By our definition, mentoring is a form of professional socialization whereby a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as a guide, role model, teacher and patron of a less experienced (often younger) protégé. The aim of the relationship is the further development and refinement of the protégé’s skills, abilities, and understanding“ (Moore & Amezy, 1988).
- (A mentor is) „a senior member of the profession or organization who shares values, provides emotional support, career counseling, information and advice, professional and organizational sponsorship, and facilitates access to key organizational and professional networks“ (Olian et al., 1988).
- (Mentoring is) „a relationship with a person who took a personal interest in your career and who guided or sponsored you“ (Roche, 1978).

The main participants in mentoring are the mentor and the mentee. The mentor is an experienced person who brings new knowledge in the relationship to support the development of the mentee. Mentee is therefore a person with less experience which is supported by a mentor in the development - this role is central to the whole process of mentoring (Edelkraut and Graf, 2014).

1.2 Mentoring and entrepreneurship

Benefits of mentoring in business have been aptly summarized by many authors in a variety of research and analysis. Sullivan concluded from his research on entrepreneurial education that learning is an integral part of successful business and mentoring is an efficient instrument through which entrepreneurs have the opportunity to learn from the experience of others (Sullivan, 2000). Cox and Jennings support this statement based on their findings that

the ability to learn from mistakes is crucial for a successful business (Cox and Jennings, 1995). Analysis of St-Jean and Audet are also similar, but these authors reported also the main difference between the organizational mentoring and business mentoring, which is the protection of the mentee - in business mentoring the mentee is provided with advice and guidance but the process does not include any level of protection. Business mentor helps the mentee to stand on his own feet and be able to act independently and proactively; he does not suggest the right solutions, but allows him to draw his own conclusions. St-Jean and Audet found that low levels of directive together with high level of engagement achieved the best results in the context of cooperation of experienced and new entrepreneurs. In other words - the very best mentors spend a lot of time with their mentees, but do not try to control them or build the next version of themselves out of them. They help them to perceive situations from different perspectives and estimate and consider the implications of their decisions (Audet and St-Jean, 2009).

In their further research St-Jean and Audet focused on the discovery of specific skills that entrepreneurs can improve through mentoring. These enhanced capabilities can be divided into two main categories - cognitive learning and affective learning. In the field of cognitive training had the entrepreneurs as mentees the opportunity to acquire new knowledge on the correct management of an organization and fill certain gaps in their knowledge. This knowledge can be both general and specific, depending on the needs of the mentee and the experience of the mentor. Discussions with mentors can also help the entrepreneurs to clarify their vision, which includes the reorganization of their knowledge and expertise. Often the situation arises in which entrepreneurs do not suffer from the lack of ideas, but they cannot choose the ones that correspond best to their objectives. A mentor can help in this situation to choose the right path or even show a brand new one, which the mentee previously overlooked. Another area of education was the skill-based training, but the results showed no significant values in this area. It should be noted that, although mentors may specialize in certain areas, their role in mentoring is rather general. The second major area is therefore the affective education. In this area entrepreneurs can get a better idea of who they are, who they want to become and what they want to achieve. The mentor can also serve as a mirror through which the entrepreneur can discover his strengths and correct his weaknesses (Audet and St-Jean, 2012).

The topic of mentoring in business is nowadays interesting also for specialized magazines published either in printed form or on the Internet. With these resources we can for example also make a number of points of how mentoring can enhance the business success. Based on data from a study carried out by the company UPS on small and medium-sized enterprises we can say that 70% of organizations with a mentor "survive" more than five years, which is more than twice compared to organizations without mentoring assistance. An even higher proportion of entrepreneurs, 88%, even stated in this study that the value of the aid of their mentor was really beyond the price. Another benefit of mentoring in business is that the entrepreneur mentor helps to find weaknesses in the business model. It can easily happen to the entrepreneurs in the beginning of their activities that they are too fixed on their plan and begin to suffer from tunnel vision. Mentor on the contrary has a certain detachment and a different perspective that is useful in cases where the entrepreneur uncritically stands by

his own opinions. Mentors are unlikely to have the right answers to all the questions, but in these cases they will be able and willing to refer the entrepreneur to someone else with the required knowledge and skills and thus actively assist in expanding the network of contacts and search for investors, clients and other consultants. But we should not forget that in any case the mentor accepts the responsibility for the business but only provides advice and extends the horizons (Rampton, 2015).

2 Materials and methods

The main objective of this article is to analyze the experiences in entrepreneurship mentoring in Slovakia, its benefits and importance for business development, together with main gaps, and to make recommendations for improvements in this area. Based on the gained knowledge we can subsequently identify weaknesses and make recommendations to remedy the shortcomings and improve the quality of mentoring.

The conducted research focuses on analyzing personal experiences and opinions of individual respondents regarding entrepreneurship mentoring. Our sample consists of seven respondents with direct experience in entrepreneurship mentoring – two respondents as mentees, one as mentor, two as both mentors and mentees, and two respondents experienced in programming of mentoring support schemes. Thanks to this variability and direct experiences in the area of mentoring, it was possible to draw relevant conclusions useful for formulation of recommendations for entrepreneurship mentoring practice.

Data used in our study were obtained through semi-structured personal and telephone interviews and a questionnaire (with same structure as interviews, used for the respondent who could not be reached personally or by phone. As the scope of our inquiry exceeded the aim of this paper, we used partial results based on selected respective questions of the interview/questionnaire. The outline of semi-structured interview and the questionnaire, adjusted specifically for mentors and mentees, is presented in Appendix 1.

For the evaluation and interpretation of information obtained from respondents, a combination of content and narrative analysis was used. Using content analysis, we can identify common elements and lessons learned from the individual respondents and narrative analysis will help us understand the overall narrative of the respondents about their experiences with mentoring. The content analysis seeks to demonstrate the importance of written and visual resources by assigning them to different categories of content and their subsequent quantification and interpretation. This analysis is useful if the meaning of the text is rather simple and clear (Myers, 2013). The narrative analysis is derived from the word narration, that is a description of related events story. It is the arrangement of the experience gained in the time frame. Narrative analysis deals with the understanding of own and foreign acts and decisions over time and is communicated from the perspective of the narrator of the story (Myers, 2013).

3 Results and discussion

In this part of the article we aggregate the findings gained from respondents by order of the questions they have been asked in the interview, to find out where the answers were consistent and where the respondents have had different points of view.

3.1 Analysis of the interviews

Why did you decide to engage in mentoring respectively use mentoring?

Respondent no. 1 had been led to mentoring at a competition Businesswoman of Slovakia, due to which she got in contact with the Slovak Business Agency. Later the Agency contacted her when planning the next project if she were interested in passing her experience further as a mentor. Respondent no. 2 decided to use mentoring because she had not enough information about a chosen business sphere and she decided to join the Slovak Business Agency project as a mentee. Respondent no. 3 got to mentoring in the same way as the respondent no. 2, but later, as she already participated as a mentor in another program organized by Slovak Business Agency. Respondent no. 4 began to work in mentoring and coaching after an end of active career, when he was looking for ways to keep in touch with young people to whom he could pass his experience. The last respondent was introduced to mentoring through the student extracurricular organization Nexteria, in which mentoring is a mandatory part of the program Nexteria Leadership Academy.

From these facts, we can conclude that the respondents - mentors - started to work in this area on the challenge of Slovak Business Agency and/or they perceived a need to remain useful in business. Respondents - mentees - are active people who are aware of the opportunities offered by mentoring, and are not afraid to use them.

What were your expectations of mentoring?

This question was primarily asked to those respondents who have experience with mentoring as mentees only. Respondents who have experience both as mentors and mentees were mostly asked questions from the variant for mentors.

Respondent no. 1 perceived mentoring as help to solve problems arising from the business. Respondent no. 2 expected acquisition of new knowledge about the business because she wanted to have deeper understanding of what is required in the establishment and management of a company. Respondent no. 3 signed up for the mentoring program partly out of curiosity and expected that it would move her knowledge forward; during the mentoring program she was founding an civic association. The idea of respondent no. 5 was that a mentor would help her to solve work issues that she could not solve by herself and that she would learn to look at problems and situations from other perspectives.

All respondents who were asked this question agreed that they used mentoring as help with business matters. Given the fact that most of them were part of the project from Slovak Business Agency, which focused on the work area, it is logical, but also in other parts of the interviews respondents did not consider the use of mentoring in the personal area.

What are you getting from mentoring? Did it meet your expectations?

Respondent no. 1 is interested in mentoring outside the activities of Slovak Business Agency as well, but only in an informal level. Mentoring gives her the feeling that she is able to pull ahead and help people who appreciate her experience. According to the respondent no. 2 mentoring did meet her expectations, she has learned a lot of useful information and advice and can avoid some disappointments in the future. Respondent no. 3 admits that because of her busyness she missed some things in the mentoring and did not use it as much as it was possible, but nevertheless it was strong support for her and she could move forward with real results. To respondent no. 4 mentoring helps to maintain active contact with the business and gives it a feeling of necessity. Respondent no. 5 is also satisfied with mentoring because she draws a lot of new ideas and suggestions out of it.

In these answers we can see that mentoring has really great potential in Slovakia, because none of the respondents stated that they would not be satisfied with it. It is widely used in various fields and in addition to sharing experiences and knowledge it also meets another very important function of acquiring new contacts.

How did you first get in touch with your mentor/mentee?

Respondents no. 1, 2 and 3 got in touch with their mentors/mentees got through the projects organized by Slovak Business Agency. The Agency has created a database of available mentors and the mentees could view and choose partners from this database. Of course there was an opportunity for personal contact as well, to determine whether the mentors and mentees would fit also in the interpersonal angle.

Respondent no. 4 does not like the collective mentoring projects. It is important to him that people come to him on their own, because it is a sign of their intrinsic motivation and there is a strong chance that the cooperation will be effective.

The last respondent got to know her mentor in the organization Nexteria where she chose him from a database. Mentees can choose three mentors in the database according to their preferences and Nexteria will then connect them with one of them.

We can see that in almost all cases, the mentor and mentee are in contact through an organization that is active in this area. Only in one case do mentee initiate the contact individually with an interest to work with the mentor.

Did you have specific issues prepared, that you needed advice with, or did you perceive mentoring just as general assistance in business?

This question was asked to respondents who have experience as mentees. Respondent no. 1 had clearly defined in what areas she needed most help and she always had a range of topics ready for the mentor that needed to be addressed. At subsequent meetings were then changes and progress evaluated and the full cooperation during the mentoring program was in this style. Respondent no. 2 was similar to the respondent no. 1 – she knew with which problems she would need help but she was equally interested in new knowledge about general functioning of the companies in our business environment. The last respondent was also

always prepared to the meetings and really appreciated the brainstorming, during which she and the mentor always produced many new ideas and solutions to different problems.

Based on the responses we see that when people engage in mentoring they usually really dedicate time to make the most out of it and to be really productive. Usually only the initial meetings were general and in the next ones already the real problems have been addressed.

Do you think there is enough available information about mentoring in business?

According to the respondent no. 1 there is enough information about mentoring available, but mostly the younger generation and people moving in startups are getting to them. More popular is rather the informal mentoring that is not supported by any organization, but people in different communities naturally share their knowledge and experience. According to the respondent no. 2 there are not enough information and Slovakia could take over some inspiration from foreign countries. According to the respondent no. 3 it is a pity that the Slovak Agency Business mentoring organizes only projects of limited duration, because more projects and more activities in this area would definitely help. She considered negative that no one in Slovakia pays systematic and long-term attention to mentoring in all business areas. According to her, candidates mostly have experience only with the informal mentoring groups and communities on social networks. According to the respondent no. 4 everyone who is interested can get to information about mentoring, because there is enough literature and other sources of information. What we lack are the practical experience, as many young people do not know how mentoring (and coaching) can help them. The last respondent cannot assess the amount of information available about mentoring because, in her own words, she is in a more or less closed community where mentoring is a known concept.

On this issue, the answers of respondents vary. This can be understood in the way that when someone knows the field of mentoring, they do not feel the lack of information because they know where to look for them. The impression of a lack of information may come from individuals who are only getting to know mentoring and are not looking for foreign resources.

What do you consider as disadvantages or risks of mentoring?

Respondent no. 1 sees as a risk the possible emergence of competitive tension in some mentor-mentee pairs, if one party wishes to acquire new know-how, but from the perspective of competition it is positive because it forces people to improve themselves. Respondent no. 2 indicates that she sees a risk in "stealing" of a business idea through the mentor. Respondent no. 3 sees a potential problem if mentees have false expectations and they perceive mentoring primarily as a way to make new contacts, another risk may be if the mentor tries too hard to advise the mentee to guide him. Respondent no. 4 sees as a hidden pitfall the occasional impossibility of assuming the behavior of mentees in terms of the openness in communication - mentor must not assume that if a mentee communicates openly in one meeting, he/she will also do it again next time. The last respondent also submitted incorrect expectations of mentees from the mentors and also often inadequate profiles in databases of mentors that undermine the possibility of mentees to choose the right partner.

Based on these responses, we can say that most of the disadvantages or risks that respondents perceive stems from a lack of communication between mentors and mentees. When organizing mentoring programs it would therefore be appropriate to give greater emphasis to the initial information sessions and training in order to avoid potential disagreements.

What do you think could improve in mentoring in business?

Respondent no. 1 stated that the Slovak Business Agency should not realize projects aimed only at women, but it should support projects for entrepreneurs – men as well. She also mentioned that it would be desirable to support the informal contacts between the participants through various meetings focused on networking. Respondent no. 2 says that the awareness of mentoring among people should be increased; this means the creation of public opinion, that mentoring is a useful form of help and advice. Respondent no. 3 thinks that mentoring in Slovakia would be much more successful if it some organization was systematically and long term specialized in it. Respondent no. 4 pointed out the need to use any promotional and marketing channels and to highlight the benefits of mentoring. Last respondent noted as well as respondent no. 1 that the organizations implementing mentoring projects should not only focused on women.

All respondents reported helpful hints and tips of how they would raise the awareness and improve mentoring. This indicates that they are really interested in this subject and if there was an opportunity, they would like continue in this field.

Why should starting entrepreneurs use mentoring?

Respondent no. 1 would recommend mentoring on the grounds that it is a great opportunity for brainstorming and new ideas. According to the respondent no. 2 most businesses at the beginning of their activities do not know to what it really is about, and they are not realizing the amount of obligations arising from business; advices of experienced mentors can open their eyes and prepare them for the reality and/or any disappointments. Respondent no. 3 sees the main benefit of mentoring in the fact that entrepreneurs get confidence through support and learn the best practices. Respondent no. 4 sees mentoring as an opportunity for brainstorming, through which often appear more opportunities and new ideas. Respondent no. 5 sees the most important advantages of mentoring in the fact that the mentees do not learn from their mistakes and get tips, ideas as well as warnings from experienced mentors.

Respondents agreed that the main benefits of mentoring are new ideas and thoughts, often obtained through brainstorming. They also stated that mentoring helps them to avoid mistakes they could probably have done without the mentor who would guide them and point out the possible errors.

3.2 Recommendations

Based on the information gained from interviews with respondents, in this chapter we can make recommendations and improvements in the area of mentoring in business.

In the short term we would like to propose several changes primarily for existing projects and organizations that are engaged in business mentoring. Based on some of the

interviews, we found that the respondents would welcome more detailed profiles of available mentors during the projects. Our first recommendation is therefore to create a larger database of mentors, where an authorized officer would assess the information value of these profiles and adjust them as necessary before the release; in this way, we would like to avoid a situation where mentors have a lot of experience, but are unable to present it adequately, because for example they are too modest. The second change, which can be made quickly, is a more rigorous training of mentees at the start of mentoring programs where the role of mentoring and the right expectations would be clarified (currently the mentees often expect that the main goal of mentoring is the acquisition of new contacts, but this is not the purpose).

In the medium long point of view, we recommend not to focus the projects only on selected groups of entrepreneurs (women entrepreneurs with the active involvement min. 6 months, etc.), but to extend them for more candidates. We are of course aware that each project has a certain target group and cannot focus on all entrepreneurs in general, but according to some respondents, the purpose of these projects is often only the pursuit of differentiation, and do not bring any increased value compared to other projects. Another proposal is aimed at mentoring community in general and it is support of acquisition of new contacts through informal events focused on networking.

In the long term we would advise to specifically and comprehensively raise people's awareness of mentoring, its importance and benefits. Nowadays more and more young people decide for business and not for the way of conventional employment, and where there is sufficient knowledge about mentoring, then there is a much greater chance that a new business will run successfully. It would be appropriate to entrust any of the existing organizations or set up a new organization that would address mentoring for entrepreneurs systematically and continuously, and not only for specific projects of limited duration. This organization could also address the education and certified professional mentors. At present, almost all the organizations in Slovakia in this area specialize in coaching.

All of the above recommendations would move the area of mentoring in business significantly forward and have great potential. As well as other forms of business support, mentoring would in effect help to create new jobs, increase employment and develop the individual regions of Slovakia.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to analyze the experiences with entrepreneurship mentoring in Slovakia, its benefits and importance for business development, and to propose practical recommendations for further improvements in this area. Thanks to cooperation with the Slovak Business Agency, which recommended the most respondents to us, we have had the opportunity to get in touch with interesting personalities and each one of them has contributed to this work.

Provided the communication with the individual respondents and evaluation of the obtained information, we were able to transform the obtained findings into recommendations, that we have further divided into short, medium long and long term, according to perspectives for their implementation. In the short term, profiles in the databases of mentors should be

made more detailed and objectively compiled, mentees should be better trained and prepared at the beginning of mentoring programs. In the medium long term we would like to recommend organizing of more general mentoring projects rather than focusing only on selected categories of applicants. Also the acquisition of new contacts in the community should be supported to complement the benefits of mentoring programs by organizing various informal events focused on networking hand in hand with the respective program. Finally, in the long term, we recommend targeted raising of people's awareness of mentoring and its benefits, as well as the establishment of a new institution or authorizing of any of the existing institutions with the task of systematic and long-term focus on mentoring in entrepreneurship.

The area of entrepreneurship mentoring is only at the beginning in Slovakia and it is considerably under-researched, with only a few publications available dealing with this topic. Therefore, we believe that our article contributes to the existing body of knowledge in this field, and proposes improvements and recommendations that are applicable in practice.

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Appendix 1: Structure of the interview

Variant for mentors

1. Why did you decide to run a business?
2. Why did you decide to engage in mentoring?
3. What are you getting from mentoring?
4. How did you first get in touch with your mentee?
5. Do you see any differences between mentoring in Slovakia and abroad?
6. Do you think there is enough available information about mentoring in business?
7. What do you consider as disadvantages or risks of mentoring?
8. What do you think could improve in mentoring in business?
9. Why should starting entrepreneurs use mentoring?

Variant for mentees

1. Why did you decide to run a business?
2. Why did you decide to use mentoring?
3. What were your expectations of mentoring?
4. What are you getting from mentoring? Did it meet your expectations?
5. How did you first get in touch with your mentor?
6. Did you have specific issues prepared, that you needed advice with, or did you perceive mentoring just as general assistance in business?
7. Do you see any differences between mentoring in Slovakia and abroad?
8. Do you think there is enough available information about mentoring in business?
9. What do you consider as disadvantages or risks of mentoring?
10. What do you think could improve in mentoring in business?
11. Why should starting entrepreneurs use mentoring?