

Mentornet - Case Study

Reframing practice: creating social learning networks

11 March 2010

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Tools: Wiki, WebEx

Technology: Confluence, WebEx

Number of users: 200+ mentorees / 45 mentors / 6 subject matter experts

Industry: Education

Keywords: wiki, e-learning, mentoring, Australia

Timeframe: 2007 - 2009

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Introduction

The MentorNet program provides an intimate business social network that supports entrepreneurial women to grow their businesses through education, networking, and mentoring over a period of six months.

MentorNet was the first national mentoring program for women in business to be launched in Australia and the first to use Web2.0 technologies (blogs, wikis, social networks, webinars, photo-sharing and social bookmarking) to provide education and mentoring in an enriched technology enabled experience.

In June 2006, the [Australian Business Network](#) (ABN) won a government grant to develop a national mentoring program for businesswomen as part of the Australian Government's Building Entrepreneurship in Small Business program. Since January 2007, 6 programs have been successfully completed by 127 Mentorees, together with 29 Mentors.

Suzi Dafnis, National General Manager of the ABN says:



"There has never been a better time to create a program like MentorNet. Today's technologies allow us to tap into the richness of this country's business thinking and education and deliver that direct to aspiring businesswomen in all parts of the country to help them grow their businesses. A successful businesswoman in Melbourne can mentor a woman in Taree. Today's technologies mean that time and distance are no longer barriers. Mentoring is the key to business success; it is a short cut for those new in business as well as a way for more experienced business owners to share advice and business wisdom. The MentorNet program offers something totally new in mentoring, using the latest online community and learning methodologies."

Learning wherever you are based

The main benefit of MentorNet has been to overcome the geographical dispersion of its members, and to create a vibrant online community that is able to support and help Australian businesswomen wherever they are.

Program design

From [Anne Bartlett-Bragg](#), the program designer, educational adviser to the ABN and Managing Director, Headshift Australia:

An essential consideration in the design of MentorNet was to gain clarity on our (the ABN's) underpinning assumptions about the nature of mentoring and learning, while understanding the parameters or constraints that would need to be addressed before we were able to design the software platforms.

The ABN's Mentoring philosophy

The role of the Mentor was considered key to the success of the program - outlined here are the core attributes of mentoring we wanted to enable:

- ▶ Role model - wise counsel or advice based on their experiences in similar situations
- ▶ Guiding - persuading and coaching to apply suggestions
- ▶ Collaborating - brainstorming
- ▶ Empathetic listening and clarification
- ▶ Sounding board
- ▶ Networking with mentorees/mentors

The Mentors are men or women with over five years business experience, who provide mentoring to small groups or Pods (four mentorees) following a structured and planned approach to business building.

The ABN's educational philosophy

To structure the business skills education component, it was agreed that the content must be:

- ▶ Pragmatic
- ▶ Practical
- ▶ Applicable
- ▶ Transferable
- ▶ Adaptable

The ABN's Mentoree philosophy

To achieve the program outcomes, it was considered essential that participants would be actively involved by:

- ▶ Creating,
- ▶ Publishing, and
- ▶ Distributing their work for feedback
- ▶ NOT just passively consuming information

Some design parameters

- ▶ Not tied to specific locations
Negative feedback from previous locally conducted mentoring sessions frequently related to the need to attend physical locations
- ▶ Geographically dispersed participants
How do we bring them to us?
- ▶ Connectivity & access
In Australia, particularly rural and regional areas there remains issues with access to high-speed internet connections
- ▶ Ease of use
Must be seamless where technology is the enabler - not the focus!!
- ▶ Levels of digital literacy
The design would need to cater for all levels of digital and computer literacy.

Social software can generate powerful learning networks - from simple individual actions that help create an architecture of participation, to links that connect people for a common purpose.

Weblogs, wikis, social bookmarking and tagging have all emerged as powerful collaborative tools, but their greatest transformational potential exists within organisations that embed them into their learning strategies.

While social learning theories recognise that learning occurs in a social context through interactions with others and subsequent learning is influenced by observing and modelling patterns of behaviour.

Publishing and participating online with social software creates a complex sphere of communication. The social structure of the environment comprising of a variety of people, both readers and writers, supporting the structure of network evolution that develops an ecology of connections.

Social software in this learning context was informed by the following assumptions:

- ▶ Learners want to communicate and collaborate with others
- ▶ Learners enjoy networking with like-minded people
- ▶ Learners will openly share their experiences
- ▶ Learners look for recommendations and feedback from trusted resources
- ▶ Learners will create their own knowledge by self-publishing
- ▶ Learners will manage their own learning by subscribing to information

MentorNet incorporated a blended selection of the most powerful social software options to create a rich learning environment for all participants.

Live meetings are conducted through synchronous webinar technology provided by Webex. This enables the participants to collaborate and share their experiences in real time through the internet and a telephone.

Structured business sessions occur fortnightly, and informal mentoring meetings in a small group, or Pod, are scheduled in alternate weeks.

The core web-based learning context is shaped through a variety of large group, peer group and individual spaces based on a wiki and weblog environment, a mash-up platform, heavily customised, using Atlassian's enterprise wiki, Confluence.

Mentorees build their business plans in a dynamic, personal wiki spaces, while collaborating with the larger group on case studies and focus activities on the group weblog.

Templates and examples provide a framework for the mentorees to apply the knowledge acquired directly into their own contexts and receive feedback from their peers and mentors.

Mentors are also provided with personal wiki and weblog spaces, where they can comment and provide their own experiences and knowledge for the benefit of others to learn from.

Additional functions, like event calendars, resources, social bookmarking, photo sharing, and other subscription services are displayed through RSS feeds in the central wiki as the main portal for the group.

All individuals develop profiles based on digital storytelling principles that will incorporate photos shared through Flickr and other rich media. These profiles will allow participants to connect with each other in a more personalised way and create stronger network connections.

With MentorNet, Headshift Australia was up against the task of creating a vibrant online community for a group of people with very specific needs, but also with potentially very different backgrounds.

Outcomes

MentorNet is designed to put theory into action over a 6 month period. The participants are expected to set outcomes, attend the webinars facilitated by subject-matter experts in business skills, work with a mentor and small peer group to develop a business plan that they can action during and after the program. Sustainability of these businesses is a high priority and focus.

The stated program outcomes are:

- ▶ Create a detailed business plan incorporating financial, operations and marketing plans
- ▶ Consolidate upon the business skills training, identify deficiencies in skills, and take action to address these areas.
- ▶ Expand their national networks and make contacts that can provide ongoing support beyond the completion of the program.



"The results are amazing, we are seeing demonstrated evidence of the mentorees applying the business principles they're learning into their wikis, and openly providing feedback to their Pod members", says Anne Bartlett-Bragg. "Not only is the technology providing an enriched experience, but our design is enabling application and improvement into their businesses!"

These results have been collected from 4 programs by participant surveys:

Mentorees:

- ▶ 100% reported an increase their business skills
- ▶ 95% report having more direction in their business
- ▶ 100% have expanded their networks
- ▶ 50% report an increase in turnover (during the 6 months program)
- ▶ 65% report business growth (during the 6 months program)
- ▶ 35% have employed more staff (during the 6 months program)
- ▶ 90% have developed their business plans
- ▶ 100% report increased confidence about their business
- ▶ 100% are more enthusiastic about their business

Mentors:

- ▶ 100% have expanded their networks
- ▶ 100% are more enthusiastic about their business
- ▶ 100% reported an increase their business skills

Participant Quotes

Mentorees

“

"...MentorNet is giving me some clarity to my business goals and planning and my Mentor is giving me confidence to follow through some business ideas and the support of the mentorees is helpful in developing my confidence as I have been working in isolation for the past year and lost some of my confidence."

Susse Lint | Susse Collections

“

Before MentorNet my business had been plodding along for 4 years. Now, coming towards the end of the journey I have a structure for my business plan that I understand and use. I have learnt concepts and techniques I had never considered, such as blogging to keep in touch with current and past clients. And strategies and systems I knew about but didn't fully understand such as financial forecasts. By having the support of other business women and my fabulous mentor I have taken steps I was previously too scared to do to enable the growth of my business, such as employment and setting financial goals.

Every step of this journey has been an educational one and I look forward to keeping in contact with the other participants. Thank-you!

Stephanie Lee | Alive Personal Training

Mentor

“

"Very inspiring to see their [mentorees] passion for growth and learning and the support given, you know, always around in the group, I think that's what's been particularly enriching, has been the mentoring by mentorees, if you like, between folks on the calls. And really see visible impact. It's not just a feel-good thing. I mean, ideas have been put out and then acted on and progress has been, you know, has resulted"

mentor based in the US

A final word from Suzi Dafnis - General Manager ABN

“

"MentorNet has allowed the Australian Businesswomen's Network to play a key role in the development of women business-owners from across our vast country. The technology and use of media has allowed women to participate (from opposite ends of Australia) to collaborate, support each other and further their business education while managing busy schedules, families, fledgling businesses. They've connected with a community of like-minded women and found support and guidance that they need to grow successful businesses. We are very proud of the program and the difference it is making to these women."

Screenshots

Main Program Page



Program 8

Program 8 Space

[Dashboard Dashboard](#) > [Program 8](#) > [Program 8 Space](#)

View **Edit** **Attachments (0)** **Info**

[Browse Space](#) [Add Page](#) [Add News](#)

Added by [Anne Bartlett-Bragg](#), last edited by [Peter Johnston](#) on Mar 05, 2009 ([view change](#))



Business Planning

[Click here to access the module](#)

Financial Management

[Click here to access the module](#)

Marketing

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Human Resource Management

[Click here to access the module](#)

Technology and Business

[Click here to access the module](#)

Tuesday, March 31, 2009

Consolidating, learning and building for the future...

Labels: [program8](#)

Hi Everyone!

This is you final activity - officially - from me!

The purpose is to assist you to review, reflect and consolidate on your learnings from the program and provide you with an opportunity to continue to learn and develop...

Tasks:

1. Review each of the modules

Look through the tasks, review your comments and contributions - and of course, comments from other participants.

(Did you take the opportunity to review the handouts too?)

2. Review the work you have already completed towards your business plan.

Now - knowing what you now know and your specific context - what would you change? Or add? Or delete?

And finally -

3. Identify 3 key points of learning from each module - for you and your business!

Develop actions to implement these points and monitor your achievements.

If you follow this process for each module - using a separate wiki page for each module - you will build a powerful learning resource that can be easily reviewed on a regular basis, or when your business context is appropriate.

Remember - if you need any support through this final summary of learning process - let

Program 8 Space

Personal Space

Webex Webinars

Your next session

Next Session:

No further sessions scheduled

Essentials

[Help and Key Contacts](#)

[Participant Guidelines](#)

[Netiquette](#)

[FAQ](#)

[QACs](#)

[Ideas](#)

[Fun](#)

[Events](#)

[Mentoring Agreements](#)

[For Mentors](#)

Module Page - Human Resource Management



Program 8

Human Resource Management

[Dashboard](#) [Dashboard](#) > [Program 8](#) > [Program 8 Space](#) > [Human Resource Management](#)

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Added by [Peter Johnston](#), last edited by [Peter Johnston](#) on Jan 21, 2009 ([view change](#))

Expert Profile



Megan Tough is the Sydney based director of [Complete Potential](#). She has worked and managed all around Australia in the areas of general management, operations, HR, professional development, leadership, culture and change management. Megan has a Bachelor of Psychology (Hons), an MBA and is a graduate of CoachInc, a US based Coach Training School.

[Click here to access Megan's Personal Space.](#)

Module Details

This module will address some of the key strategies for recruiting and developing staff to enhance your business. In this module you will:

- Develop a recruitment strategy
- Interview and select staff
- Develop a training and development plan
- Conduct performance review and coaching sessions

Program 8 Space

Personal Space

Webex Webinars

Your next session

Next Session:
No further sessions scheduled

Module Blog

[Thursday, January 29, 2009](#)

Post Webinar - January 28

Last changed: Jan 29, 2009 23:13 by [Peter Johnston](#)
Labels: [4hrm](#)

Today's session was all about keeping people - and in particular, Megan talked about engagement, performance standards and giving feedback.

The slides from the session are available in the Attachments - there are also a mound of handouts for this module.

Your Tasks:

Activity 1:

Latest Module Activity

[Goal update](#) (Jennifer Repper)
Labels: [4hrm](#), [pod](#), [1](#)

[Post Webinar - January 28](#)
(Program 8) Labels: [4hrm](#)

[m. Management and Human Resources](#) (Maria Anderson) Labels: [pod4](#), [4hrm](#)

[Keeping People](#) (Program 8) Labels: [4hrm](#)

Essentials

[Help and Key Contacts](#)
[Participant Guidelines](#)
[Netiquette](#)
[FAQ](#)
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[Ideas](#)
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[Mentoring Agreements For Mentors](#)

Personal Space



Maria Anderson

Home

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Added by [Maria Anderson](#), last edited by [Maria Anderson](#) on Oct 07, 2008 ([view change](#))

Personal Profile

Hi, my name is Maria Anderson and I am the marketing director of Sustainable Marketing Services Australia. Sustainable Marketing Services helps small to large businesses in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to create sustainable profits.

I use specialised marketing expertise and a deep understanding of businesses to develop unique insights which I then transform into practical marketing solutions that are easy to implement. My approach is based on a proven formula: Knowledge + Ideas + Expertise + Processes = Sustainable Profits.

On a personal note, I have two burmese cats (Sebastian and Isabella) and a border collie (Lily) and enjoy walking, yoga, qi gong and reading.

[click here to edit](#)

My Blog

Thursday, March 5, 2009

a successful week

Labels: [pod1](#), [pod3](#), [pod4](#), [pod5](#)

Hi all

I brought on 3 new clients this week - a mortgage broker, a financial planner and a web builder. Yay!

My Pod 4

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Latest Pod Activity (pod4)

[a successful week](#) (Maria Anderson)
Labels: [pod1](#), [pod3](#), [pod4](#), [pod5](#)

[A small success](#) (Maria Anderson)
Labels: [pod1](#), [pod2](#), [pod3](#), [pod4](#), [pod5](#)

[Some small successes](#) (Maria Anderson)
Labels: [pod1](#), [pod2](#), [pod3](#), [pod4](#), [pod5](#)

MentorNet Space

Personal Space

Webex Webinars

Webinar Notes

Next Webinar:
[Meet your Mentor](#)
Password: mentornet1
[Business Planning](#)
Password: mentornet1

del.icio.us links

[Every Company Should Use Social Media](#) (Jun 01, 2008 00:57)

[Innovation centres to help foster small businesses](#) (May 14, 2008 02:27)

[Can online social media](#)