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Accounting Horizons

Vol. 13 No. 1

March 1999

pp. 37-53

An Analysis of Formal Mentoring Programs and Perceived Barriers to Obtaining a Mentor at Large Public Accounting Firms

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SYNOPSIS: One way for firms to promote the mentoring of employees is to establish formal programs that match employees with potential mentors. Whether employees are satisfied with such formal mentoring is an empirical question. This paper examines that issue as well as whether formal mentoring programs serve to reduce perceived barriers to obtaining a mentor. The study is based on survey data obtained from 723 respondents currently working at the major public accounting firms. The study found that certain methods for matching potential mentors and protégés, as well as certain formal structures (e.g., meeting regularly and setting goals and objectives), are associated with greater mentorship satisfaction by employees. Also, the study found evidence that employees exposed to formal mentoring programs perceive no more barriers to obtaining a mentor than employees who develop informal mentoring relationships. No evidence was found suggesting that female employees, compared to males, perceived greater barriers to obtaining a mentor, or were more likely to leave the firm. These results suggest that formal mentoring programs may be associated with a changing social structure at the large public accounting firms.

Data Availability: Individuals interested in obtaining data from this study may contact the author.

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Dirsmith and Covaleski documented that mentoring was a critical mechanism for developing talent at large public accounting firms. Since that time, most of those firms have more aggressively encouraged employees to form mentoring relationships. One mechanism for facilitating the initiation of mentoring relationships is the

The author gratefully acknowledges the invaluable research assistance of Lisa Danford and Cathy Miller, and reviewer comments from Bill Pasewark, David Hulse, Bob Ramsay, Belle Ragins, Jerry Strawser and participants in the University of Kentucky workshop series.

Submitted: November 1997

Accepted: September 1998

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use of formal programs that match employees with potential mentors. In general, formal mentoring programs have been adopted because they offer specific, tangible organizational benefits, including lower employee turnover, improved job performance, and socialization of employees into organizational roles (Burke and McKeen 1989).

Currently, very little is known about the structure and processes of formal mentoring programs at large public accounting firms, including which employees tend to have a formal mentor, what methods are used to match employees with potential mentors, and whether formal structure benefits the mentorship experience. This study was undertaken to investigate those issues, as well as determine whether employees exposed to formal mentoring programs perceive fewer barriers to obtaining a mentor.

There are at least three reasons why formal mentoring programs may reduce barriers to obtaining a mentor. First, such programs increase the probability that employees in a firm are linked with at least one mentor, even if the formally assigned mentor chooses to provide only a counseling role. Second, formal mentoring programs are a mechanism for training organizational members (employees, managers and partners) on how to be a mentor. Third, formal mentoring programs are a useful way to promote the concept of mentoring and the benefits derived from either having a mentor or serving as a mentor. Thus, persons involved in formal programs may be more likely to serve as informal mentors and informal protégés.

Formal mentoring programs may be of special benefit to female employees, who are likely to perceive greater barriers to obtaining a mentor in male-dominated organizations. Although studies have found that women are as likely as men to report having a mentor (Viator and Scandura 1991; Ragins and Cotton 1991; Fagenson 1989), Ragins and Cotton (1991) found that women in research and development organizations were more likely to identify certain barriers to obtaining a mentor. Several researchers have noted that the possibility for mentoring relationships to be misconstrued as sexual or romantic in nature can create barriers to forming cross-gender mentoring relationships (Clawson and Kram 1984; Kram 1985; Ragins 1989; Ragins and McFarlin 1990). Since formal mentoring programs provide organizational sanction to mentoring relationships, they may enable women to pursue close developmental relationships which are not perceived as overly intimate (Burke and McKeen 1989). Thus, this paper also investigates whether formal mentoring programs at large public accounting firms are associated with women perceiving fewer barriers to obtaining a mentor.

The following sections review prior research on formal and informal mentoring and develop four specific research questions. These questions are addressed using survey data obtained from 723 respondents who were currently employed at Big 6¹ public accounting firms.

BACKGROUND ON INFORMAL AND FORMAL MENTORING

In general, informal mentoring tends to develop in work settings where potential protégés and mentors have the opportunity to interact and observe each other. Often, potential informal protégés are looking for an older, more experienced person who possesses power in the organization, exhibits self confidence, and is willing to share experiences and protect younger, junior employees (Hunt and Michael 1983). On the other hand, because mentoring requires time and commitment from mentors, potential informal mentors tend to look for employees who exhibit "the right stuff": a good performance

¹ This study was conducted prior to announced mergers among the Big 6 public accounting firms.

record, the right social background, as well as commitment and loyalty to the firm and the profession. In public accounting, the initial phases of a mentorship may focus on job tasks, with the mentor explaining why certain functions are performed and how to get the job done, especially given constraints imposed by the firm or the client. As the mentor and protégé observe each other over time, the subsequent phases of mentoring can focus on the protégé's career development, his/her visibility within the firm, and additional social support for the protégé. A critical factor for building a mentoring relationship is that both the informal mentor and protégé establish a sense of trust and commitment.

Formally assigned mentorships are typically not based on informal interactions between potential mentors and protégés (Chao et al. 1992). Programs that assign mentors to protégés resulting in "formal mentors" and "formal protégés" use a number of different matching methods. The matching may be based on random assignments from information obtained in personnel files and conducted without investigating potential protégés' needs and objectives. Or, the matching can be a more structured process in which assignments are made from preference lists submitted by potential mentors and protégés (Cunningham 1993; Burke and McKeen 1989). Regardless of the degree of structure used to match participants, there is a concern that formal mentors will view the mentorship as just another part of their job (Keele et al. 1987). With less commitment, formal mentors potentially may invest less time and effort with the protégé, leaving the protégé dissatisfied with the formal mentoring relationship. Thus, while the potential benefits to be derived from formal mentoring programs are significant, there are inherent obstacles to formalizing the mentoring process (Dirsmith and Covaleski 1985). This study examines which program characteristics and organizational processes are most likely to lead to protégé satisfaction with the formal mentorship experience.

DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first question examined in this study relates to understanding the extent of formal mentoring in large public accounting firms. There are several interrelated issues. First, the implementation of formal mentoring programs, especially for firms that are less structured and more decentralized, may vary from region to region and office to office. Thus, whether the use of formal mentoring programs is widespread or limited is unknown. Second, formal mentoring may vary across employee organizational levels. Entry level accountants may benefit from having a formal mentor who introduces them to the firm's political and social structure and can also answer routine questions as they arise. On the other hand, formal mentoring programs may not be able to nurture and develop more senior-level employees into future partners of the firm (Dirsmith and Covaleski 1985). Third, the extent of formal mentoring may differ based on employee gender. If formal mentoring programs assist women in overcoming barriers to obtaining a mentor, women may be more likely than men to join such programs. Thus, the first research question is stated as follows:

Research Question 1: What is the extent of formal mentoring at large public accounting firms, and does such mentoring differ by employee organizational level and employee gender?

The structure of formal mentorship programs can differ along two dimensions. First, the programs can differ in the way potential mentors and protégés are matched with

each other. Some programs may be participatory, where either the potential mentor or potential protégé, or both, are consulted and asked for their input and preferences. Or, the program may not conduct any consultations before randomly assigning mentors and protégés. Second, formal mentoring relationships themselves can differ in the degree of structure imposed by the firm. More structured mentorships require that mentors and protégés (1) set goals and objectives, and (2) routinely meet to discuss issues and provide feedback. The previous literature has not identified which procedures tend to be used to match formal mentors and protégés, or how much structure is imposed on formal mentorships.

Research Question 2a: What processes tend to be used for matching formal mentors and protégés?

Research Question 2b: How much structure is imposed on formal mentorships (e.g., setting goals and meeting routinely)?

Even if large public accounting firms have extensive formal mentoring programs, it is unlikely that every employee at every office has a current formally assigned mentor. In order to assess how formal mentors are similar or dissimilar to informal mentors, this study asked all protégés to provide information concerning some basic characteristics and perceptions of their mentor. This information included data regarding supervision by the mentor, perception of the mentor's success, and satisfaction with the mentor. It is unknown whether formal mentors work and interact with their protégés in a manner that is similar or dissimilar to informal mentors. Thus, the third research question is stated as follows:

Research Question 3: How do working relationships of formal mentors with their protégés compare with those of informal mentors?

The final research question directly addresses whether formal mentoring has impacted employee perceptions of barriers to obtaining a mentor at large public accounting firms. Unfortunately, there is no baseline data describing the level of perceived barriers to mentoring prior to the establishment of formal mentoring programs at large public accounting firms. However, it is possible to assess whether employees with a formal mentor perceive more barriers (or fewer barriers) to obtaining a mentor, compared to employees with no mentor or an informal mentor. Since Ragins and Cotton (1991) reported that perceived barriers to mentoring differed across employee organizational level and employee gender, this study will examine those factors also.

Research Question 4: Do perceptions of barriers to obtaining a mentor differ for employees based on their access to a formal mentor, controlling for employee organizational level and employee gender?

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The data for this field study were collected through a mail survey of 3,000 CPAs in large public accounting firms. A mailing list was obtained from the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, with support provided by the institute's academic relations division. The sample was pulled from a database of employees (senior accountants, managers and senior managers) at large public accounting firms and was stratified by employee gender so that an equal number of males and females would be

selected. This stratification was necessary so that ancillary issues regarding the mentoring of females could be examined.

Potential participants received a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, a four-page survey questionnaire, and a postage free return envelope. After three weeks, a follow-up reminder postcard was sent to all potential participants. A total of 903 surveys were returned, representing a 30 percent response rate. Thirteen responses were deleted for coding errors or incomplete surveys. Because the subject focus of this paper are employees at Big 6 public accounting firms, other respondents were omitted for the following reasons: 107 were not at Big 6 firms, an additional 43 identified themselves as partners or directors, and 17 others did not clearly identify either their organizational level or gender, or their mentor's organizational level or gender.

Table 1 presents the demographic background for the 723 participants included in this study. Even though an equal number of surveys were sent to males and females, a slightly higher number of females ($n = 398$), compared to males ($n = 325$), completed this study. There were a substantial number of respondents from all three organizational levels: senior accountant ($n = 287$), manager ($n = 249$), and senior manager ($n = 187$). A Chi-square test was conducted to determine if there was an association between employee gender and employee organizational level. The Chi-square test results indicate that the distribution of females and males differed in regard to the respondents' organizational level. A relatively high percentage of females (46 percent) identified themselves as senior accountants, whereas a fairly even number of males were from all three organizational levels (approximately 33 percent each). The difference in the two distributions is important to note because it will affect the interpretation of subsequent tests reported in this paper.

Data Collection

The four-page survey questionnaire included questions covering the participant's demographic background, his/her perception of barriers to obtaining a mentor, demographic questions regarding his/her most recent mentor, how formal mentors are assigned by the firm, and, finally, scales related to turnover intentions. All scale items were based on a five-point Likert-type scale.

As in Chao et al. (1992), protégés who reported having had more than one mentor were instructed to focus on their current or most recent mentor. Since this study focuses on formal mentoring programs, participants who currently had a formally assigned mentor and could identify one or more informal mentors were instructed to consider the formal mentor in making their responses. This procedure for identifying participants of formal mentoring programs has been used in other studies, including Chao et al. (1992). All participants with a current formal mentor (those with a concurrent informal mentor, and those without) completed a separate section identifying characteristics of the formal mentoring program. These characteristics included how the mentor was assigned, the type of structure imposed by the firm on the mentoring relationship, and the demographic background of any informal mentor who supported the protégé concurrent with the formal mentor.

Measures of Perceived Barriers to Mentoring

The items assessing perceived barriers to mentoring were adopted from Ragins and Cotton (1991), who used principal component factor analysis to identify five separate

TABLE 1
Respondent Demographic Background:
Employee Organizational Level by Employee Gender

<u>Employee Organizational Level</u>	<u>Employee Gender</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	
Senior Accountant	46.0%	32.0%	39.7%
Manager	33.4	35.7	34.4
Senior Manager	20.6	32.3	25.9
Total	100.0% (n = 398)	100.0% (n = 325)	100.0% (n = 723)

Chi-Squared probability that distributions are similar: $p = 0.001$

The distribution of females differs from males:

46 percent of female participants were senior accountants.

32 percent of male participants were senior accountants.

dimensions for perceived barriers. Due to survey constraints,² this study adopted only two of those factors: (1) lack of access to potential mentors, and (2) lack of willingness by potential mentors. Each factor was represented by two questionnaire items; all four items are presented later in this paper in table 6. These factors were considered most relevant since Ragins and Cotton (1991) found differences for these factors based on both employee organizational level and employee gender. The Cronbach alpha for each factor was greater than 0.85 and suggested relatively high reliability, given 0.70 as a reasonable guideline (Nunnally 1978).

RESULTS

Research Question 1

The first research question is: What is the extent of formal mentoring at large public accounting firms, and does such mentoring differ by employee organizational level and employee gender? All 723 respondents were asked to identify whether they had had any mentor: a formal mentor (someone assigned by a formal program in their firm), and/or an informal mentor (someone not assigned by the firm). In this study, only 9.5 percent of the respondents failed to identify any kind of mentor, a much lower percentage than the 22.6 percent reported by Viator and Scandura (1991). Although reported rates of mentoring are subject to response bias effects (e.g., employees without a mentor may tend to not respond), the finding of an increase in the rate of mentoring seems reasonable given the increased use of formal mentoring programs and the promotion of informal mentoring by human resource directors.

Table 2 presents the distribution of current mentor type across employee organizational level and employee gender. The results of Chi-square tests indicate that current mentor type differs by employee organizational level, but not by employee gender. For senior accountants, the most frequently reported mentoring type was having concurrent formal and informal mentors (47.0 percent). Managers and senior managers tended

² As part of a broader study, the survey included some nonmentoring questionnaire items. Response rate concerns limited the survey instrument to only four pages and restricted the total number of questions adopted.

TABLE 2
Type of Current Mentor Across Employee Organizational Level and Employee Gender

Current Mentor Type	Employee Organizational Level			Employee Gender		Total Participants
	Senior Accountant	Manager	Senior Manager	Male	Female	
None	11.1%	9.2%	7.5%	9.2%	9.8%	9.5%
Formal Only	10.5	4.0	7.5	7.7	7.3	7.5
Formal with Informal	47.0	32.9	30.5	38.8	37.2	37.9
Informal Only	31.4	53.8	54.5	44.3	45.7	45.1
Total	100.0% (n = 287)	100.0% (n = 249)	100.0% (n = 187)	100.0% (n = 325)	100.0% (n = 398)	100.0% (n = 723)

The distributions of employee organizational levels are statistically different ($p = 0.001$):
 47 percent of senior accountants had a formal and informal mentor.
 Over 53 percent of managers and senior managers had an informal mentor only.
 For current mentor type, the distribution of females is not different from males ($p = 0.90$).

to identify only informal mentors as their current mentor (53.8 percent and 54.5 percent, respectively). All three employee levels had relatively low rates of no mentoring and formal mentoring only (averaging 9.5 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively). By combining the rates for formal mentor only and formal concurrent with informal, the data analysis suggests that lower level employees are more likely to have formal mentors. Based on the combination, 57.5 percent of senior accountants had formal mentors, whereas the rates for managers and senior managers were only 36.9 percent and 38.0 percent, respectively. These results support the assertion that formal mentoring programs primarily target lower level employees who can benefit from guidance and advice provided through such structured programs. On the other hand, more senior-level employees, such as managers and senior managers, need access to political networks that tend to be informal and may be less likely to benefit from, or even be assigned, formal mentors.

Additional analysis found that senior managers were as likely as other employees to have had formal mentors in the past. For participants who indicated that their current mentor was informal, the historical rate of prior formal mentors ranged from 2.34 (for senior managers) to 1.92 (for senior accountants). Thus, senior managers actually indicated more formal mentors over time. This is probably attributed to their longer tenure. The finding that managers and senior managers were much more likely to have informal current mentors raises important concerns, addressed in Research Question 4 below. Specifically, are managers and senior managers more likely to perceive barriers to gaining a mentor, given that informal mentoring tends to be the more frequent mentoring relationship at those levels?



The distribution of current mentor type did not differ by employee gender. Female employees reported rates of mentoring which were very similar to male employees, across all mentoring types. The lack of gender differences for "no mentor" is similar to Viator and Scandura (1991). Given that more female participants, compared to male participants, were at the senior accountant level, it is interesting that there were no gender differences for type of current mentor. The analysis presented in table 2 was performed on sub-samples based of employee organizational levels. No gender differences were found with the exception of senior accountants, where females as compared to males had a slightly higher rate of informal mentoring only, 33.9 percent vs. 26.9 percent. This result is counter to what was expected and suggests that not only do females, as compared to males, have a similar rate of mentoring, but their mentoring is no more tied to formal programs than is the mentoring of male employees.

Research Question 2

The second research question was composed of two parts: (2a) What processes tend to be used for matching formal mentors and proteges? (2b) How much structure is imposed on formal mentorships (e.g., setting goals and meeting routinely)? The 328 respondents who identified that they currently had a formal mentor (either formal only, or formal with a concurrent informal mentor) completed the survey section on formal mentoring programs. These questions related to the degree of participation by potential mentors and protégés during the process of assigning mentors, and the degree of structure imposed on the formal mentoring process. Tables 3 and 4 present summary information for these data.

Matching Processes

Seven questions related to the method for matching protégés with formal mentors and were grouped into three categories based on whether (1) the protégé had input into the matching process, (2) the mentor had input into the matching process, and/or (3) the protégé lacked input. Responses to these questions were not mutually exclusive and, in some cases, did overlap.

Regarding the protégé having input into the matching process, 39.6 percent of the 328 protégés who identified a formal mentor agreed with the statement "I asked to be assigned to my mentor." The 17.4 percent indicated that the firm assigned them a mentor from a list of candidates they submitted. For questions concerning whether the mentor had input into the matching process, very few participants agreed with any of the statements (less than 9.0 percent for any question). It is possible that some of the participants simply did not know that their mentor had had some input. For the final category where participants indicated lacking any input into the matching process, a relatively high number (32.8 percent) agreed with the statement "the firm assigned me a mentor without any consultation or interviewing."

These results suggest that formal mentoring programs in large public accounting firms do vary in the degree of participation by potential mentors and protégés in the matching process. As reported in table 3, certain methods for matching mentors and proteges occurred somewhat infrequently, such as: assigning mentors only after discussing with the protégé his/her needs and objectives, or the protégé perceiving that the mentor recognized the quality of his/her work and had similar goals and aspirations.

A question raised from this analysis is whether the matching process affects the quality of the mentorship experience. Protégés who had identified a formal mentor

TABLE 3
Methods for Matching Formal Mentors and Protégés:
Effect on Protégé Satisfaction with Formal Mentorship

Panel A: Formal Mentorship Matching Methods

<u>Matching Method</u>	<u>% Agreeing</u>	<u>% Not Agreeing</u>	<u>Respondents</u>
Protégé had input in matching process			
The firm assigned me a mentor from a list of candidates I submitted.	17.4	82.6	n = 328
The firm assigned me a mentor after discussing my needs and objectives.	9.5	90.5	n = 328
I asked to be assigned to my mentor.	39.6	60.4	n = 328
Mentor had input into matching process			
My mentor requested that I be assigned to him/her.	8.8	91.2	n = 328
My mentor had recognized the quality of my work.	6.4	93.6	n = 328
My mentor and I had recognized that we had similar goals and aspirations.	8.8	91.2	n = 328
Protégé lacked input			
The firm assigned me a mentor without any consultation or interviewing.	32.8	67.2	n = 328

Panel B: Relation Between Satisfaction and Protégé Input to Mentor Selection^b

<u>Mentor Selection</u>	<u>Satisfied With Mentor^a</u>	<u>Mentor Does NOT Meet Needs^a</u>	<u>Mentor Disappoints^a</u>
Protégé had input (n = 197)	4.21 a	1.68 a	1.60 a
Protégé lacked input (n = 113)	3.47 b	2.38 b	2.18 b
Probability that means are similar:	0.001	0.001	0.001

^a Within each column, means that are statistically different from each other are noted by different letters (“a” vs. “b”).

^b Measures are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 5 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

were divided into three groups based on the matching categories listed in table 3. Since there was some overlap, protégés who identified having had any input were assigned to the “protégé had input” group (n = 197); another 113 who indicated having no input into the process were assigned to the “protégé lacked input” group.³

Protégés were asked to rate their current mentor on three satisfaction items. Table 3 presents the results from Analysis of Variance and indicates that protégés who had no input into the matching process viewed their mentorship experience differently from

³ There were 18 formal protégés who indicated their mentor had had some input. Their responses were similar to the 197 protégés with “some input” and statistically different from the 113 with “no input.”

TABLE 4
Requirements and Processes of Formal Mentoring Programs: Effect on Protégé Satisfaction With Formal Mentorship

Panel A: Formal Mentorship Requirements and Processes

Requirements and Processes	% Agreeing	% Not Agreeing	% Indicating Unknown	Respondents
Regular Meetings:				
Are regular meetings required by the firm?	69.2	30.8		n = 328
Have you and your mentor met on a regular basis?	75.9	24.1		n = 328
Setting Goals and Objectives:				
Was setting goals and objectives required by the firm?	62.8	37.2		n = 328
Did you and your mentor set goals for the mentoring process?	63.7	36.3		n = 328
Other Processes:				
Did your formally assigned mentor receive any mentorship training?	24.1	29.3	46.6	n = 328
Have you ever "switched" formal mentors?	52.1	47.9		n = 328
Did you have an informal mentor concurrent with your formal mentor?	83.5	16.8		n = 328

Panel B: Protégé Satisfaction With Formal Mentorship^b

Had Regular Meetings	Satisfied With Mentor ^a	Mentor Does NOT Meet Needs ^a	Mentor Disappoints ^a
Yes	4.14 a	1.73 a	1.61 a
No	3.32 b	2.53 b	2.33 b
Probability that means are similar:	0.001	0.001	0.001
Set Goals and Objectives			
Yes	4.14 a	1.78 a	1.65 a
No	3.59 b	2.17 b	2.03 b
Probability that means are similar:	0.001	0.001	0.001

^a Within each column, means that are statistically different from each other are noted by different letters ("a" vs. "b").

^b Measures are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 5 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

the other two groups.⁴ In particular, these protégés were much less satisfied with their mentor, felt that their mentor had not been able to meet their needs, and were more disappointed with their mentor.

⁴ The Analysis of Variance included a control variable for current mentor type, which was statistically significant. Thus, the reported analysis suggests that "matching method" was associated with protégé satisfaction beyond the effect of current mentor type. Regarding the control variable current mentor type, employees who had a formal mentor only were less satisfied with their mentor as compared to employees who had a formal mentor concurrent with an informal mentor.

Structure of Formal Programs

Table 4 reports data regarding the structure imposed by formal mentoring programs. These questions addressed issues regarding regular meetings with the formal mentor, setting goals and objectives, and other processes of the formal mentoring program. A majority of the participants indicated that their formal mentoring program required both regular meetings with the mentor and setting goals and objectives, 69.2 percent and 62.8 percent, respectively. Most protégés indicated that they and their mentor did adhere to the firm's policy. Of the 69.2 percent whose mentoring program required regular meetings, only 14 percent indicated not meeting regularly; and, for the 62.8 percent whose mentoring program required setting goals and objectives, only 8 percent indicated not setting goals and objectives. In general, as reported in table 4, 75.9 percent of all formal protégés met with their mentor on a regular basis, and 63.7 percent set goals and objectives with their mentor. Most, but not all of these protégés, had indicated such processes were required by the firm's formal mentoring program.

A question raised from these data is whether formal mentoring policies, when adhered to, result in perceived benefits by the protégé. To explore this question, an Analysis of Variance was conducted using measures of protégé satisfaction as dependent variables. For each policy issue, two independent variables were derived: (1) whether the firm requires the process, and (2) whether the protégé and mentor engaged in the process. The initial ANOVA tests also included an interaction term, which was subsequently dropped due to lack of significance. The ANOVA results for the three satisfaction measures indicated that the two mentoring processes (meeting regularly, and setting goals and objectives) were associated with higher levels of protégé satisfaction.⁵ However, the existence of firm policy alone was not associated with protégé satisfaction. These results, along with the insignificant interaction terms, suggest that protégés who met regularly with their mentor and set goals and objectives were more satisfied (and less disappointed) with their mentor, regardless of whether firm policy required such processes. Although mentors and protégés were more likely to engage in these processes if required by the firm, the firm policy by itself did not lead to higher satisfaction levels. Table 4 presents the factor level means for both significant factors.

Also reported in table 4 are participant responses to other formal mentoring processes. Only 24.1 percent of the formal proteges were able to report that their mentor had received some mentorship training (46.6 percent simply did not know). A total of 52.1 percent reported that they had switched formal mentors. Most importantly, 83.5 percent indicated that they had an informal mentor concurrent with their formal mentor. This high rate of concurrent formal and informal mentors suggests that employees who are assigned formal mentors are very likely to form informal mentoring relationships. The rate of concurrent mentors was originally presented in table 2, where 274 participants indicated a formal mentor concurrent with an informal one, and only 54 participants indicated having a formal mentor only.

Research Question 3

The third research question is: how do working relationships of formal mentors with their protégés compare with those of informal mentors? Table 5 presents data

⁵ As similarly described in footnote 4, the Analysis of Variance included a control variable for current mentor type, and it was statistically significant. Thus, the variables "Had Regular Meetings" and "Set Goals and Objectives" were associated with employee satisfaction beyond the effect of current mentor type.

TABLE 5
Protégés' Working Relationship With Informal vs. Formal Mentors
 (n = 654)

Protégé is Supervised by Mentor	Protégé's Current Mentor		
	Informal Mentor (n = 326)	Formal Mentor (n = 328)	
Yes	96.3%	82.0%	Probability of Similar Distributions: p = 0.001
No	3.7	18.0	
Total	100.0%	100.0%	
Protégé Perception of Mentor's Success			
Average	4.3%	8.5%	Probability of Similar Distributions: p = 0.001
Successful	40.6	49.4	
Extremely Successful	55.1	42.1	
Total	100.0%	100.0%	
Protégé's Satisfaction With Mentor^a			Probability of Similar Means
Satisfied with Mentor	4.28	3.95	p = 0.001
Mentor Does NOT Meet Needs	1.62	1.92	p = 0.001
Mentor Disappoints	1.57	1.79	p = 0.002

^a Satisfaction measures are based on a 5-point Likert-type scales, where 5 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

analysis from the 654 participants who had a current mentor. The analysis excludes participants with no current mentor and considers the formal mentor for protégés who had a formal mentor concurrent with an informal one. Three issues are examined: whether the protégé was supervised by the mentor, whether the protégé perceived the mentor as being successful, and whether the protégé was satisfied with the mentor. Protégés' working relationship with their mentor differed across all three measures (with p-values less than 0.002). Most protégés reported having been supervised by their mentor, but protégés evaluating an informal mentor reported a higher rate compared to protégés evaluating a formally assigned mentor (96.3 percent vs. 82.0 percent). Regarding the protégé's perception of the mentor's success, 55.1 percent of protégés evaluating informal mentors rated their mentor as "extremely successful," compared to 42.1 percent of protégés evaluating formal mentors. Protégés evaluating a formal mentor were more likely to rate their mentor as only "successful."

Finally, results of simple t-tests indicate that protégés evaluating an informal mentor reported being more satisfied with that mentor.⁶ These protégés rated their mentor

⁶ Given this paper reports that protégés with a formal mentor were less satisfied with their mentor as compared to protégés with an informal mentor only, a genuine concern exists regarding the composite of those respondents evaluating formally assigned mentors. It is possible that respondents with both a formally assigned mentor and concurrent informal mentor are systematically biasing the results (i.e., they
(Continued on next page)

higher regarding "I have been satisfied with my mentor," and lower for "My mentor has not been able to meet my needs," and "My mentor disappoints me." In general, the results suggest that employees perceive informal mentors in a more positive manner and tend to interact more on the job with them.

Research Question 4

The final research question directly investigates whether formal mentoring programs have served to reduce perceived barriers to obtaining a mentor. Table 6 presents the test results from an Analysis of Variance for two measures of perceived barriers: "lack of access to potential mentors" and "lack of willingness by potential mentors." Higher scores indicate that respondent subgroups perceived less access to potential mentors (for reasons such as a shortage of potential mentors) and less willingness by potential mentors to develop a relationship. The primary explanatory variable of interest is Current Mentor Type (none, formal only, informal only, or both formal and informal). The analyses include two control variables: employee organizational level and employee gender. The control variables are necessary since employees who have been with the firm longer may have more experience with obtaining a mentor. Also, there is evidence from prior research (Ragins and Cotton 1991) that female employees perceive barriers to mentoring which male employees do not perceive.

The test results in table 6 (based on all 723 respondents) indicate that employees who have both a formal and an informal mentor perceive fewer barriers in gaining access to mentors and more willingness by potential mentors to develop a relationship with them. The employee subgroup which perceived the greatest barriers were those who currently had neither a formal nor informal mentor. The formal only subgroup perceived as few barriers as the informal only subgroup. While these results are intuitively appealing, it is most encouraging that employees with only a formal mentor perceived fewer barriers compared to employees who had no mentor. Also, their perception of barriers was no worse than that reported by employees who developed informal mentoring relationships on their own (without direct assistance from the firm). These results suggest that formal mentoring programs at large public accounting firms are effective in reducing employees' perceptions of barriers to obtaining a mentor and may, in fact, actually reduce barriers to forming mentoring relationships.

The analyses also indicate some differences due to protégé organizational level, where senior managers were more likely than senior accountants to indicate lack of access to potential mentors ($p = 0.091$). However, these two groups probably have very different career objectives and psychosocial needs, and, thus, may be seeking access to two very different kinds of mentors. It is likely that the type of access senior managers are seeking relates to partnership promotion and may be more difficult to obtain. As noted in discussion of Research Question 1, the dominant mentoring relationship for senior managers was informal mentoring.

The analyses in table 6 indicate no significant differences between male and female employees. To further investigate this finding, the ANOVAs were rerun for the two

Footnote 6 (Continued)

are the ones who are less satisfied with the formally assigned mentor). The statistical tests were rerun with protégés grouped into three categories: informal only, formal only, concurrent formal and informal. The analysis indicates that, contrary to the concern, formal protégés with a concurrent informal mentor were more satisfied with their formal mentor than protégés who had only a formal mentor. Protégés with only a formal mentor tended to be the least satisfied.

TABLE 6
Analysis of Variance Regarding Perceived Barriers to Obtaining a Mentor
(all Respondents n = 723)

	Lack of Access to Potential Mentors ^a		Lack of Willingness by Potential Mentors ^b	
	Model: F = 13.38, p = 0.001		Model: F = 17.52, p = 0.001	
	Means ^c	Probability of Similar Means	Means ^c	Probability of Similar Means
Current Mentor Type		p = 0.001		p = 0.001
None	5.74 a		5.84 a	
Formal Only	4.63 b		4.61 b	
Informal Only	4.30 b		4.18 b	
Both Formal & Informal	3.64 c		3.66 c	
Employee Organizational Level		p = 0.091		p = 0.191
Senior Manager	4.47 a		4.36 a	
Manager	4.21 a,b		4.05 a	
Senior Accountant	4.05 b		4.16 a	
Employee Gender		p = 0.886		p = .188
Male	4.22 a		4.26 a	
Female	4.21 a		4.11 a	

^a Lack of Access to Potential Mentors included two items.

- 1) I am prevented from obtaining a mentoring relationship because of a shortage of potential mentors in the firm.
- 2) I am prevented from initiating a relationship with a mentor because there is a lack of access to potential mentors in the firm.

Each item was measured by a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Combined scores ranged from 2.0 to 10.0, with 10.0 indicating high levels of perceived Lack of Access.

^b Lack of Willingness by Potential Mentors included two items.

- 1) Potential mentors have been unwilling to develop a relationship with me.
- 2) Potential mentors have lacked the time to develop a mentoring relationship with me.

Each item was measured by a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5 = Strongly Agree and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

Combined scores ranged from 2.0 to 10.0, with 10.0 indicating high levels of perceived Lack of Willingness.

^c Means that are statistically different from each other are noted by different letters ("a" vs. "b", etc.).

subgroups with no formal mentor: employees with no mentor (n = 69) and employees with only an informal mentor (n = 326). Neither analysis indicated any gender differences. In both cases, women reported no more barriers to obtaining a mentor than men did. This finding is not trivial, especially given the relatively large sample size and potential bias for finding some difference. However, the results reported here should be interpreted with caution, since a lack of significant difference does not prove that "no differences" exist. Also, it is possible that this study incurred a response bias, where women who perceived barriers to obtaining a mentor simply did not respond to the survey.

Further Analysis

To further examine the effect of mentoring at large public accounting firms, an Analysis of Variance was conducted on employee turnover intentions.⁷ Unlike Viator and Scandura (1991), this study found no association between turnover intentions and explanatory variables, including employee gender and current mentor type. The results for employee gender are encouraging and differ from other studies that have reported higher turnover rates for females in public accounting (Pillsbury et al. 1989; Dalton et al. 1997). As noted in table 1, more female respondents, compared to male respondents, were at the senior accountant level, which typically has higher turnover rates. Thus, the lack of gender differences for employee turnover intentions suggests that, in more recent years, there may have been a positive shift in female employees' attitude toward staying in public accounting.

Although the association between current mentor type and employee turnover intentions was not statistically significant, the ordering of the factor levels was intuitively appealing. Protégés with only a formal mentor and employees with no mentor had the highest level of turnover intentions (7.07 and 6.86, respectively). Protégés with both a formal and concurrent informal mentor, as well as those with an informal mentor only, had the lowest level of turnover intentions (6.65 and 6.64, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The basic motivation for this study was to assess whether formal mentoring programs at large public accounting firms are effective in providing mentors to employees. Perhaps the greatest value derived from formal mentoring programs is that they serve to promote the concept of mentoring and educate employees on the critical value of having a mentor. Less than 10 percent of the respondents failed to identify some type of current mentor. Over 83 percent of the respondents who had a current formal mentor identified one or more persons they considered a concurrent informal mentor. Unfortunately, this study was not able to determine whether employees assigned a formal mentor tended to engage in informal mentoring relations because they considered the formally assigned mentor inadequate, or, they simply were motivated by the firm's initiatives to seek out even more mentoring support. Given that even employees in formal mentoring programs are likely to pursue informal mentoring relationships, future studies should examine what kinds of organizational structures and processes best support and nurture informal mentoring relationships.

This study also examined which program characteristics and organizational processes are most likely to lead to protégé satisfaction with the formal mentorship experience. The analyses presented suggest that the method for matching potential protégés and mentors, as well as the processes of meeting regularly and setting goals and objectives, will impact whether employees are satisfied with their formal mentoring experience. Although the majority of employees participating in formal mentoring programs indicated that either they or their mentor had some input into the matching process,

⁷ Accounting studies have used somewhat different measures of employee turnover intentions (Dillard and Ferris 1979; Senatra 1980; Aranya et al. 1982; Harrell and Stahl 1984; Aranya and Ferris 1984; Harrell et al. 1986). In the current study, the turnover intentions scale was constructed from two questionnaire items adopted from prior studies and focused on "thinking about leaving the firm" and "the probability of looking for another job." There is general support that turnover intentions provide a viable indication of subsequent actual turnovers (Steel and Ovalle 1984). The Cronbach Alpha for this measure was 0.83, indicating acceptable reliability.

those who indicated "no input" were much less satisfied with their formally assigned mentor. For formal mentoring programs to be successful, it seems critical to provide mechanisms where potential protégés and mentors have input regarding the person with whom they are ultimately matched. Also, it seems clear that persons who serve as formal mentors (whether they are employees or partners in the firm) should meet regularly with their protégés and set goals and objectives for the mentorship.

Most encouraging in this study is that women did not differ from men with regard to two critical measures: (1) their perceptions of barriers to obtaining a mentor, and (2) their intentions to leave their public accounting firm. Once again, because the methodology used in this study captured information at a single point in time, we do not know the degree to which mentoring in general, and formal mentoring programs specifically, have served to integrate women into the public accounting profession. However, prior to the establishment of formal mentoring programs and the intense promotion of mentorships, academic studies tended to find that women were more likely than men to leave public accounting. It may be that the social structure in large public accounting firms has changed over time, and continues to change. Equal access to mentors may be just one aspect of that change, or may be a driving force promoting the social change. Given that retention of talented and skilled professionals remains a high priority in the practice of public accounting, additional studies are needed to document the social and organizational changes that have occurred in the last ten years. Also, as the workforce becomes more culturally diverse, these studies should focus on providing insight into the career development of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as women.

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