YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CARRIER ORIENTATION

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МЛАДЕЖКИ МЕНТОРСКИ ПРОГРАМИ КАТО ИНСТРУМЕНТ ЗА ЛИЧНОСТНО РАЗВИТИЕ И КАРИЕРНА ОРИЕНТАЦИЯ

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Abstract

The 21st century digitalization of processes makes for a large pool of career opportunities and an immense number of possibilities for young people. Education and work are no longer the same, neither are the young people who go through the life stages of personal development and career orientation. Even though the information availability presupposes for an easier choice, the reality is different. Young people tend to be unfamiliar with their own strengths and weaknesses, and thus their selection of career path is often not the right one and not corresponding to the personal traits, biological, anatomical, and emotional capabilities and desires. Career counseling might be useful but only when addressed in a timely manner. Young people are rarely entitled to such advising which usually appears only when the career starts. Among the opportunities for young people to reflect on their opportunities based on personalization is through mentoring.

Mentoring has been known for hundreds of years as a way of transferring knowledge and experience from one generation to another. And yet, we live in times when the transfer is reversed or rather mutual.

This article aims to address the link between personal development, career orientation and mentoring.

Keywords: personal development, career orientation, mentoring, mentoring programs

Резюме

Дигитализирането на процесите през 21ви век разкрива много кариерни направления и разнообразие от възможности за младите хора. Образованието и работата вече не са каквото са били, нито пък младежките, които преминават през етапите на личностно развитие и кариерна ориентация. Въпреки че наличието на информация предполага по-лесен избор, реалността е различна. Младите хора са незапознати със собствените си силни и слаби страни, и следователно изборът им на кариерен път често не е правилният.
Introduction

The term personal development has been discussed in numerous articles, academic publications and books. Therefore, this paper will not deal with the exploration of the terminological terms but will use the following definition published by several academic researchers: Personal Development is the conscious pursuit of personal growth by expanding self-awareness and knowledge and improving personal skills. The part which is of interest to the analysis of the author of this article is “expanding self-awareness”. As it was mentioned earlier, self-awareness of one’s personal strengths and weaknesses, personality traits, and capabilities, allows for better alignment of the set of the career choice, and therefore, better results, fulfilment, capacity building, success and satisfaction of the individual.

Most of personal development related to career orientation or career development, analyses the link between personality traits and career success because of, not as a process to, to begin with. Career orientation would serve much better the individual when done prior to the career beginning, even prior to the career selection.

The process of mentoring has indisputably proven its significance with respect to both personal and professional advancement of individuals. The effectiveness of mentoring programs and the success of mentoring relationships is rooted in the unique amalgam of diverse techniques and tools which provide essential guidance, support and knowledge proliferation and propel the impetus for hastened skill enhancement and self-actualization.

The transformative nature of mentoring defined by long-term effectiveness and an emphasis on both personal and career development, transforms it into a powerful instrument for the progress of younger individuals both in terms of professional growth and personal skill enhancement.

The concepts of career orientation and personal development

Career orientation is a definitive process in an individual’s life, comprised of various activities aiming at the facilitated dissemination of information on educational and employment options. What is more, career guidance is considered a specialized activity of high expertise, as it is directed towards assisting young individuals to fully understand the complex personal plethora of goals, aspirations,
competencies and distinctive traits, which aid them to make informed decisions and connect them to available training and employment opportunities (Prelovsky, 2009). In addition, career orientation and counseling is perceived as a widely encompassing process which goes well beyond the initial choice of educational institution or profession but has a greater impact on both lifelong professional and personal development, thus contributing to stronger economies defined by more productive and capable labour force. In accordance with the complex nature of the process and its specificities, six categories can be distinguished with respect to the different career orientation activities:

Figure 1: Career orientation activities

For the purpose of effective career orientation and personal development for the youth, the first three activities should be outlined as essential to the success of the professional guidance process. In order for youngsters to fully realize their potential and be able to make informed and reasonable career choices, career orientation should commence at the early stages of their personal development. Following this rationale, young individuals will have the opportunity to identify their personal strengths and weaknesses in terms of character, skills and abilities and will further distinguish between the benefits and pitfalls of their own personality traits and peculiarities.

Another major argument in favour of the idea of early-stage career orientation is the fact that research provides indisputable evidence about the correlation between differences in personality traits and the choice of major life goals. According to the extensive research conducted by Roberts and Robins
(2012), there is a significant link existent between the famous Big Five personality traits scale (Openness to experience; Conscientiousness; Extraversion; Agreeableness; Neuroticism) and personal dispositions about life goals and career aspirations. The evidence supports the postulations of the Socioanalytic perspective, stating that individuals select life roles that reinforce their identities. Due to this reason, it is extremely important that individuals develop their self-awareness from the early stages of their life, so that they are capable of structuring their own life path and career preferences in the most optimal and effective manner. In order to provide youngsters with the opportunity to develop their potential for personal realization and career advancement in a genuinely successful way, mentoring is introduced as the most effective tool for this purpose. The personalized approach of mentoring relationships that is built on solid grounds of mentor-mentee transfer of knowledge, experience and insight, presents the unique possibility to not only contribute to the young individual’s wisdom creation and potential career orientation, but to assist him or her in the complex path towards self-awareness and self-actualization.

The following section will further elaborate on the role and significance of Youth Mentoring Programs with regards to the personal development and career guidance of young people.

**Youth Mentoring Programs**

The development of mentoring programs always follows a predefined structure, which further facilitates the clarification of objectives and setting of priorities throughout the process. In general, one of the main strategic objectives is to clearly and precisely identify the specific needs of the particular target group and to consequently develop effective solution strategies in order to meet those needs (Koleva, 2015). In the case of mentoring programs devised for the broad target group of the “youth”--including high schoolers, university students and young graduates, it is pivotal to prioritize and address efficiently the needs for personal development and career orientation of youngsters.

Youth is best defined as a transitional period from dependence towards independence, greater responsibility and awareness as an adult (United Nations, 1981). In addition, this is the period when individuals are most volatile, as they are experiencing the passage from childhood to adulthood, which is strongly defined by uncertainty, varying expectations and lack of full self-awareness. Due to these reasons, mentoring is perceived as the most effective instrument towards professional identification and personal advancement of young individuals. As it was explained in greater details in the book “Mentoring: Process, Guidelines and Programs” by Dr. Koleva, mentoring programs aid youngsters to become more self-reliant and self-consistent by further developing the mentees’ planning and organizing skills and encouraging them to develop resilience, responsibility and prudence with respect to their own career advancement and personal growth.

What is more, an extremely important element of this research is to place an emphasis on the significance of mentoring as a process of mentees’ self-actualization. Mentoring programmes are no longer following a narrow focus which addresses only emotional, behavioral and social issues (Herrera et al, 2013), but are rather directed towards the full capability identification and realization by youngsters. By creating and implementing a brand new methodology based on complex psychological, physiological and neuroscience techniques and practices, the revised youth mentoring programmes will be particularly helpful in identifying the positive and negative traits of young individuals and will guide them in the process of self-realization in terms of both individual growth and career path orientation.
Some of the most effective mentoring programs are initiated in the academic realm. The rationale behind academic mentoring is to encourage and support the professional advancement of young individuals who are in the early stages of their careers or are in the process of choosing their desired professional path. The effectiveness of the academic mentoring programs relies heavily on the structured approach to pairing students with faculty members who match the needs and interests of the mentees, thus leading to the creation of trusting relationships which contribute to increased productivity, self-awareness and self-confidence of young mentees. In addition to that, academic mentoring programmes focus on empowering the mentees to take responsibility of their own learning, actions and choices concerning their career development and personal growth. As a result, mentoring programs implemented in the academia have an indisputable impact on the development of students and their enhanced career orientation, as they provide an effective link between academia and business and create a more motivated and aware work force.

Many renowned universities and colleges have successfully implemented mentoring programs in their institutions as a valuable tool to attract, retain and develop the potential of the best students in society. One excellent case of well-designed and developed mentoring programme is the University of Sheffield Tutoring Program, which has a primary aim of assisting students with advice and information on their university career and desired professional development. Although mentors in this program generally monitor the academic progress of their students, the mentors place a substantial part of their efforts towards supporting and guiding mentees in the process of enhanced self-awareness and self-realization related to their career choices and personal endeavors (The University of Sheffield, 2015). Another successful example of academic mentoring programmes is the Xavier University Mentoring Program, whose rationale is based on connecting students with active practitioners and career experts, who in turn prepare the mentees to make more informed and prudent career decisions and to develop their teamwork and leadership skills more effectively (Xavier University, 2015). Since the commencement of the program, 2500 students have been connected with professionals from over

Figure 2. Characteristics of an Effective Youth Mentoring Programme

Academic Mentoring Programs
560 organizations, thus preparing the mentees for a more practical application of their knowledge and skills acquired in class. In summary, academic mentoring programs are a powerful instrument for personal development and career orientation of young individuals, as it provides them with the unique opportunity to strengthen their self-perception and discover their strengths and weaknesses in their pursuit of personal and professional progress.

Digital Mentoring Programs

In accordance with the specific needs, preferences and lifestyle patterns of young individuals, the implementation of mentoring programs has also evolved to include additional elements which facilitate the communication and openness of mentees. In order to address youngsters’ various needs and issues, mentoring programs currently include web-based platforms and mobile applications which are aimed at eliminating boundaries and making the mentor-mentee communication more effective and more active (Wong and Premkumar, 2007). Digital mentoring programmes are characterized by high levels of dynamism, flexibility and absence of time and physical space constraints and are useful for creating a smart and innovative career orientation environment (Koleva, 2015). In addition, some of the numerous benefits of digital mentoring programmes are related to the broad range of services and functionalities of learning and networking among academics, students and professionals in a virtual reality. As a result of these factors, digital mentoring facilitates the mentees’ transition from academic to professional life while also complying with the current market trends of the rapidly changing environment.

The essence of digital mentoring and the methodology used is a blend of standard mentoring techniques (including the matching process of mentors and mentees from both business and academia with the general purpose of personal and career development counselling and knowledge sharing) and innovative features and applications (aiming at a more dynamic and accessible nature of the mentoring programmes). There are several successful examples of digital mentoring platforms whose target is young individuals in pursuit of their career path and personal growth. One of the popular online mentoring programs is the platform “mentomet.org”, which is designed to match younger individuals with professionals who take up the role of mentors and provide valuable support and guidance to their young mentees. In addition, both mentors and mentees in this program avail of diverse digital tools, as virtual platforms and online chat interface, which further enhance the mentoring process by facilitating communication channels and establishing secure and open interactions (MentorNet, 2015). Another successful digital mentoring program with a distinct focus on empowering young individuals to develop their capabilities and identify their greatest strengths, is the “SHIELD” mentoring program. By introducing a broad range of digital tools (online trainings and webinars), the program encourages youngsters to reach optimal levels in terms of their personal growth and career orientation efforts (SHIELD, 2015).

In general, digital mentoring programs will be an indispensable part of the future mentoring practices, especially those whose target group is young individuals. As a consequence of the aforementioned fact, combining the currently developed mentoring methodology for the youth, whose main characteristics and functions were presented in this paper, with the development of an integrated digital tool and mobile application, would be an effective approach towards disseminating knowledge and diverse information to youngsters.
References


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