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Virtual Mentorship as an Advanced Method of Knowledge and Experience Sharing and Network Building



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Abstract

Access to advanced ideas, specific information, advanced expertise, accumulated experience and applicable knowledge are key competitive determinants of those that want to prosper in knowledge based society. In other words human capital is principal competitive advantage of knowledge based economies. Trends in today's world are making us rethink the methods of delivering knowledge. In order to answer to those trends and as a proactive effort to foster their global competitiveness top students from two most influenced graduate schools (Faculty of Economics and Business and Faculty Electrical Engineering and Computing both within University of Zagreb) in Croatia gathered within eSTUDENT initiative and they have started project "Virtual Mentorship". Its primary goal is to initialize and organize cooperation between senior undergraduate students from Croatian universities and acknowledged members of academic society and business world who live abroad but do have originated from Croatia. Purpose of the project is to establish mentor-protégé relationship between these two parties that will enable students to learn and improve their knowledge as well as gain new skills through quality virtual communication with respectable scientists and professionals. This project has a great potential and significance for development of Croatian system of education as well as for improvement of Croatian labour competitiveness in general. Its significance lies primarily on impacts that Virtual Mentorship has on educational system.

Keywords

mentorship, virtual, knowledge sharing, networking, distance learning

JEL classification

A22, D83, D85, J11, J21, J24, M53, O15

1. Introduction

Access to advanced ideas, specific information, advanced expertise, accumulated experience and applicable knowledge are key competitive determinants of those that want to prosper in knowledge based society. In other words human capital is principal competitive advantage of knowledge based economies. European Union acknowledged that when they have accepted strategic goals for 2010 set for Europe at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 where they have stated: “We want to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.”¹

In today’s world if you want to meet needs and desires of advanced learners one needs to rethink delivery methods and strategies (Dooley, Lindner, Dooley, 2005). One of the most important factors in labor force competitiveness is the national educational system (Porter, 1990; Ives, 1992; Becker, 1994; Curran, 2000; Longenecker, Ariss, 2002; Pfeffer, 2002; Giddens, 2003; Docquier, Marfouk, 2006) where return on investment is much higher than in any other type of investment (Benhabib, Spiegel, 1994; Barro, 1998). Of all phenomena that have gripped the business world in recent years, few match the impact of networks (Parkhe, Wasserman, Ralston, 2006). In order to answer to those trends and as a proactive effort to foster their global competitiveness top students from two most influenced graduate schools (Faculty of Economics and Business and Faculty Electrical Engineering and Computing both within University of Zagreb) in Croatia gathered within eSTUDENT initiative and they have started project “Virtual Mentorship”. Virtual Mentorship is non-formal educational program which is used as a non-mandatory supplement activity to formal education (Shrestha, Wilson, Singh, 2008). The project was started as a pilot program in 2004 by first generation of students. Project is organized by the Virtual Mentorship Team which consists of up to 10 members of eSTUDENT who are responsible for different tasks within the project. In order to become the members of Virtual Mentorship Team students need to pass the complex evaluation of their abilities and skills such as: proficiency in English, computer skills, literal expression and IQ test. People with higher levels of education or better socio-economic standing do have strong tendency to use their networks more efficiently to gain status (Lin, 1999), improve performance (Mehra, Kilduff, Brass, 2001) or achieve higher income in their career (Meyerson, 1994). In addition to that personal characteristics of individuals, such as their identity, set of values, cognitive maps and capabilities, influences how successfully such individuals can use social capital to achieve either personal or organizational goals (Shipilov, 2006).

eSTUDENT and its Virtual Mentorship Team as the umbrella organization acts as the main link between the students and their mentors. Teams’ assignment is to find scientists and professionals who are interested and willing to commit themselves to the project, to promote Virtual Mentorship among student body, to serve as a technical support and information provider for both mentors and students as well as developing Virtual Mentorship public awareness in general. Its primary goal is to initialize and organize cooperation between senior undergraduate students from Croatian universities and acknowledged members of academic society and business world who live abroad but do have originated from Croatia. Purpose of the project is to establish mentor-protégé relationship between these two parties that will enable students to learn and improve their knowledge as well as gain new skills through quality virtual communication with respectable scientists and professionals.

Students communicate with their virtual mentors primarily through e-mails, VOIP devices, telephone contact and other virtual electronic methods. Communication and cooperation is focused around student’s scientific paper works, research projects, development of business plans and other scientifically and professionally based activities which are in the field of expertise of his/her mentor. In previously described projects both sides stimulate flow of information, knowledge building, expertise sharing, networking and learning from experience of others.

¹ Taken from official European Commission web page, http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/knowledge_society/index_en.htm, February, 13th 2008

Any scientific work that is based on technological aspects of modern educational tools is quickly outdated. In order to mitigate this obsolescence by the time we publish this paper we tried to emphasize mostly non-tangible effects of the project.

2. Social background

This project is in a way strongly determined by the fact that a large number of Croatian people live and work outside Croatia. Croatia ranks among those parts of Europe which have taken very high part in all forms of emigration flows in almost all periods of the last few centuries. Strong emigration process started during 16th century due to Turkish invasion to South and east European countries. This is a result of a great emigration process that happened to Croatia during the late 19th and entire 20th century. About 500,000 people had emigrated from Croatia in the period from the end of the 19th century up to World War I. (Čizmić, 1996).

Increasing poverty and unstable political situation in Croatia, especially after the world wars and during the economic crisis in 1980s caused the increase of both political and economical emigration waves mostly to west European countries, USA, Canada, Latin America and Australia. For the entire period 1948–1981, statistics show that modern overseas emigration from Croatia totalled roughly 140,000 persons (Čizmić, 1996).

It is estimated that now days in previously stated countries live more than 3 million people with Croatian origin. For a relatively small country as Croatia (4.7 million citizens) it is a quite a large number which represents a great potential for development of Croatian diplomacy, economy and science. Very significant is the fact that there are a lot of Croatian people among world's respectful business people as well as scientists from all the fields of science and art. World Bank reports indicate that almost every third Croatian citizen with a graduate degree lives abroad, and with a 29.4% migration rate Croatia has taken first place in Europe in the number of departures of highly educated people – 14th place at the global level (Docquier, Marfouk, 2006).

Like in almost every Central and East European country also in Croatia brain drain process is a huge problem. After finishing their studies many young, bright and well educated people decide to look for employment outside Croatia not just because of higher life standard but also because they think that abroad they are going to achieve their professional needs.

As a response to this very complex problem during the past few years Croatian government as well as civil society institutions have been working intensively on stimulating young people to stay in Croatia. Also a great progress has been made in brain gain activities which have a purpose to support and stimulate Croatian scientists to return and continue development of their careers in Croatia. In order to encourage that process on formal level Croatian Ministry of science, education and sport organized second congress of scientists from the homeland and abroad where students from Virtual Mentorship team did have chance to present their project and gain great interest. Congress was organized as extension of efforts at bringing together and creating a network of Croatian scientists that began with the first Congress, held in Zagreb and Vukovar, in November 2004, and as a path to the scientists' more active role in the development of Croatia into a knowledge-based society.² The Congress objective is to lay the groundwork for the incorporation of knowledge and research into the framework of the scientific, economic, cultural and political development of Croatia.

The student organization eSTUDENT was founded with a goal to connect enthusiastic students at the University of Zagreb, with most competitive Croatian companies. It was founded by a group of students and teaching assistants thinking they could act as change agents and provide students environment where they could acquire additional knowledge and practical skills that would be of great use to them in their

² Taken from official Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport web page, <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx>, February, 10th 2008

professional and personal development. Initiative was started as a reaction to *en masse* type of education where all parties involved realized that it is almost impossible to give extra attention to those students that deserve it. With the help of business managers and faculty, its goal is to give students that are willing to take initiative and responsibility extracurricular education with the purpose of creating competitive workforce that is going to core of the national future growth and value creation. The organization started to work in March 2004 with following principles as part of their organizational culture: respecting different attitudes, opinions and ideas; freedom of choice; independence of work for the organization; transparency and democracy; individual and organizational responsibility for their work.³ Virtual Mentorship as well has given a significant contribution to these values.

3. Project organization

The mentor-protégé relationship is a concept that originated in Homer's Odyssey where one of the characters was named Mentor. According to Ernest Klein, Men is 'one who thinks', 'tor' is the masculine suffix, 'trix' the feminine (Roberts, 1999). Therefore, he gives mentor a meaning of a man who thinks, and Mentrix, a woman who thinks. A mentor is typically more experienced person than his or her protégé. He or she possesses the wisdom that only experience can provide and is willing to invest time and effort to share that with his/her protégé. Someone who offers sincere support, rightful challenge, genuine patience, contagious enthusiasm and overwhelming set of values while guiding a young person. In short mentor represents tangible evidence of what one wants to become and relationship is base on trust. The protégé is usually someone who is looking to move up the career ladder, usually following in the footsteps of the mentor. It is important to emphasize that relationship benefits both mentor and protégé. Protégé receives guidance and helpful advice through direct contact and mentor benefits from the opportunity to strengthen his or her leadership skills, gain fresh perspective and thinking outside the box. At the end there is also a sense of pride in knowing that you have helped one to accomplish dreams and personal satisfaction in accepting a challenge and meeting a goal. It is extremely important for both sides not to have too big expectations.

Due to all project vision is to improve quality of education in Croatia and create value in knowledge-based society by bringing together the excellent students from Croatia with respectable professionals and scientists who live and work abroad. Project mission is to create context that is going to foster students to improve their knowledge, receive valuable first hand information, develop new skills and learn from the experience of others in order to be more competitive in the global work force market as well as to create a respectable network of excellent Croatian scientists and professionals from homeland and abroad.

Besides using links from people involved in project, the ongoing work of finding new potential mentors is carried out in cooperation with Croatian diplomatic representatives and professional organizations in foreign countries but also by using virtual business-oriented social networks such as LinkedIn, Xing, hi5 and others. Other technique that proved to be useful is Googling through key words.

Every student who passed the selection process for eSTUDENT can apply for a mentor by sending their CV, letter of motivation as well as the profile of the mentor they would like to communicate with to people responsible for application process within Virtual Mentorship Team.

After examining the application the next step is to find the mentor who is willing and able to help the student with the selected subject. It is done by searching through the base of potential mentors or by searching online networks and contacting Croatian embassies. In general there is culture among team members that everyone is happy to help students with everything they are working on, so when they can not find specific mentor profile they are asking the closest matching mentor if she/he is willing to help. At the begging mentor-protégé communication is guided by appointed Team member especially in order to communicate to protégé (student) that she/he should take communicational initiative and that networking is all about reciprocity. Team member is mentoring communicational process without overstepping any

³ More about the organisation on their official web page, <http://www.e-student.hr>.

confidentiality boundaries. It should be clear to both mentor and protégé that networking outreach is not a one-way proposition. Out of experience from previous years Team members realized that many problems occur in early stages of the relationship. That is good because it gives both sides a chance to address the issue. Program allows a no-fault termination in the first three months.

Formal duration of the mentor-protégé relationship is limited by the time needed to finish the project they are working on. On the other hand it is strongly recommended that student stays in touch with the mentor after the project is finished in order to broaden his/her professional and personal network. If a partnership works well there are no official boundaries to continue the relationship informally.

4. Virtual Mentoring Benefits and Challenges

Mentoring process within this project is defined as shared creation and/or discovery in which two individuals with complementary skills interact to create shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on his/her own (Quereshi, 2006). As we can see from previous and following paragraphs this project has a great potential and significance for development of Croatian system of education as well as for improvement of Croatian labour competitiveness in general. Its significance lies primarily on impacts that Virtual Mentorship has on educational system. Through Virtual Mentorship students have:

- a unique opportunity to improve their theoretical knowledge that they receive through formal education and compare it with first hand information and advice from experienced experts;
- an introduction (letter) to another contact who works in the area student is heading toward;
- a recommendation to a professional organization (for internship) and further development (for permanent employment);
- easy and immediate access to all sorts of information that are placed on the web;
- most convenient type of communication where they can send an e-mail and communicate any time of day or night;
- access to web sites, newsletter or any other similar source of information that is relevant to students career and his/her aspiration;
- tips about possible window of opportunity or even help with job application;
- according to all parties involved a very valuable feature in a way of supporting case study method of teaching;
- information about educational programs in a particular geographic area;
- business plans made by students in cooperation with their mentors have a great potential of becoming a successful enterprises;
- to complete formal survey regarding their experience in mentoring program as a part of knowledge/experience data base.

It is clear that this projects tries to build positive long-term relationships between all parties involved but some qualitative work (Labianca, Brass, 2006) indicates that negative relationship development is a much faster process. Therefore we should be aware that every project has its shortcomings and challenges such as:

- proper building and refining interpersonal skills requires direct contact between mentor and protégé;
- it takes time for students to raise their questions and concerns since they think that major part of their problems are too trivial for mentor to deal with;
- both mentors and protégés are by their selection very busy and it takes time to develop relationship;
- mentor and protégé do not have the same level of conscientiousness that refers to extent to which and individual is hardworking, organized, dependable and persevering (Labianca, Brass, 2006).

It is through systems of relationship that people are able to enact their desires, pursue their affections, and get works done (Kilduff, Tsai, Hanke, 2006). Perhaps the most important asset the one can receive from

this project is a strong international network of professionals which will be of great help in his/her future career development.

5. Achieved results

During the past three years the project has expanded to two more faculties within the University of Zagreb. Besides that several universities from Croatia as well as universities from neighbour countries have shown an interest to participate in the project.

Mentoring is an important element of a career and personal advancement. Research shows that individuals who have been mentored have higher chance for professional advancement, make higher salaries, and report higher career satisfaction (Knouse, 2001). By now more than 60 students and 30 mentors participated in the project. There is also a database with more than 200 potential mentors.

Mentor-protégé relationships within this project resulted with 15 new perspective business plans, 9 new enterprises, 2 new scientific projects, 1 scientific conference, several informal professional networks as well as many new ideas and job opportunities for both students and mentors.

There are many side benefits out of this program, e.g. through this project several scientists from abroad established deeper friendly relations with Croatian scientific institutions and are considering a possibility of permanent return to Croatia.

Also many of Croatian students did use this opportunity not just to expand their personal and professional network but to take internship and to find employment abroad that is going to fit their ambition and desires. Networks like this prove that knowledge-sharing based relationship will drive this century economy.

6. Future plans

Ongoing quality improvement evaluation process will allow the project to meet needs and wants of the students and mentors. Feedback from previous years results in concrete suggestions that led us to beneficial changes.

On the basis of both advantages and disadvantages there are certain things that could be improved. In that manner people involved in the project should:

- create online database of mentors and interactive professional user-friendly web page that will allow easy application process of students from entire country,
- develop e-Learning programs of education and communications between students and mentors,
- organize more of educational seminars and scientific conferences intended for mentors and students within the project in order of supporting brain gain activities and developing professional and scientific network;
- try to merge mentoring process with networking process as much as possible since those two are inter-related within this project but they differentiate by term and strength of relationship;
- write brief reflective paper to summarize their experience and build knowledge base for future users.

It appears that collaboration projects like this one can enhance the effects of data, information, knowledge, experience and wisdom sharing through modern communication technologies when applied to development efforts. The information about opportunities is particularly valuable in nontransparent markets, where participants might not always know who is working on valuable projects, and when and where there is considerable knowledge he/she should have access to (Shipilov, 2006). As technologies evolve Virtual Mentoring process is becoming increasingly important factor not just for students' career development but also for career success and in some cases even survival. That allows us to think that in the following period Virtual Mentorship will become a recognizable project for its excellence and vast opportunities it offers

among all parties in interest. At the end project should get stronger support by Croatian government in a way of finance and to expend to all higher education institutions in Croatia.

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