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The Role of Trust in the Mentoring Experience of Trainee Lawyers and its Influence on Intention to Stay in Irish Law Practices

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The Role of Trust in the Mentoring experience of trainee lawyers and its Influence on Intention to Stay in Irish Law Practices

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ABSTRACT

Trust and mentoring are two well researched concepts within the field of management science. However, very few studies have sought to explicitly look at the role of trust in the mentoring relationship. This study seeks to contribute to the linking of the two fields. The mentoring experiences of 289 second year trainee lawyers who were interns in law practices in the Republic of Ireland were surveyed. Their levels of trust in their formally assigned mentor was assessed and their perceptions of the effectiveness of their mentoring experience using Scandura's (1992) three function conceptualisation were measured. The role of trust in the experience of the three functions is highlighted. The research also reveals how trust in mentor and the experienced career development aspect of mentoring, predict trainee intention to stay or leave their organisation. Implications for mentoring programme development and practice are suggested.

***Key Words*:** Trust; Mentoring; Intention to Stay; Trainee Lawyers

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TRUST

Trust is commonly regarded as the hallmark or bedrock of effective relationships (Dirks, 1999). Although researchers have approached trust from a variety of perspectives in management research and have conceptualized it in a variety of ways, Rousseau, et al. (1998) have noted several commonalities across the common definitions, specifically:

(i) risk
(ii) expectations or beliefs, and
(iii) a willingness to place oneself at risk with the assumption and expectation that no harm will come to oneself.

There is an acceptance right across the literature that the issue of vulnerability is a core and consistent characteristic in trust relationships.

McAllister's, (1995) conceptualisation of trust as having both affective and cognitive components hints at the complexity of the issue. Cognitive forms of trust reflect issues such as the integrity or capability of another party. Affective trust on the other hand reflects a special relationship with the party that may cause him/her to demonstrate genuine concern about one's welfare and engenders a feeling of empathic consideration for him/her. Kramer (1999) reflects this socio-emotional aspect of trust in his relational conceptualisation of trust (as against rational trust) where he sees this facet of trust going well beyond the transactional aspects of a calculated exchange but toward a sense of fellowship and citizenry.

Mishra (1996) extends the dimensional conception of trust when he defines trust as 'one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) reliable, (c) open and (d) concerned' (p. 265). Competence refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities of the trustee (Butler & Cantrell, 1984); openness implies sharing of information and ideas (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000); concern is the belief and expectation that the other party will not only refrain from behaving opportunistically but will also care about the trustor's overall welfare and interests (Mishra, 1996); and reliability deals with consistency and congruency between words and actions (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000)

The literature on the importance of trust in organisational settings is now vast. The meta-analysis by Colquitt, Scott and LePine (2007) has helped clarify the direct and mediating impact on performance as well as outcomes such as affective commitment. This is not to say that trust is all positive but it has emerged as a significant variable in our understanding of organisational behaviour in recent times (Rousseau et al, 1998).

Trust in Professional Relationships

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) differentiate the dynamics of business or professional relationship focussed trust from the personal and romantic relationship trust research. They highlight that professional relationships rarely involve the positive feeling and idealisation phase characteristic of the beginning of romantic relationships. Building

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on the earlier work of Shapiro, Sheppard and Cheraskin 5(1992) they posit that most professional relationships begin with what they refer to as calculus-based or deterrence-based trust. This form of trust is driven by the value of rewards from a trusting relationship balanced by the fear of costs of violation, whatever they may be. However, most professional relationships, in time, evolve beyond this transactional formula. Lewicki and Bunker suggest that once a degree of consistency and predictability characterises the developing professional relationship, knowledge-based trust begins to emerge as the dominant source of stability for the relationship. Knowledge here refers to the development of a richer schema, built from the history or experience of the relationship, which incorporates understandings of various behaviours and attitudes. This deeper understanding gained for longer exposure to the other party and in varied contexts may even include allowances for inconsistencies which might not have been acceptable in the calculus-based phase.

Higher order professional trust relationships are characterised by what Lewicki and Bunker (1996) refer to as identification-based trust. This level of trust reflects an almost empathic awareness of the values, needs and goals of the other party. They suggest that this form of trust is best highlighted when for example in the faces of adverse criticism, one party advocates for or defends the target with more zeal than the target him/herself might have displayed.

Trust in Manager Supervisor

McCauley and Khunert (1992) suggest that workplace trust is a multidimensional construct consisting of vertical and lateral components. Essentially, lateral trust refers to trust relations among co-workers (or equals) who share a similar work level or situation, whereas vertical trust refers to relations between individuals and either their immediate line manager or supervisor, or top management. Tan and Tan (2000) emphasise the importance of clearly distinguishing the foci of trust within the organisation. They argue that trust in supervisor and trust in management are two distinct while related constructs, each with its own antecedents and outcomes.

Trust in manager is traditionally perceived as primarily or at least initially at a transactional level which might develop through to knowledge based or identification based relationship overtime and with experience. While trust in manager is a widely research area there is very little research that focuses on the place of trust in the mentor-protégé relationship. Formal mentoring relationships are typically a manager-subordinate level relationship but the fact that the pairing has a clear set of expectations attached makes it an intriguing issue for trust research.

Mentoring

The popularity of mentoring programmes within organisations has grown dramatically in recent years (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). This popularity reflects the strength of research supporting the numerous advantage of mentoring for protégé, mentor and organisation (see, Eby, Allen, Evan, Ng, and DuBois, *In Press*, for comprehensive

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review). Mentoring programmes are frequently adopted by HR professionals as a core methodology or tool, by which employee socialisation, expectations and potential can be developed within the actual work environment (Noe, 1988).

Kram (1983) identified that formal mentoring delivered a dual function, career development assistance for the protégé and psychosocial support. Scandura and Viator (1994) did further development work on this dual function conceptualisation of mentoring and revealed three distinct mentoring roles. In addition to career development and social support, they reported that mentoring relationship was also an important source of role modelling for protégés. This three role conceptualisation of mentoring has received support in a variety of contexts and cultures (see for example, Barker, Monks and Buckley, 1999; Herbohn, 2004).

The Role Modelling function reflects the mentor's effectiveness as a behavioural model for the protégé. It includes aspects such as actual behavioural mimicry and respect for his/her ability to teach and demonstrate various on-the-job skills. The Social Support function is more psychosocial in nature and involves the mentor encouraging the protégé to share problems with him/her or to move the relationship beyond just the professional sphere by sharing social activities together also. The Career Development function is quite explicit with mentor advising and directing the protégé on specific career advancement issues.

While much research has focussed on the differential impact of formal versus informal mentoring (e.g. Chao, Walz & Gardner, 1992) and on the different functions of mentoring (Kram, 1983: Scandura & Viator, 1994), with a few exceptions there has been little research investigating the relational underpinnings of the mentoring experience (Allen, Eby, O' Brien, & Lentz, *In Press*) which might highlight the place of trust in such a professional relationship.

Mentoring and Trust

Given the literature reviewed to date it makes intuitive sense that trust would be a significant factor in the success or effectiveness of a formal mentoring relationship. Linnehan, Weer & Uhl, (2005) did look at the proteges perceptions of trust in initial stages of an academic mentoring scheme the study did not relate this to the effectiveness of mentoring nor to the different functions. Koberg, Boss and Goodman (1998) did demonstrate the trust among in-group members was a pre-requisite for positive psycho-social mentoring among a hospital sample but did not investigate the mentor-protégé experience of trust. It is surprising that the issue of trust has not been researched in more detail given the very detailed analysis of the mentoring relationship has received from researchers in the past two decades.

The current research seeks to bring the trust and mentoring literature together and seeks to establish and understanding of the confluence of these fields by testing series of projective hypotheses.

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Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The three functions of mentoring will be significantly positively related to trust in mentor.

Hypothesis 2: Positive Trust in Mentor will predict positive experience of the 3 mentoring functions.

Hypothesis 3: Trust in mentor and experienced mentoring functions will predict protégés intention to leave the organisation.

METHODOLOGY

Context and Sample

In Ireland all trainee solicitors (lawyers) must complete a two year period of trainee placement within a professional legal practice. At the commencement of this two year internship all trainees are assigned a formal mentor. This mentor must be a qualified middle to senior level lawyer and must have at a minimum 5 years practice experience. While trainees spent two years in the internship they are required to attend compulsory Irish Law Society training programmes at several points over that period. The current study attempted to survey the full year two of the trainee population (N=316) at one of these scheduled compulsory training programmes.

Survey completion was voluntary and of the 316 registered trainees, 289 completed and usable questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 91.5% of the full population.

Participants were on average 27.1 years of age (SD= 4.02), of which 102 were male (35.3 %) and 187 were female (64.7%). As the size of a practice can influence the breadth of trainee experience respondents were asked to idenfity whether their internship was in a sole practice (N= 32, 11%), a small practice with less than five legal staff (N=118, 41%) or large practice (N= 139, 48%). 220 of the respondents were male (76%) with 68 females (24%).

Measures

Mentoring Behaviour: Scandura's (1992) 15 item measure of mentoring functions was used to indicate the extent of the experience of the three mentoring functions, Career Development (α .92). Role Modelling (α. 87), and Social Support (α .82).

Trust: Mishra's (1996) 16 item 'Trust in Management' scale was adapted to focus on Trust in Mentor (α .96). The adaptation involved placing "my training solicitor…" at the beginning of each item. Training solicitor is the formal title for the trainee's assigned mentor. The questionnaire comprises of 4 dimensions openness, reliability, competence and concern which are combined to give a single trust score.

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Intention to Stay with Firm: The 3 item Colarelli (1984) measure was employed (α .89).

As suggested from previous research a series of independent factors were recorded such as mentor gender, mentor experience, and size of firm within which placement took place.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the inter-correlations between the core variables of the current research. Variable one is the overall trust variables measured by the combination of the four component dimension of Mishra's scale. Variables three to six inclusive (shaded) are the individual components of the Mishra scale.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

The significant positive correlations between trust and the mentoring functions lead to the acceptance of hypothesis one. Looking more closely at the intercorrelations of the sub-dimensions of trust, the variability of Competence based Trust across the three functions is also worth noting. The significant negative relationship of intention to leave the organisation with both trust and mentoring function is also expected.

No significant gender differences were found at either gender of trainee or gender of mentor levels of analysis. To test hypothesis two a hierarchical regression was conducted (see Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The analyses reveal that trust in mentor play a significant role in the development of each of the three mentoring functions, thus lending support to hypothesis two. However, trust alone was not the only factor that appeared to influence the development of effective mentoring function relationships. Size of firm also appeared to play a role. Further analyses (ANOVA) revealed that there was no significant difference between the three practice sizes (solo, small and large) in terms of mentoring function scores. Deeper analysis using stepwise regressions revealed that there was the interaction between firm size and trust thus delivering the effect. Trainees in larger firms reported significantly higher overall trust in mentor scores that those in solo or small practices ($F = 8.13$, *df 2*, $p < .001$). Further analyses at the level of the constituent components of trust (openness, reliability, competence and concern) showed that the same significant differences pertained to all dimensions.

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The third hypothesis predicted that overall trust in and mentoring functions would impact positively on traniees intention to leave the organisation (practice) once their internship was completed (see table 3).

[Insert Table 3 about here]

These results reveal that the two variables that play the most significant part in a trainees perception of whether they would stay or leave this practice after internship was the level of overall trust in their mentor and the level of career development mentoring the received from this mentor. This interesting result leads to a partial acceptance of hypothesis three with only one of the three mentoring functions playing a predictive role in a decision to stay or leave their organisation. While it was shown from the earlier hypothesis that trust played a significant part in the various mentoring functions when it came to predicting future behaviour it was the combination of trust and the level of explicit career advancement assistance that the trainees received which influenced their future desire to stay of quit the organisation.

DISCUSSION

This research sought to address an apparent gap in the research literature linking trust to the mentoring relationship and more specifically with the specific component functions of mentoring. The research focussed on the experiences of trainee lawyers who were one year into a formal mentoring relationship in their internship practices. Results indicate that trust in mentor is an important predictor of the levels of career development, social support and role modelling they received from their mentors. It was also revealed that trainees who were in practices of 5 or more lawyers reported much higher overall trust in mentor scores. This latter finding requires some probing. While it is speculation, the researchers understand that the larger practices tend to have more formal mentor training and the whole mentoring programme is part of a wider HR development strategy. This is not always the case in smaller practises where while mentors are aware of their obligation and the meaning of it in terms of the profession, they may not have received any formal mentor training nor is their performance being assessed in any way.

The research also reveals an interesting insight in to the opinions of the trainees on whether they would stay with their current firm of leave at the end of the internship. Ultimately, the factors which influenced this opinion were the overall level of trust in the mentor and the level of career development assistance the trainee felt they received from their mentor. This is an interesting juxtaposition of the relational, in terms of trust, and the transactional in terms of career advancement opportunities and advice.

From the perspective of the HR practitioner the research has some important messages. Trust is at the foundation of the mentoring relationship and is a significant influence in all functions of the formal relationship. However, when it comes to

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seeking to retain protégés, their decision to stay will be influenced by the level of trust they have developed with their mentor but also by the effectiveness of his/her career development advice and behaviours.

The study is representative of an entire one year cohort of trainee lawyers in one jurisdiction but there are some issues which limit the generalisability of the findings. In particular the difference of context and experience of trainees who serve their internships in solo or small (< 5 lawyer) practices markedly different from those in large well established practices. The latter frequently have very clear roles to assign to their trainees and have clear cycles of experience to offer them. They also tend to have more formal HR departments who train mentor and monitor the progression of trainees across their internship. This tends to be a much more ad hoc experience in small practices. A second feature of the population is also associated with the practice size factor. Many of the larger practices will recruit annually from their trainees. This fact is known to the trainees and may influence their perceptions of likelihood to craft a career within the practice. For many trainees in the smaller firms they would be aware that the likelihood of being retained after their internship would be small. This suggests that the intention to leave items on the survey may have been somewhat artificial in this context. We were surprised however, that there was no significant difference between solo/small practices and larger practices on the intention to leave variable (although means for the larger firms were more positive).

Given the point made above about the different potential for continuance in smaller firms this would suggest that trainees in these firms may view the mentoring relationship as a transitory and potentially finite relationship.

The research is a snap shot at one stage in the internship of these trainees and thus does not capture the developmental nature of the mentoring relationship (and indeed the rust relationship).

Future research might focus on the evolution of trust within the three mentoring functions over the time of the mentoring relationship. It might also be worth comparing the mentoring experiences of trainees in one of the professions, such as these lawyer, with trainees or new employees in a non-professional organisation. Mentoring has been a historic part of the training of lawyers in Ireland and thus expectations have developed around the process. The centrality of career development with regarding to continuance certainly would benefit from further investigation and future research might focus on more explicit career aspirations to further our understanding if this issue.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Correlation matrix of central variables

	Means (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Firm Size	2.3 (.67)									
2. Trust in Mentor	5.91 (1.2)	.217								
3. T.Openness	5.7 (1.4)	.175	.944							
4. T. Reliability	5.9 (1.3)	.215	.938	.845						
5. T. Competence	6.4 (.87)	.165	.779	.614	.717					
6. Trust Concern	5.6 (1.5)	.190	.938	.883	.810	.606				
7. Career Dev.	4.7 (.66)	*-.033*	.701	.686	.630	.446	.691			
8. Social Support	3.1 (1.6)	-.129	.442	.417	.396	.263	.443	.627		
9. Role Modelling	4.9 (1.4)	*.051*	.696	.613	.639	.569	.646	.693	.549	
10. Intention to Leave	3.9 (1.8)	-167	-491	-.482	-.410	-.345	-.487	-.462	-.302	-.457

Note: All correlations except those in italics are significant at p. <.05.

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression of the effects of Context and Trust on the three Mentoring Functions

Variables	**Career Development**	**Role Modelling**	**Social Support**
Size of Firm	.17*	.06	.19**
Gender of Mentor	.01	.04	.01
Trust	.74**	71**	.48**
R^2	.52	.49	.23
F	93.7**	82.0**	26.1**

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Table 3: Hierarchical Regression of main variables on Intention to Leave

Variables	Step 1	Step 2	Step3
	.		
Size of Firm	18*	.06	.11
Trust		.49*	.23**
Career Development			.25*
Social Support			.02
Role Modelling			.13
R^2	.03	.26	.31
F	7.7*	43.1**	21.8**
ΔR^2		.26	.30
Δ F		76.1**	5.9**

* p <.05; ** p<.001

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