Distance Relationship Advice

A distance mentoring relationship is defined as one whereby the mentor and student are physically separated by one or both parties not being located in South East Queensland, and thus face limited opportunities in which to meet face-to-face.

The objectives of students joining the Career Mentor Scheme often include being able to gain industry experience, networking opportunities and/or exposure in a real profession. These objectives can be hard to meet in a distance relationship and perhaps creative solutions need to be found and/or the objectives of the student need to be moderated.

Points of difference/problems within distance relationships

The main difficulties that participants report focus around the issues of contact and building rapport. It is easier to lose contact via an email relationship. If you forget to reply and one party is left waiting on the other to reply, or vice versa, then the relationship can often falter. It is surprising how many times a relationship fails because both parties were waiting for the other to contact them!

Regular meetings and/or points of contact can also be tougher to organise as they have to be at a certain time each week/month. You need to be reliable and organised.

Distance relationships can also become quite impersonal as you do not have the chance to meet and build rapport with the other party face-to-face. Don’t be afraid to inject some personality into your communications and perhaps talking on the phone on occasion will help you both get to know each other on a deeper level.

One final point to watch is the lack of feedback that can often occur when there is no face-to-face or verbal interaction. This can reduce the message being fully understood. Be clear in your communications and talk about your objectives for the scheme upfront.

Example of the beginning of an email relationship

- First point of contact—student emails mentor, introduces themselves and attaches their resume.
- First reply email – the mentor outlines their career history.
- The student picks out some parts of the mentor’s experience, asks questions and looks for expansion on areas of interest.
- The student gives ideas as to what their career goals may be.
- The mentor comments, probes, clarifies and questions.
- Relationship continues from there.

Tips for success

- Check email regularly and don’t sit on an email for longer than a few days.
- Build rapport from day one. Discussions about non-career related interests can also be incorporated into the relationship. E.g. do you have common sporting interests?
- Use more than just email as a contact method.
- Be organised – think about what you wish to achieve throughout the year and discuss expectations up front with the other party.
- Students – show commitment from the start and establish a regular contact routine. Mentors perceive that students who are quick to reply show commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, dedication and pro-activity.
- Have a reason for each email – E.g. Ask questions, probe on issues, be specific rather than general. You have to be clear on what you wish to know and what information you seek from a mentee.
• Utilise other sources beyond the mentor for student’s information and progression. Set students tasks to complete, encourage students to search for networking events for themselves. Email the student any event information, newsletter or interesting articles that you think they might be interested in.
• Mentors may have colleagues or contacts in the Brisbane area that they can introduce to the students and set up a face-to-face meeting or workplace visit.

**Remember**

Remember, mentors are often overwhelmed by many emails during the day. If you are expecting to communicate daily, but your mentor has many emails to deal with during the course of the day, then they are going to struggle to give a timely response. Communication methods and frequency should be discussed from the outset and rules put in place. E.g. Turn-around time of one week on emails.

**Contact methods**

Email is definitely not the only way that you can communicate with your mentor over distance relationships. Phone calls are a great way of building rapport and achieving ongoing interaction.

• Phone at a regular time – E.g. Every month.
• Communicate online together via instant messaging. Msn, Yahoo and Skype are examples of free services.
• Teleconferencing/Net meeting. Useful if both parties own the same software, and allows for information to be shared collaboratively over the net.
• Often mentors who are Australian based travel to Brisbane, so it is worthwhile discussing when any trips will be planned and taking this opportunity to meet face-to-face.
• Some mentors have offices for their place of work in Brisbane or other contacts, and may be able to arrange for their mentee to meet representatives of the business.