Six Steps to Implement a Mentor Program

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The Chicago Compensation Association found success for its members with a mentor program.

A recent survey by the Chicago Compensation Association (CCA) found only 15 percent of its membership had three years or less experience in the profession and 15 percent had four to six years’ experience. Furthermore, senior members complained that it was difficult to find applicants with the education and experience needed to fill entry-level compensation and benefits jobs. In an effort to strengthen its appeal to early career professionals and to provide a meaningful development experience, CCA launched a mentor program in spring 2012 after more than a year of development.

The CCA Mentor Program was launched with 15 mentor-mentee pairs. According to CCA, the mentoring program offers considerable value to the mentor, mentee and the CCA for a relatively low investment. However, the development and implementation of the program required strong commitment from the board and the small taskforce.

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that designed the program, as well as
two of the board members who led the
program. This article outlines a six-step
process for developing and successfully
implementing a mentor program.

1 Assess Membership Interest
An initial assessment of interest in
a mentor program is important for at
least three reasons.

- It will answer the question, “Is it
  worth it?” This process will help
  the board develop a basic understanding
  and some agreement on how the
  mentor program can contribute to
  the mission and goals of an organiza-
  tion and the cost that would
  be associated with the program.

- The information collected during
  an assessment can help design a
  program that meets the needs
  of the association. There is no
  one-size-fits-all approach.

- Assessment includes reaching out
to members to build commitment
for the program. These programs
are based on the assumption that
members will invest effort and time
in mentoring other members.

If the board decides to proceed, then
employing focus groups or conducting
a survey can be helpful to determine
the membership’s interest in such a
program and to obtain input on how
the program should be structured.

2 Articulate Clear Program
   Goals and Value Proposition
If there is sufficient interest to
proceed, it is important for the board
to articulate program goals and a
value proposition that is aligned with
the association mission. First, setting
goals requires the board to clarify
its expectations for the program
and provides a context for making
program design decisions. Second,
the goals of the program and the
value proposition for mentor and
mentee provide basic information
to market the program and develop
orientation materials for participants.
Finally, goals provide criteria to
evaluate, to monitor and to create a
foundation upon which to improve
the program as experience is gained.

After goals have been formulated and
there is a commitment by the board
to proceed, a taskforce needs to be
empowered to develop program guide-
lines and the materials to market the
program and to provide an orientation
for those who wish to participate.

3 Develop Program Guidelines,
   Marketing Content and
   Orientation Materials
The CCA design team included
several board members, one of whom
had recently developed a mentor
program, and two members who
had participated in such programs.
One of the design team’s challenges
was to engage association members,
because the association recognized
that it absolutely needed its active
participation when the program
went live. In developing the mentor
program, CCA’s design taskforce had
to consider a number of issues.

Eligibility. Determining who is
eligible to participate is not as clear
as one would expect. Questions to
consider include: Are mentors required
to have a certain amount of compen-
sation experience? Can retirees serve
as mentors? Is there a time commit-
ment expectation? What constitutes
“early career” for the mentee? Can
anyone become a mentee?

Nature of the relationship. Some
mentor programs primarily involve a
distant or network kind of relation-
ship, often computer based. Although
CCA wanted its mentor program first
and foremost to encourage interac-
tion regardless of the venue in which
it occurs, the association believed
that face-to-face interaction was
important because it strengthens the
mentor-mentee relationship, enhances
the value of the program and builds
stronger member relationships with
the CCA. The association’s experience
shows that relationships with face-
to-face interaction are more likely to
endure than ones that are limited to
emails and phone calls.

Matching mentors and mentees.
Establishing criteria for matching
mentors and mentees can be tricky.
The temptation is to make it like
a dating game where mentees and
mentors get to pick a person based on
a host of criteria. This is problematic
because more criteria quickly shrink
the pool of possible matches, especially
in smaller programs with fewer than 20
potential pairs. Furthermore, a mentor
or mentee may learn more from a
person who is not exactly like them.

Confidentiality agreement. The
CCA program assessment uncovered
some potential mentors who were
concerned that confidential informa-
tion might be shared inappropriately
by mentees. Although having mentees
sign a confidentiality agreement is
one way to approach this issue, CCA
decided to emphasize confidentiali-
ity in the orientation program as
opposed to requiring a pledge. This
approach seems to have worked well.

Time period. Specifying a time
period may encourage pairs to better
use their time and to avoid a situ-
ation where the relationship ends
because one or the other no longer
finds value or time to invest. Another
benefit of having an end date is that
it frees up the mentor to work with
another deserving mentee. Even if
there is an end date, it does not stop
mentors and mentees from continuing
their relationship on their own.
Recruiting Mentors and Mentees
Recruitment has two major challenges: getting equal numbers of mentors and mentees to participate, and recruiting individuals who are willing to invest the time and energy necessary to have a meaningful and rewarding relationship. CCA found it was the mentee who often did not follow through with the relationship.

Recruiting participants through normal communication channels is certainly necessary (i.e., announcements at meetings, postings on website, email blasts, etc.), but gaining the support of senior rewards professionals and association leaders is clearly one of the best methods to attract participants, especially those who will fill mentor roles.

Mentor and Mentee Program Orientation and Training
On the surface, becoming a mentor or mentee may seem relatively easy and straightforward. However, as with all human interaction, there is potential for misunderstandings and disappointments. A common misunderstanding is the expectation that the mentor will find a job for the mentee or help the mentee get promoted. This is not a realistic expectation and organizations likely do not want mentors to feel burdened with this responsibility or mentees who are disappointed in not achieving this outcome. As such, the outcomes for the mentees must be clearly specified; the mentor program is a development and networking opportunity.

Setting expectations for the program can be handled in several formats. Some programs provide information on a website or in documents sent to participants. However, CCA found a meeting during which mentors and mentees could learn about the program and the expectation associated with their roles was important. Attendance at this meeting confirms their commitment to the program. Having an orientation session allows participants to meet for the first time and actively engages mentors and mentees in the relationship. It provides an opportunity for networking and demonstrating to the mentor and mentee that they are part of something bigger than just their individual relationship.

Finally, the orientation program is an opportunity to clarify little issues so they don’t become big issues. A senior compensation professional may think nothing of inviting a mentee to an expensive place for lunch. However, even if the mentee is only expected to pay for half, that can quickly become a barrier in the relationship.

Program Administration and Evaluation
There needs to be a designated leader to administer the program. Monitoring the relationships is important because some may falter based on miscommunications or varying commitments to the program. When a problem occurs, someone needs to step in and re-assign mentors and mentees or simply act as a sounding board or offer advice as to how to get the relationship back on track. Also, during the year, someone needs to remind some mentors and mentees to actively engage and encourage them to attend some shared events. A successful coordinator is able to make suggestions on points of discussion, recommend activities and plan events through the organization to foster the critical face-to-face meetings.

Conclusion
Like any investment, the progress of a mentor program requires feedback to measure the results. The coordinator should be proactive about keeping in contact with the participants and checking in on the partnerships. This approach keeps enthusiasm high, provides input and keeps the board informed. However, a formal evaluation process is vital to determine if the program is meeting the specific goals established by the board. A confidential annual survey of mentor program participants and their attendance at events can provide the information necessary to determine if the investment is worth it and provide insight on how the program can be improved.

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