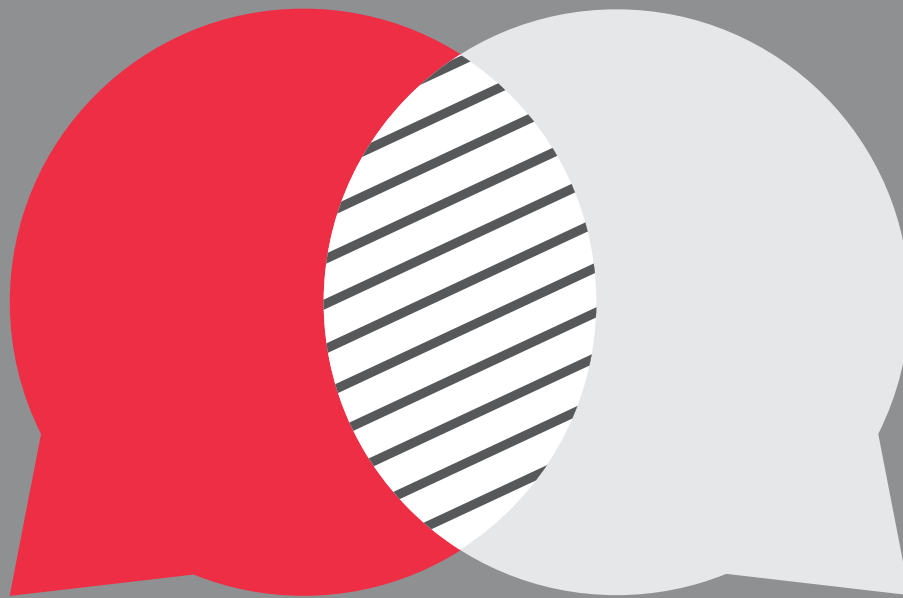


MENTORING PARTNERSHIPS



Building Successful Exchange Relationships

By Professor Jelena Zikic

In collaboration with TRIEC and The Mentoring Partnership



Principal Investigator

Jelena Zikic, PhD (University of Toronto, Rotman School of Management) is an Associate Professor at York University, School of Human Resource Management. Her research program and expertise centres on career transitions of diverse populations (e.g., unemployed, entrepreneurs, baby boomers, migrants), stress and coping. Currently she is studying career transitions of immigrant professionals and examining individual as well as organizational context and strategies for obtaining success in the new labour market. Dr. Zikic has presented at numerous national and international conferences and her work has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, and *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* among others. Her work has also been featured in the press, such as the *Globe and Mail* and national and international outlets as well as CBC Radio. She is the recipient of numerous research awards and commendations, including Verity International's prize for the best paper, the Literati Award from Emerald publishing for the Highly Commented Paper and she has also received the Dean's Award for Excellence in Research.



Research Collaborator

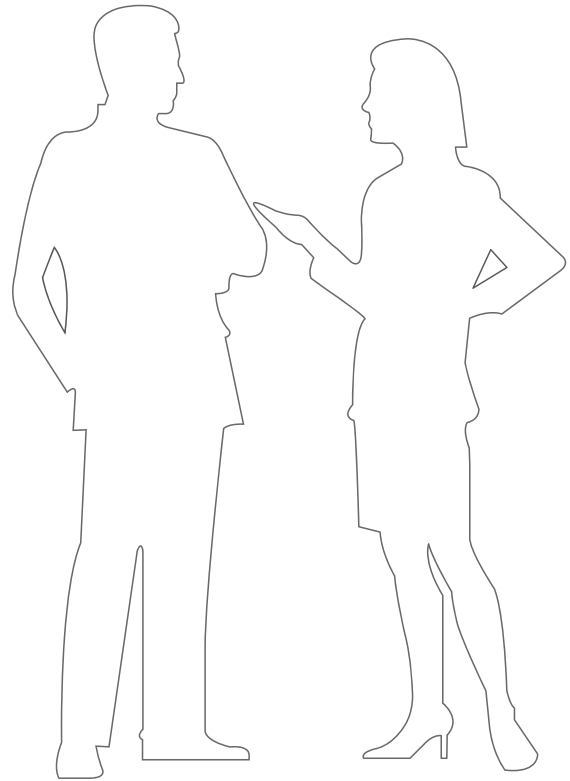
Gunjan Sondhi, PhD (University of Sussex, Sussex Centre for Migration Research) is a Research Fellow within the Division of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests lie within the fields of gender studies, and knowledge mobilities. Thus far Dr Sondhi's work has examined the theme of education migration into Canada. Currently she is working on a project entitled Singapore in the Global Talent Race, funded by the Singapore's National Research Foundation. The project examines the motivations of international scholars and academics to move to Singapore and choose to stay. The ongoing project will also evaluate the impact of the Singapore's investment into its research and innovation system. Prior to her current position, Dr Sondhi was a Post-doctoral fellow at York University. Dr Sondhi's work has appeared in the annual publication *India Migration Report 2015*, *Journal of South Asian Diaspora*, and *Compare* – the journal of British Association of International and Comparative Education. Dr Sondhi has presented at both Canadian and international conferences.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In collaboration with the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council's *The Mentoring Partnership* and supported by a SSHRC grant, Dr. Zikic from York University conducted an in depth study of 100 individuals (50 mentors and respective 50 mentees) taking part in *The Mentoring Partnership* program between 2013 -2015. Each participant who volunteered dedicated at least an hour of their time to share their mentoring experiences in a confidential interview with the researcher. The interviews briefly explored their career experiences overall and then focused on the types of interactions, conversations and experiences of *The Mentoring Partnership* meetings. The goal of these interviews was to obtain an in-depth understanding about what aspects of the relationship are most beneficial to both parties, and what contributes to successful exchange between mentors and mentees, and perhaps even the continuation of the relationship past the formal mentorship program.

Findings emphasized three characteristics of successful relationships. Open and authentic communication with active listening was a foundation of all successful relationships. Thus, communication competence on the part of both the mentor and the mentee is one skill that is most needed for successful partnerships, and could be provided through training if needed. Secondly, emotional presence and the ability to share in a more holistic manner was another component that led to a better and stronger connection between the mentor and the mentee. Lastly, an exchange relationship based on

equal sharing and knowledge exchange, where both partners are able to learn from each other, proved to be an important aspect of mentoring partnership. These three characteristics led to positive outcomes for the mentee, specifically with respect to learning about the local labour market, obtaining new contacts locally, and, more importantly, increasing self-confidence and persistence. Mentors gained new knowledge about skilled immigrant professionals, their human capital, and labour market challenges locally. They also improved their own coaching skills and leadership skills, among other benefits.



Study Description

This study was conducted in the period between spring 2013 and fall 2015. It consisted of 100 in-depth interviews that lasted anywhere between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. Of the 100 interviews, 50 were conducted with mentors and 50 with mentees; thus, the study is composed of 50 mentoring partnerships. Each interview was the result of voluntary participation and the researcher took time to explain the study and distribute relevant information prior to the interview. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed, and consent forms guaranteeing confidentiality were signed by all parties. The data thus consisted of about 40 pages of text per interview.

Outreach for mentors and mentee volunteers was facilitated by TRIEC, who enabled the researchers to meet program coaches, mentors and mentees and disseminate information on the study to encourage participation. Mentor interviews were conducted at the office of the mentor, and locations varied all across the GTA. Mentee interviews took place at one of the two York University campuses – downtown campus at Yonge and Lawrence, or Keel campus, depending on which location was more suitable for the mentee. The researcher also tried to accommodate the timing of the interview so that it would fit with the mentor's or mentee's schedule.

Interview Protocol

Each interviewee was asked the same set of questions, based on researcher's interview protocol. This began with a brief introduction focusing on the mentor's/mentee's area of expertise and educational

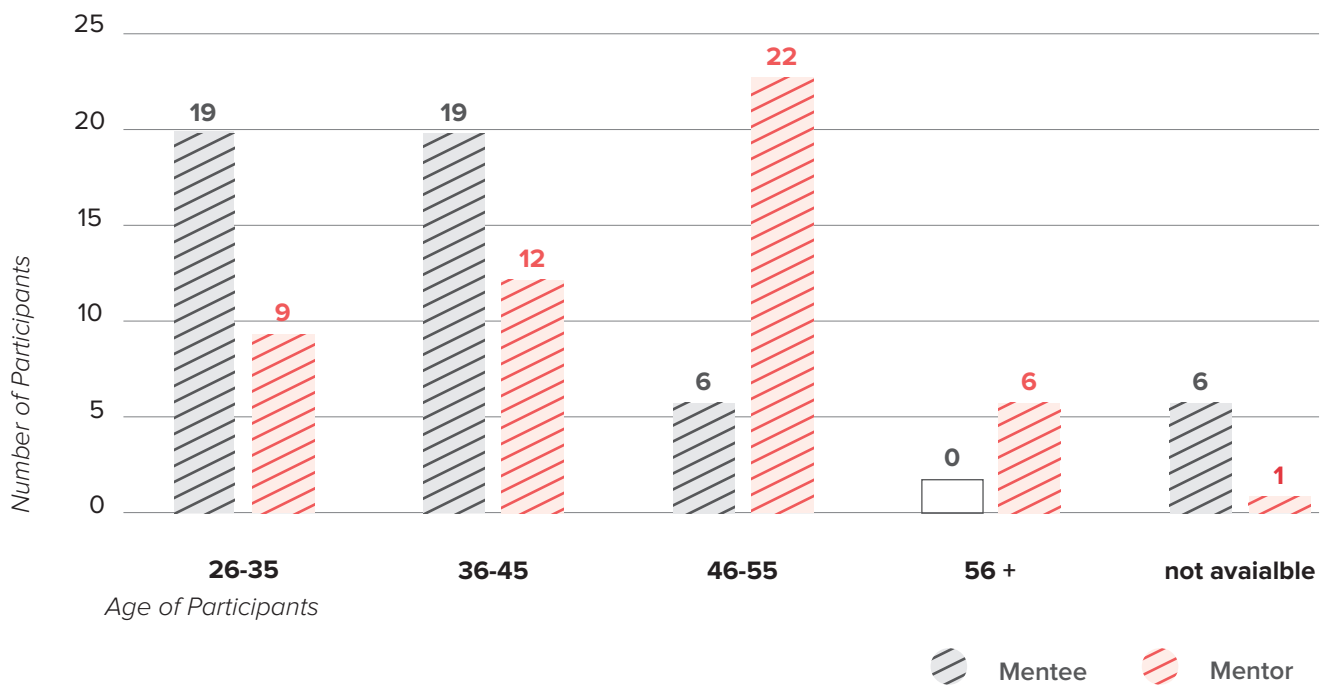
background, how they got involved, and their motivation to join *The Mentoring Partnership* program. The second section of the interview explored the interviewee's understanding of their role and their partner's role in the program, their first meeting, and a basic summary of how various meetings in general are conducted. The third section focused on describing two mentoring episodes. Lastly the interviewer asked the participant to describe what they had learned from the partnership and about each other, how they thought the partnership may have changed or evolved over time, and any other impressions they were interested in sharing. Each interview was recorded with prior consent from each participant. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Brief Description of the Sample

Mentors were mostly from middle to senior management positions, with some director-level employees as well; 42% had 16 years of work experience or more. Mentees, on average, were mostly early- to mid-career professionals; 70% had between 1 and 15 years of experience. Mentors were somewhat older, with 40% clustered in the 46–55 age category, while 70% of the mentees were in the 26–45 age category. Women made up about 45% of the sample. About 50% of the mentors were either born in Canada or had lived there for over 20 years; the other half had been in Canada for less than 20 years. Education levels were very similar, with mentees having somewhat higher levels of education than local mentors.

DEMOGRAPHIC TABLES

Age of Mentee and Mentors



Years of work experience

Work Experience (years)	Mentee		Mentor	
	n	%	n	%
1-5	10	20	5	10
6-10	11	22	5	10
11-15	14	28	10	20
16-20	5	10	7	14
20+	4	8	19	38
Not available	6	12	4	8
Total	50	100%	39	100%

Table 11: Years of work experience completed in their profession of Mentee and Mentors in all dyads (Source: Author's survey)

Gender of Mentee and Mentors

Gender	Mentee		Mentor	
	n	%	n	%
Male	31	62	27	54
Female	19	38	23	46
Total	50	100%	50	100%

n- Number
%- Procentage

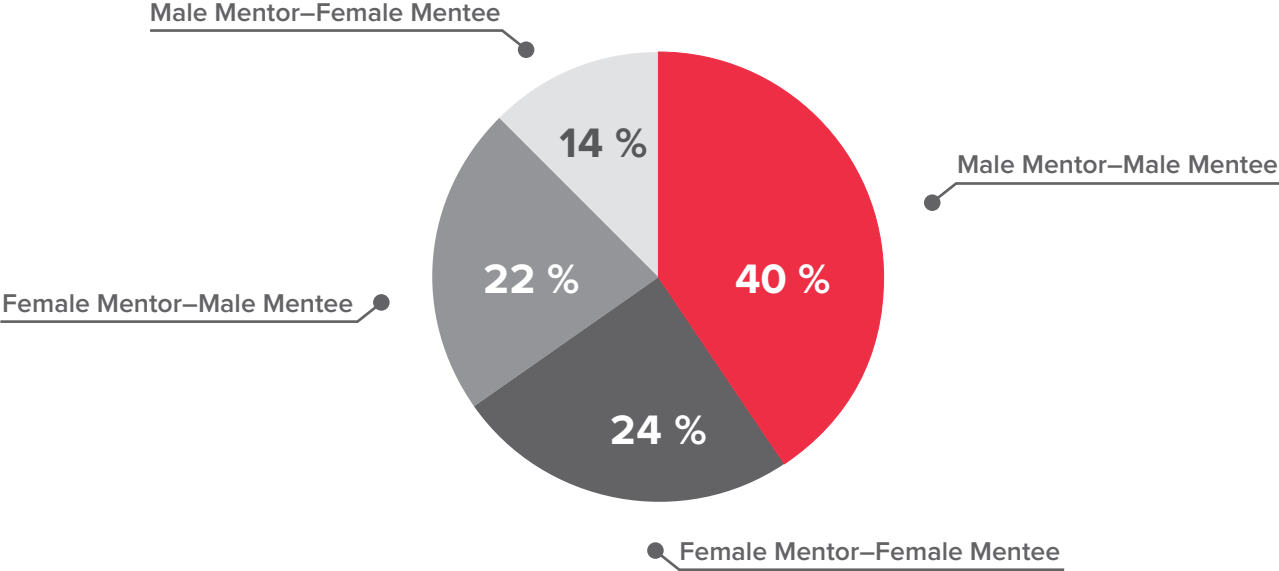
Table 8: Gender of Mentee and Mentors in all dyads
(Source: Author's survey)

Education level of Mentee and Mentors

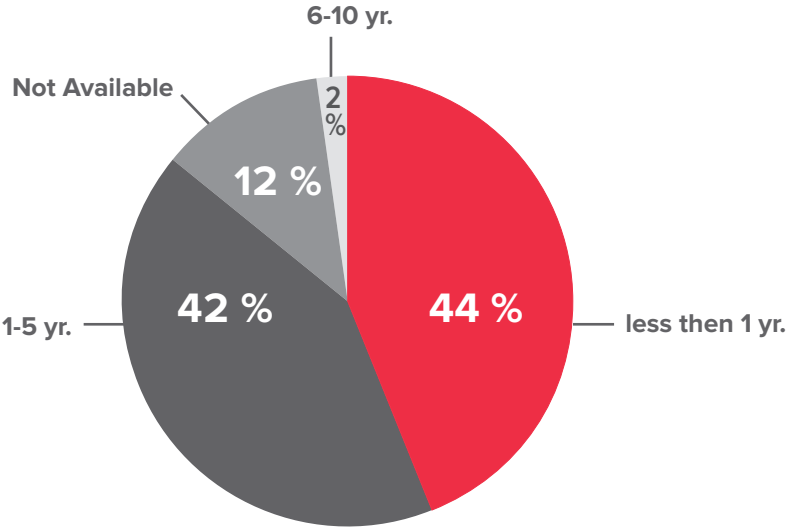
Education level	Mentee		Mentor	
	n	%	n	%
Some college	1	2	5	10
Bachelors	12	24	14	28
Some graduate work	1	2	4	8
Master's	25	50	22	44
Doctorate	4	8	4	8
Not available	7	14	1	2
Total	50	100%	50	100%

Table 10: Highest level of education completed by Mentee and Mentors in all dyads (Source: Author's survey)

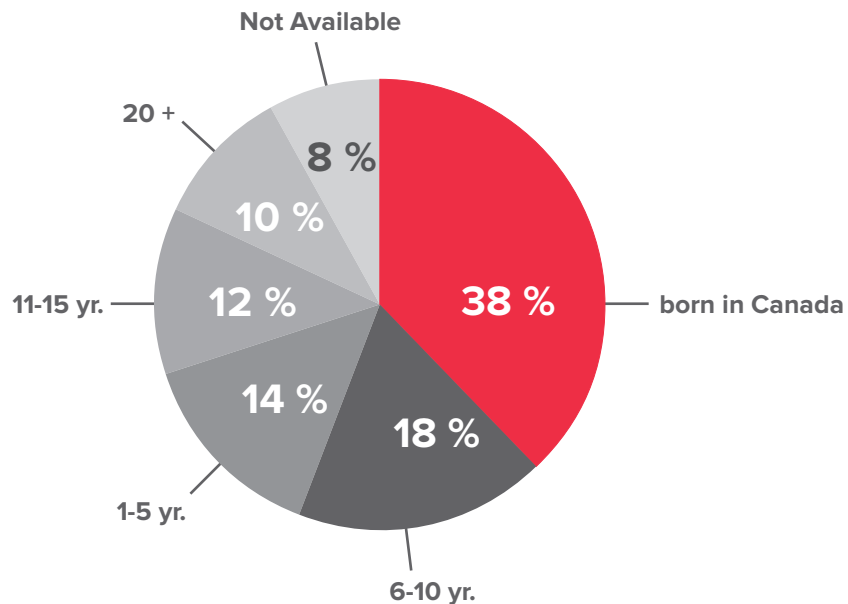
Gender composition of Dyads



Number of years Mentee has been in Canada



Number of years Mentor has been in Canada



FINDINGS IN BRIEF

There were three main elements that contributed to the success of *The Mentoring Partnership*:

- 1.** *Ability to communicate in authentic ways:* Communication competence was of utmost importance for both for the mentor and the mentee, especially skills related to being open in sharing knowledge and career-related experiences with each other and engaging in active listening.
- 2.** *Emphasis on emotional presence of both partners:* The ability to share – without feeling judged, but rather feeling safe – to

share both positive and negative emotions and experiences proved important. Most importantly, mentors' and mentees' empathy and compassion for each other was imperative in making long-lasting and successful partnerships.

- 3.** *Relationships based on mutual exchange and reciprocity:* Mentoring partnerships that reported the most satisfaction and benefits were those where the mentor and the mentee were both committed and proactive but worked together as equals, sharing information back and forth and exchanging expertise at different points in the mentoring process.

Outcomes:

Mentees gained specific job search and networking assistance, but most importantly, they increased their self-confidence and perseverance. Mentors grew during this experience, in terms of both coaching skills and acquiring new knowledge about skilled immigrant professionals, but also, at times, in terms of learning about areas in which they needed to improve to further their own careers. Most significant was their new-found appreciation for diversity in the labour market, as well as the ability to pause their daily routine and assist someone in need.

Findings Explained: Characteristics of Successful and Lasting Mentoring Partnerships

Fostering Authentic Communication

After an in-depth study of 100 interviews (50 mentoring partnerships), one of the three most important building blocks of successful mentoring partnerships was shown to be partners' ability to establish authentic communication between each other.

Communication is the foundation of any relationship. Accordingly, when connecting professionals with diverse backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, language levels, gender, etc.) in formal mentoring relationships (i.e., wherein the mentor and the mentee did not know each other prior to this relationship), authentic, clear and open communication is of utmost importance. In fact, for many partnerships, communication competence was the focus of many conversations. Specifically, authentic communication in mentoring partnerships involves openness and active listening.

Openness to share and exchange experiences meant that both parties felt "safe" to share their insights, stories and experiences without being judged; they were able to openly ask questions, seek feedback and, most importantly, feel comfortable to share their career challenges (e.g., insecurities related to communicating, such as lacking the

required fluency for interview situations). Sharing one's difficulties and struggles was just as important as sharing successful stories and experiences. In other instances, through effective and open communication, mentors also served as "translators" of the local business culture. For example, mentors described how they managed to deal with some obvious cross-cultural communication differences, such as being addressed as "sir," or a lack of eye contact:

And eventually they see it as something that they can overcome. He wasn't making eye contact. Again, it's a matter of respect. In the East, to look at somebody in the eyes it's an act of insubordination. It's offensive ... If you respect somebody, you lower your eyes. And that is where he was coming from.

Open communication was also intricately linked to building trust; as one partner opened up, there was trust openness would be reciprocal:

If a mentor can't understand where a mentee is coming from, you know, what is the background, what is the state of mind, you know, what kind of culture, and stuff. So I think if that connection does not happen, you can't really build trust. And you can't really – I think you can't really open up to a mentor if she doesn't appreciate where you come from.

This sharing was not just of a professional nature, but often spilled into domains related to family, hobbies, values, etc. This holistic type of conversation enriched the ability of the partners to understand each other beyond a strictly career-related domain. Sharing beyond work allowed them to connect in more personal ways. This holistic approach to communication led to discovering these "deeper level similarities" (i.e., work values, family experiences, and spiritual connections) between the partners. These connections are often described as "bonding tissue," or major building blocks for the continuation and further strength of the relationship.

Active listening is another characteristic that was found to foster authentic communication and the

sharing of expectations early on in the relationship. The “art of listening” may seem an obvious component of any communication situation; however, it is also one of the most common mentoring communication barriers. As busy professionals we are often eager to get quickly to our own questions or share our own stories, however taking time to listen to the mentees at the start was shown to be important in building a successful partnership. For example (i.e., the first meeting), active listening will help partners to fully understand each other’s career goals and motivations for being involved in the relationship and leading to a greater chance for the relationship to grow and develop positively. Being open in communicating and taking time to just listen to your mentoring partner creates space and opportunity for each partner to hear the other’s story with an attentive and curious ear.

Yeah, if I would feel that I’m not sure, or I would ask, “Why do you think that would be a suitable place?” I was quite open in that relationship, and I was open to listen to different suggestions and ideas. And he is a very smart person, so if he had a suggestion, then, “maybe I should listen to it.” So it was very much a kind of a dialogue type of conversation, usually. It would be him probing and asking something to see whether, what my response would be. And then we could build on that.

In the quote above, it is quite evident that the many aspects of successful relationships discussed here were present in this partnership, such as openness, the ability to feel safe while sharing, asking questions, and listening. Only by listening carefully to one another were partners able to build on and learn from each other. Based on our findings, the active focus on communication and being a good listener was a stepping stone to connecting more strongly and creating a successful mentoring partnership. These communication characteristics increased the sharing of both partners, and opened up a channel for more reciprocal and mutual exchange in the relationship, as discussed below.

Job Search/Resume Conversations as a Vehicle to Self-Discovery

A job search is a fairly personal issue. Given the urgency of the mentee’s situation to find work and the limited length of the partnership to four months, mentors and mentees also had to find a way to connect very quickly. Establishing this connection was based on the communication of some very powerful personal information and experiences (e.g., What are the strengths and qualifications of the mentee? What kind of work is he/she really interested in, and what is he/she ready to do in the new country? What kind of family/settlement needs may there be?). The answers to these questions are of extreme personal value to any individual, and in successful partnerships, this kind of exchange led to further bonding and learning about each other.

This learning about each other often occurred in the context of understanding the mentee’s resume. The resume, being an important personal narrative, is a unique document which tells a work/life story about the person and can often have a powerful impact on many influential audiences (i.e., employers). Thus, by engaging in this resume crafting together, mentoring partners have to be open, trust each other and feel comfortable incorporating each other’s suggestions. Ideally, by revising the mentee’s resume to more adequately reflect not only the local business norms but also the mentee’s true abilities and experiences, the two partners have a chance to connect at a much deeper level. The mentor below describes the power of this document to communicate the mentee’s “true self”:

It helped her to really make the connection with her CV. She had made a CV based on various suggestions from other employment agencies and her network. So it was kind of other peoples’ suggestions. But like when we went through this process of discovering herself, or herself discovering herself, she could now really breathe into the CV and get a CV which she can, in an interview, be very authentic to.

Emotional Presence

As in the instances described above, mentors and mentees studied in these partnerships faced many emotional conversations, especially when their sharing involved conveying meaningful personal experiences and career struggles. These sensitive moments called for a strong emotional presence on the part of both partners; how they managed those sensitive moments was critical for the success of the relationship.

Successful relationships were marked by compassion and empathy. In order to be of assistance and fully understand the needs of the mentee, the mentor was thus able to identify with their needs and experiences. While some mentors were learning about specific issues faced by foreign professionals for the first time, many mentors (with migration backgrounds) were actually in a similar situation at some point in the past and were thus able to empathize more deeply.

Conveying job search realities: The mentoring partnerships studied also involved sharing some of the more difficult realities of the local labour market (i.e., the average length of time for a job search or the need to expand their search to other companies and roles). An example of this was one mentor assisting their mentee in realizing that their current job search strategy perhaps needed to change (this mentee with a PhD was looking only at top universities, and needed to consider colleges as well as a broader group of universities perhaps outside of the city). Thus, mentors had to convey these local realities to their mentees; these were often very emotional and important moments where mentors provided feedback and assisted mentees in setting realistic job search goals (e.g., helping them see that the search process might take longer than expected, and yet that they needed to keep their hopes and energy high as long as the job search lasted):

I needed to do some expectation setting then, itself, in that meeting, saying like, “You may or may not find the job until November. But by then I want you to be on a path where you have full confidence in yourself,

and it will help you in landing the job.”

Mentors as the “face” of the job search journey:

Finally, when dealing with a mentee who is facing an extremely stressful situation, such as unemployment or the need for a complete career change, even just the mentor’s emotional presence as the “face of the job search process,” who will reassure them to continue, and not to lose their hope and self-confidence, was of utmost importance. Thus, the mentor provided a much needed human dimension to their job search journey. Sometimes, even without a job in sight, mentees reported feeling better on a weekly basis. As a result of meeting with their mentor face-to-face and sharing their weekly experiences and frustrations, mentees often felt more hopeful and had the strength to approach another week of job searching.

I always tell him I’m very happy that he was chosen to be my mentor. Because I felt like even if we meet every week, on the days that we don’t meet, my feeling goes down. And then we meet, it goes up again. So I felt it’s good that we meet. Because it is hard for us newcomers to look for jobs here.

At times, the emotional dimension was also “contagious,” in that when the mentee felt down and frustrated, the mentor also felt those hardships and was compelled to assist:

And I see them suffering, I see them being tortured because they want to get a job. And it really bothers me. And then I feel a need to assist.

Thus, emotional competence – and especially one’s ability to recognize and manage emotions – was a major requirement in taking these partnerships to the next level, as noted by the mentor below:

I think the first meeting is critical because it really allows two people to connect. And basically, with Bianca, I could tell her fear, but I could also tell her pride because of the way she presented herself to me.

Mentoring as Mutual Exchange

While mentors are typically seen as more senior and knowledgeable gurus, the findings of this study show that a more equal approach led to stronger and more long-lasting outcomes. The key to success in these mentoring partnerships was a collaborative and unassuming approach, whereby both the mentor and the mentee were able to freely contribute, and exchange knowledge, information and emotions. Thus, the more they were able to be true partners in these relationships (i.e., equally involved professionals), the more satisfaction was reported on both sides. In some cases, as described below, the mentor had to help the mentee to realize the value of this approach:

Because at some point he was telling me, “You are like my guide,” putting me in an upper level. And I said, “No, we are equals here. I just happen to have a bit more experience in here ... It’s just because I had a chance to be here eight years before you. If I move to India, you will be my mentor. So there is nothing different. I am just here to help you, the same way somebody helped me.”

This mutual exchange was possible whereby the mentor was not necessarily seen as the only expert (i.e., based on local knowledge and experience) in the relationship; rather, the mentee was also able to take the lead in some meetings, sharing their own knowledge, expertise and proactively seeking advice. When partners willingly bounced ideas off each other, and both took a proactive approach in each meeting it showed an evident commitment and active engagement in the mentoring relationship on each side. This relationship dynamic with a constant back and forth between learning from and about the mentee as well as then allowing the mentor to provide feedback and specific advice, were important ingredients in successful mentoring. Successful mentees were also aware of the importance of being proactive on their part and following up on the suggestions from their mentors. This collaborative approach as part of a successful partnership was clearly illustrated in this instance:

When she gives me the name of someone that I should contact, and all that, I don’t take long, and don’t let it go. You know, keep up with the commitments I make, which isn’t that hard. I don’t have so much going for me right now that I can’t do that. So yes, and I think that keeps the relationship positive.

This mentor’s approach was also characterized by asking the right questions and providing the right resources, but not without the emotional component as discussed above – or, as one mentor put it, “giving the right nudge or encouragement so that they are basically helping themselves, and realizing that they knew it all along or they know how to do this, or they can do this.” Once again, the mentor felt that, as equal status professionals, the mentees were capable of helping themselves. It was important for mentees to regain that self-confidence, especially after facing difficult and draining job search process and the lack of any positive feedback.

Special “we” moments were also noted, when the mentor and the mentee spoke clearly about their approach as coming together and working towards the same goal. This evidence of mutuality was especially important at times when the mentee was feeling down and the job search was not going well. They felt they were not alone in this process, again emphasizing the importance of emotional presence:

When we sensed he was passionate about something, and I thought, “Well that would be great in an interview situation,” then we kind of let that build up in energy and just let it come out.

Lastly, the reciprocity and exchange is also evident in cases where the two individuals could help each other in immediate work situations:

Especially when I try to get a point across to my co-worker that is from another country and I have a protégé from the same background. Or if my protégé

who has a Master's degree or a PhD, they may know the answer to something we are struggling at work with.

Mentoring Outcomes

Mentee outcomes: Based on the program's goals, mentees were most certainly learning a lot about the local labour market and specific job search strategies, and with their mentors' assistance they were at times able to enlarge their social network and meet other local professionals. However, the more powerful type of learning reported in this study was about one's readiness and confidence to confront job search challenges. Strong partnerships allowed mentees to experience the renewed self-confidence and persistence needed to continue searching for work despite many obstacles.

"Never give up." That's something I learned. I never actually did give up, but then I needed that extra guidance which I was not getting from anywhere.

Moreover, mentoring relationships also impacted mentees' sense of self, especially their work identity. Mentoring meetings led to learning a lot about themselves and reflecting on their own abilities in a different light. Through in-depth conversations, sharing and reviewing past experiences and careful crafting of a new resume (based on local norms and job search strategies), mentees were able to learn how to present themselves more effectively to local employers and truly showcase their abilities and past experiences in a new light. This often led to discovering new career options that mentees had not considered before.

Mentor outcomes: Mentors described improving their coaching, communication or leadership skills; they felt that they benefited in these specific ways and also learned a great deal about themselves through these helping relationships. For example, as mentors reflected on these relationships, they realized that their own fears or insecurities were sometimes lifted

and their own self-confidence was also increased as a result of being able to help someone else, especially someone who was in great need of a special kind of support and attention. More interestingly, however, the learning and benefits were mutual:

I was able to give Lina advice and insight and connect her with other individuals. She was able to have me become more self-aware and understanding that I do have something to offer someone else. And her sharing of articles, her thoughts, her feelings about other things, and we can have great dialogues and conversations. So that, yes, it's both ways. So I got something out of it as well as I believe she did as well.

On occasion, and just as important, in learning about their own skills and abilities, mentors realized what they were missing in their own careers and what kinds of skills or abilities they needed to brush up on (e.g., more networking to enlarge their own social capital, improvement of their coaching or communication skills, etc.).

However, much more powerful was the mentors' gaining of first-hand insight and knowledge about the experiences of newcomers in the local labour market. They learned not only about diversity in the labour market but also about the human side of suffering and the resilience needed to overcome these barriers.

And you want to help them. You want to give them a job. And I know that is not our responsibility, but they are so talented. The talent is just unbelievable. And you feel bad for them because they are so talented, that I just want to go up to my director and manager and say, "I found a gem here." Like, you know this is person is so creative that I want – I think we could really benefit from their experience.

Through many deep and emotional conversations with their mentees, local mentors reflected on the society and the community in which they live. Thus, by becoming part of mentees' job search processes, mentors were able to understand and identify some of

the critical societal issues and possible inequalities in the labour market that were not so apparent to them otherwise. This influential type of learning is illustrated below:

So I saw myself, part of the role of a mentor was to help advise like what life in Canadian business is like, and how to adjust. After all, it got me thinking, "Well, okay, that's fine, but it is kind of unfair, in a way. Like we're not asking Canadian business to adjust that much to the immigrants." So I had a newly found respect for Emma and the people in their situation. Again, tempered by the realization that this game is a little bit unfair.

Lastly, mentors also reported more spiritual kinds of growth and learning as a result of these partnerships. Mentoring meetings allowed them to reflect on their own existence and/or their careers and they saw these relationships as an opportunity to distance themselves from their everyday tasks: "It's healthy to have something different to focus on rather than day-to-day tasks." Others saw these meetings as invitations to "slow down a bit" and they realized that there was someone very real out there that needed their attention and time and the commitment they made to this relationship.

Mutual outcomes – holistic connection: The third type of outcome was related to growth and development that was reciprocal, which was common in stories of mentors as well as mentees. Compared to a connection based strictly on professional/career grounds, partners established instead a more holistic understanding of each other. As mentioned earlier, the mentor and the mentee talked about each other's values, hobbies, and even families.

This often indicated that the relationship could continue past the formal partnership and grow into a friendship. Thus, after connecting through this formal program, many of the individuals were able to establish a more lasting connection. They acknowledged that a change occurred when the formal relationship become more informal and they

felt more comfortable with each other. Sometimes it was marked by increased trust; other times, it was based on more personal sharing, thus becoming more comfortable and going beyond work-related conversations.

Like initially, we were more professional – but still he could understand and relate to my background. But then gradually trust started building ... he started seeing from which background I have come from, who actually I am. And then gradually he started sharing his personal details and we started meeting for dinner with families.

This sharing, and the more holistic connection, was often based on in-depth conversations and more openness (as mentioned above in the communications section). This led to the discovery of common interests in addition to work, and therefore reflected a deeper level of similarity between the mentor and the mentee.

We both sort of have very similar interests in the city's not-for-profit sector and the opportunities it provides people from marginalized communities ... That was a good connection for us ... because it is sort of like we share the same sensibility about things. That was important.

The more holistic the relationship was, the more partners connected at a basic human level and discovered similarities that strengthened the relationships.

Yes, I think there's a lot of commonalities. I mean, he seems to care about other people, and he wants to make a better life for himself than what he had in Bangladesh. And so while I'm not an immigrant, I can relate to the desire to kind of further yourself professionally, to make something of yourself.



