
New media, new mentoring: An exploration of social media's role in public relations mentorships

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Abstract

This study explores the emerging use of social media in mentoring relationships by public relations professionals. In-depth interviews with 15 public relations professionals from a variety of specialties revealed characteristics of mentoring relationships in public relations, and challenges and benefits related to facilitating mentoring relationships online. The key guidance revealed in the interviews included: allowing the mentee to lead the introduction of social media; mentoring as an opportunity to provide guidance on mentee's social media usage; understanding when to move the conversation offline; and using the online interaction as learning opportunity. Because there are currently no theories related to public relations and mentoring or social media and mentoring, these exploratory findings provide a first step to the further development of a model of online mentoring in the profession.

Introduction

As social media has become widely recognised as an important and necessary aspect of the practice of public relations, practitioners and scholars are working to examine the impact and use of social media within the field. As a younger generation of practitioners enters the profession, however, the line between the personal and professional use of social media is not as clearly defined. Practitioners now need to ask important questions about the impact of social media on the profession, not just how it is used to interact with clients and organisations, but also how social media impacts more personal relationships, including mentoring

relationships. Thus, with the growing use of new media comes the idea of 'new mentoring' – with traditional notions of mentoring being challenged by these new technologies. These changes to the mentoring relationship include new media's ability to strip down power differentials, allow for a real-time conversation that could be time-stamped and recorded, and the opportunity to span geographic boundaries – functions that were once impossible before the advent of new media and mentoring.

Although practitioners have begun these conversations about the impact of social media on mentoring relationships, few studies have examined the topic or provided a more generalised picture of how its use is viewed by mentors and mentees alike. An exploration of the mentoring relationship is certainly warranted, especially for the field of public relations in particular. Since public relations is a field defined by the management of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), practitioners should be knowledgeable in all aspects of communicating with various publics, mentees included. Additionally, because practitioners are increasingly being tasked with handling social media channels, they must have the skill sets to utilise these tools effectively in their communication practices (Kim & Johnson, 2012). Finally, with practitioners taking on more senior adviser/counsellor roles (Dozier, 1992), building mutually beneficial relationships with all stakeholders, mentees included, is an important phenomenon that needs to be investigated. By understanding how the public relations practitioner builds relationships internally with mentees, both scholars and practitioners can gain a more in-depth understanding of what constitutes a truly two-way symmetrical relationship (Dozier,

Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) that works to benefit all parties.

With this said, this study examines how mentoring is changing in this new social media environment. Through in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners this study offers several answers to the question about the development of mentoring relationships. We first explored how public relations practitioners define successful mentoring relationships and then asked our participants about how these mentoring relationships are conducted through social media channels. Through a discussion of the challenges and benefits of conducting these relationships online, this study offers insights and guidance into new mentoring practices, provides guidelines for developing successful online mentoring relationships, and situates the social media interaction within the value of traditional, face-to-face communication and mentoring.

Literature review

Mentoring and public relations

Mentoring is crucial for the practice of public relations and can ultimately affect career development and advancement opportunities for practitioners. However, little research has been done on mentoring relationships in the field of public relations. A study by Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, and Real (1995) examined public relations mentorship by analysing superior-subordinate pairings through role enactment, career advancement, and salary differences (p. 263). Their findings showed that mentorships allow for mentees to have greater access to management advancement, as well as more opportunities to enact the managerial role.

Pompper and Adams (2006) extended Tam et al.'s (1995) study and found that public relations mentors help protégés in five important ways: (1) mentors supplement protégés' college classroom training by offering contextual skill-enhancement opportunities; (2) mentors validate and empower protégés as they grow into counsellors charged to lead others and to fulfill public relations' management function;

(3) mentors point out protégés' image and behaviour detractors that could stunt assimilation or status growth; (4) mentors open their networks to protégés; and (5) protégés experience substantial benefits from mentoring and later reciprocate by mentoring others (Pompper & Adams, 2006, p. 314).

Pompper and Adams (2006) also call for practitioners to offer career and psychosocial support to all protégés, and to offer more formal mentoring guidelines that will enhance the quality of the relationships. Somerick (2007) also offers suggestions to practitioners considering mentorship, including: (1) offer participation to professionals with both academic and professional know-how; (2) match mentors to mentees with similar career aspirations; (3) the mentorship should supplement, not replace classroom learning; and (4) practitioners should insist on honest, legal and ethical interaction with their protégés. Somerick (2007) posited that "as in any real-world endeavor, a mentoring program that is well thought out should have more of an opportunity to be socially responsible and effective than one that is informal and unplanned" (p. 21).

Thomsen and Gustafson (1997) conducted a study that measured the satisfaction of advertising and public relations practitioners-turned-professors with their mentoring relationships. Among the participants interviewed, new professors stated they would like their departments to initiate a formal mentoring programme that would include training, assistance with promotion and tenure requirements, and meetings with administrators, deans, and chairs. The participants claimed that the best mentors would be other professionals turned professors who could help ease them into the process and offer support with this newly chosen career path.

Mentoring costs and benefits

There are a number of potential benefits for mentors and protégés. For the protégé, mentoring creates both professional and personal rewards, including commitment, compensation, pay satisfaction, personal learning, promotion, stress management, and

the opportunity to mentor their own protégés in the future (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Schipani, Dworkin, Kwolek-Folland, & Maurer, 2009; Wanberg, Welsh, & Hezlett, 2003). For mentors, benefits include the satisfaction of developing the protégé, self-rejuvenation, and the promise of loyalty and support from their protégé (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). However, there are also potential costs and risks to a mentoring relationship, including the high time demands and the risk of exploitation on the part of either the mentor or the mentee (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Building a mentoring relationship could also be a negative experience based on several factors, including dyad mismatch, lack of mentor expertise, and mentor neglect and/or manipulation (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000).

E-mentoring

Though research on mentoring relationships has been conducted for almost 30 years, with its earliest scholarship stemming from Kram's (1985) work, there is little known about computer-mediated mentorship, otherwise known as electronic mentoring, telementoring, online mentoring, or e-mentoring. According to Single and Muller (2001), e-mentoring can be defined as:

A relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using electronic communications, that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor (p. 108).

There have been a few studies conducted on e-mentoring, but overall little research has been done to prove the value of this type of mentoring relationship. The majority of these studies simply describe programmes where students or teachers are linked to some sort of expert or database via a computer-mediated channel (Bierema & Merriam, 2002).

Despite this, the studies that have been done have found a number of benefits for both the mentor and the mentee in terms of e-mentoring. Because the power differential is not as easily visible in an online mentorship, mentees may not feel as intimidated or uncomfortable because they are able to interact with their mentor on the same level (Harasim, Starr, Teles, & Turoff, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Past research has shown that in these types of relationships, the status or position of the mentor and mentee is not as salient as would be in a face-to-face interaction (Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003), allowing for the relationship to consist of a professional and a student, a group of students, or even a student and a student. In addition, because the interaction is not necessarily immediate, both parties can have time to think of appropriate responses, allowing both the mentor and mentee to be more reflective in the relationship (Muller, 2009; Ravet & Latte, 1997). Electronic platforms can also provide a record of the e-mentoring exchange, so that protégés can look back and review advice given by their mentor (Muller, 2009). E-mentoring also allows for extended geographical and temporal boundaries, allowing for more flexibility by reaching those who otherwise would not have been able to be mentored (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003; Shrestha, May, Edirisingha, Burke, & Linsey, 2009). Thus, e-mentors can either be *internal mentors*, who work within the organisation and can provide insight on the politics, policies and procedures of the organisation, or they can be *external mentors*, who do not know about the specific organisation per se, but can offer advice on the industry or profession in general (Muller, 2009; Muller & Chou-Green, 2005).

Though e-mentoring has many positive outcomes and effects, Bierema and Merriam (2002) also suggest challenges specific to the e-mentoring relationship. The digital divide, or the inequalities of access to and use of the Internet as a medium, including education, race, income, gender, and area of residence (Hargittai, 2002), may cause some individuals to not have easy access to a computer, and if they did, to potentially lack the online literacy

necessary to conduct a fulfilling online relationship. In addition, mentors and mentees may find it difficult to gain trust and intimacy through the Internet, especially if the parties have never formally met in person. The nature of the online relationship can also cause individuals to decrease or lose their enthusiasm toward the relationship and easily end their commitment to making progress. Finally, miscommunication can occur with considerably more ease in an online mentorship, as electronic communication can easily be misunderstood and misconstrued, as opposed to reading body language and tone in a face-to-face interaction (Bierema & Merriam, 2002).

Though social media can be used to facilitate an e-mentoring relationship, to date there have been no studies conducted to explore this particular phenomenon. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the facilitation of e-mentoring relationships through the use of social media channels will be the focus of this study.

Research questions

Based on the review of the literature and the focus of this study, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: How do public relations professionals define the mentoring relationship?

RQ2: What is the impact of social media on mentoring relationships?

RQ3: What challenges do public relations professionals face in using social media for their mentoring relationships?

Method

Data collection

The research team conducted 15 in-depth telephone interviews with a variety of public relations practitioners about their mentoring experiences, both as mentors and mentees, and more specifically about how those relationships have been impacted by the use of social media. The interview protocol included questions such as *How many mentors/mentees have you had in your career? What are important characteristics of*

a mentoring relationship? and Has social media changed your perceptions of mentoring? Participants did not have to believe they used social media in their mentoring relationships in order to engage in the interview, however all participants had easy access to social media channels and were very knowledgeable about how to effectively use social media channels. The research was approved by the institutional review board at the researchers' institution, and anonymity was granted to all participants through the use of pseudonyms in the reporting of all data.

Interviews lasted from 25 to 45 minutes. Participants held a range of positions within public relations, and had areas of self-professed specialisation including media relations, sports marketing, social media, consulting, and university relations/higher education or nonprofit work, and had worked in the field anywhere from eight to 25 years. Some participants who held public relations positions on college campuses worked with college students as interns who became mentees, but were not educators in the traditional sense. Five males and 10 females participated in the interviews. All participants lived and worked within the United States, one of the top five countries in terms of social media usage (Carrasco, 2012). The fact that the US has a large majority of Internet users using social media impacted the findings in terms of how social media is perceived by participants.

Participants were chosen via a purposive sample, utilising professional connections of the researchers, and then as a snowball sample from the initial round of participants (Berg, 2009). Although a small number of participants were involved, in this type of qualitative research samples are chosen purposively based on their perceived ability to provide in-depth insight into participants' experiences, rather than generalising of data to a population (Sandelowski, 1986). Participants were asked to self-identify their mentoring relationships, and, to a certain extent, to self-identify their effectiveness in the role of mentor. While mentoring requires skills that not all individuals will possess, and thus the effectiveness of mentoring relationships will vary, the

researchers found that believing oneself to be in a mentoring relationship was the only necessary condition for participating in this research. The researchers attempted to understand individual perceptions and effectiveness within mentoring by asking each participant for their definition of mentoring and carefully inspecting their responses to protocol questions for additional insight into the relationships.

Interviews were viewed as the most effective method of data collection due to their ability to unearth rich and detailed description from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). When discussing and describing relationships, particularly how those relationships can and have changed over time, interviews allowed for a more intimate understanding of the impact of a wide variety of factors. Interviews also gave participants time to work through the information they were presenting as it happened, and to adapt their knowledge to specific questions (Yin, 2009).

Data analysis

Interviews were all audio-recorded and partially transcribed in order to maintain participant language and knowledge. Members of the research team first worked individually to engage in line-by-line coding to identify relevant themes in the interviews they had completed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). They then met to collaboratively develop a coding scheme based on the existing theory and research questions, and continued to meet throughout the coding process to adapt and modify the coding scheme. Both open and axial coding were used to identify emergent themes from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Memos and observer comments were used throughout the data collection process to help the researchers maintain reflexivity and to provide additional insight to the findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The research team was made up of three individuals, two females and one male. One member of the team has 10 years of practical public relations experience and engaging in mentoring relationships. The other two members both

had minimal professional public relations experience but were long-time public relations educators who had mentoring relationships they drew upon as well. Researchers discussed how the impact that their experiences, both in public relations practice and in mentoring relationships, influenced their interpretation and analysis of the data.

Results

How public relations practitioners define mentoring

By allowing participants to share their own definitions of the mentoring experience, the findings that resulted from this exploration led to a unique look at how mentoring can be perceived by public relations practitioners. Through their social constructions of what the mentoring relationship means to them, participants' perceptions varied, from offering job market advice to providing social support. This ability to move outside of formal definitions of mentoring is made even more possible through utilising social media channels in the mentoring experience.

Learning from each other. Participants discussed how mentoring is a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship where both parties learn from each other. Susan said that mentoring is "best when you can actually learn something too from someone you're mentoring. Or help them learn something." Tina has "learned something from them. My personal educational background was not communication/PR, it was general business so I didn't know what these students are learning so I've learned through my interactions with them." Jeff claims that "...being a mentor helps you stay on top of your game, challenges you to stay current...the mentee help[s] you understand what's going on. As we get older, we get set in our ways. It's a symbiotic relationship, you help each other to grow." Holly felt the same way, saying, "I think for the whole entire relationship to work it needs to be somewhat symbiotic to be able to connect with someone and there is real exchange...both parties grow a little bit from it. I think that it's essential."

Two-way communication. Mentors felt that having open communication and listening was

key to a successful mentoring relationship. According to Kathy, “if there’s no two-way communication that can be a barrier. That can play into the negative side. As long as both parties are on the same page in terms of what they expect, I don’t think that would happen as frequently.” Tina had similar thoughts, stating, “obviously both parties need to be willing to share and communicate with each other fairly openly. The key is open and honest two-way communication.”

Participants also stressed the importance of listening in the mentoring relationship. According to Jack, “Make sure to listen. Listen to what you’re saying. Don’t be quick to judge or answer. Listen to the students’ concerns, their dreams and aspirations. And take it from there. Keep an open mind. You never know when that student will become the next best PR professional.” Martha agreed, stating, “I think you really have to be a good listener; sure you have a lot to teach them but you also have to be able to hear where they are and what they are looking for.”

Playing a critical role. Something that can be difficult but a necessity in the mentoring relationship is being able to dole out criticism to mentees. According to Sharon, “it is tough sometimes as their mentor to be brutally honest, but I think it is my obligation to them as their mentor not to sugar coat a situation.” Alan stated that you “have to open yourself up to constructive feedback, criticism, sharing innermost thoughts to someone else.” Holly had similar sentiments, stating:

What has been established has been an open forum for communicating a trust in that someone is going to give you honest feedback, sometimes hard truths but said gently, that is welcomed, so there is a real relationship that expands beyond an area of expertise.

Setting expectations. Participants believed that it was very important to set goals and expectations early on in the mentorship. According to Jon:

It’s important to have an understanding at the beginning of

what the relationship is about. You need to have a mutual understanding of what you want to accomplish, what your goals are. Without it, the relationship will peter out over time and you won’t make any accomplishments.

Kathy had similar feelings, stating, “both sides have to be open and honest in terms of what they’re looking for in the relationship. What would you like to get out of this, what are the top three things you want to see as we work together?” Finally, Alan claimed, “mentoring is useless if it’s not helping you achieve your goals or expand your horizons.”

Empowering mentees. Mentors felt that the mentoring relationship is empowering to their mentees, with Martha stating:

I think PR can be really high stakes. I think the more of that [mentoring] is available the better. It can probably save a lot of people anguish and keep them from making serious mistakes. I don’t think anybody has all the answers but wouldn’t it be nice to have someone you trust that you can talk to.

Steve had similar thoughts, stating that you need to “maintain contact, encourage one another, even when their careers have surpassed mine. They still look to me for advice, appreciate the ‘atta boys’, and I appreciate seeing the potential go so far.” Susan believed in empowering her mentees so that they can obtain their independence:

Today’s students, you have to tell them each step that needs to be accomplished, where I had to figure it out on my own. Not all students are like that, but some, it seems have been told what to do so they can’t think on their own. So I help them get into mode of thinking on their own.

Giving back. The participants felt that they needed to mentor to give back to the public relations community and pay it forward from when they were mentored by others. Kathy puts it this way: “I have the privilege of having my own mentors, and I feel like I need to give it back, give back to the PR community.” Jon agreed, stating:

It's the mentor saying they're giving back. Someone helped them, so they're giving back. It keeps you grounded. If you think they're coming to me because I'm all knowledgeable, that's where it gets messy. But if you think that other people helped me, you'll take the responsibility differently.

Steve put it best by saying:

Mentoring is a fancy word for personal teaching. I always thought that teaching has its own satisfaction coming from imparting something to another person, and when they take it and use it and you can watch it, no greater feeling of satisfaction. Personal benefit of mentor/teacher is that there is no better way to learn something than to teach it to someone else.

Offering support. Mentors saw the mentoring relationship as a way to offer support to mentees. According to Steve, "knowing that you have a network of support, camaraderie and daily contact, gives you confidence to go forward with what you're doing, knowing the people are out there. Feel a little tighter, a little more connected, not just out there by yourself." Ashley offers her mentees support in a number of ways:

Relationships are diverse like personalities. Somewhere people just want to get some tips on how to deal with something, and others who are emotionally hitting a wall and need clarity, so when I hang up, I have the confidence knowing I gave them all I have. Can be in expertise or compassion or referrals or whatever they need.

Reflecting on your career. Jon made a very poignant point in terms of mentoring, stating that it is useful to reflecting on your career:

Reflection is the best thing. When you are a mentor, you become more reflective. It makes you think where you been, how you feel about a situation. A reflection of your own

practice. You reflect on what you did right or wrong, and you share that experience. You have to be a reflective practitioner in order to better yourself. If you don't do that, you make the same mistakes.

Frank shared a similar feeling when responding to mentees and students who challenge him with the question "why is this important?" He said, "when you are challenged to defend something you have been doing for 30 or 40 years, you have to rethink it in a somewhat different way and that is always a good thing."

The impact of social media on mentoring relationships

Participants also discussed how social media in particular could help facilitate and develop a mentoring relationship. Being able to choose appropriate channels that felt comfortable to the practitioner was important, and enabled participants to reach mentees that they would have never been able to contact without social media.

Channel usage. The predominant social media channels of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Skype were utilised by participants in different ways to connect and engage with mentees. The variety in the usage by participants was demonstrated in their own unique experiences and their level of comfort with each of the channels. Ashley stated:

Twitter is part of the culture within communication. People are looking for really quick solutions. The Twitter environment, Facebook and LinkedIn forces you to communicate concisely and briefly, to utilise few words to get message across.

Holly described how she engaged in a conversation with a student-mentee through Twitter and how the student's professor was impressed with the connections that the student had made online.

For some participants, because LinkedIn is viewed as a professional business mentoring and networking site, it provided a venue for those individuals who were not as comfortable connecting with mentees on Facebook. It was also a place that several participants found to be

useful to network and stay in contact with current and former mentees. Martha described how she was able to provide a reference online for her former interns and how her interns were then able to recommend her as an employer. Other participants suggested, that by connecting with mentees on LinkedIn, that they were then able to make online introductions with other professionals and to enhance networking opportunities.

Expanding boundaries. Among participants who engaged in social media channels and through their own personal customised channels such as blogs and YouTube, there was recognition that social media allowed them to connect with students and mentees beyond physical boundaries and share resources and perspectives with a broader audience. Sharon said, “I think that it certainly flattens the world and makes it smaller so that someone from Kuwait can contact me.” She went on to describe, because of videos that she posted on YouTube, that she has received inquiries from practitioners and students both in the US and internationally. Likewise, Jack described how he has connected with individuals from across the country through his blog. Participants described why social media was useful in sharing information and advice with mentees and other individuals simultaneously. Ashley said, “social media gives you a chance to go on Twitter and put out a ‘phrase for the day’ or post an article on LinkedIn so it can be quickly seen or reviewed by as many people as are interested in the topic.” Ann described how she used it to “spread information about anything that might be helpful to partners and to give them ideas.”

In addition to expanding the traditional boundaries of city, state and country, participants also describe how social media was useful for dealing with the time-constraints of a busy professional life. Steve stated that a continued relationship would not have continued without the benefits of being able to connect quickly through social media. He said, “I might not have the time to stay in touch without something as simple as Facebook.”

Making personal connections. Several participants found the platforms to be useful for making a more personal connection with a mentee. Susan said, “you get to know the whole person in the other half of the relationship, get to see into their world more than just what you see when they come into work.” Steve echoed this sentiment: “If you connect via Facebook, they can see the picture, the completeness, the totality of who you are, or what you choose to put out there. Know more about you – good, bad or otherwise.”

Ann suggests that although it is important to be professional, it is beneficial to share some of your personal life through social media. She said, “you should also have some fun with it—it doesn’t have to be formal or strict. Better relationships are those that have a little bit of personal information.” The lowering of the personal boundaries on social media has provided a more honest venue for discussion among some mentors and mentees. Alan said, “Sometimes you can get much better input from mentee about what they’re really thinking or really want. Sometimes they write things they never would have said.”

Challenges of social media mentoring

In spite of the many benefits of using social media for mentoring purposes, there were also a number of challenges that face practitioners in terms of being able to have the mentoring relationship reach its fullest potential. Not only are there privacy and confidentiality concerns, but there are also concerns in terms of depending fully on the online space to nurture the relationship without any personal, face-to-face contact.

Social media as a tool. Participants viewed social media as a tool to help build the mentoring relationship; they were willing to admit that it could be an important and helpful tool, but it was still just a tool. Sharon noted that “for the longer term career advice, the progression of career, I just don’t think that social media is the only answer. I think that social media needs to supplement the more real time conversations.” Holly agreed, stating that she sees it “as just another platform for communicating to stay in contact, like email.” Steve mentioned that social media can be

helpful “if it’s there to cement a relationship,” and Susan talked about how “trying to do social media so that it appeals to everyone can be a challenge”, where social media should be a tool that is adapted to the particular relationship. Finally, social media does have a drawback in losing some particulars of other forms of conversation, noted by Ashley: “I don’t always like [social media] because I can’t hear tone. I want to hear energy, when they’re pausing or thinking or whatever.”

Need for face-to-face communication. Building on Ashley’s remark about tone, social media was almost unanimously discussed as being a good supplement to face-to-face communication, but should in no way be considered a replacement. Alan said that “it has to begin with a more tactile interpersonal relationship, you have to have talked face-to-face. Mentoring can happen online, but you also need to look one another in the eye to make sure they’re on the same page.” Holly discussed the difference between low and high touch relationships, where social media are low touch and successful mentoring relationships are high touch, and doesn’t believe that “those [low touch] connections are going to be as strong or as successful as those that have more of a personal touch.”

In discussing the future of mentoring relationships, Steve mentioned that he would “hate to think anything would replace contact, eye contact. You get more sense of touch and tone from personal contact than you’ll ever get from the written word.” Martha talked about the more personal aspects of mentoring, meaning that “you really need to keep that close to the vest often, and nothing beats face-to-face.” Steve also added that there is “much less opportunity for misinterpretation through face-to-face than through social media.” Finally, Ashley declared that “you can’t have an awesome mentor relationship without vocal contact. Doesn’t have to be face-to-face, but can’t be social media only.”

Privacy concerns. One of the largest areas of discussion among participants was on where to draw the line between personal and

professional interactions on social media and social networking sites. Alan mentioned, “Social media gives us a place to make value judgments. If you’re willing or interested in seeing how you’re perceived by others, I’ll tell you,” a nod to the need for direct honesty in mentoring relationships. Susan discussed taking that honesty in the opposite direction, where perhaps her college student mentees “tell me more than I need to know [on Facebook],” but that it is “their expression of who they are, and if you give them judgment, they won’t include you, will de-friend you. Accept them for who they are.” Steve talked about the importance of privacy, where “you shouldn’t be friends with subordinates and vice versa. There are some employees, don’t want to know what you did on Saturday night, don’t want you to know what I did.” Other privacy concerns were noted by Sharon, who said that for her personal Facebook page, she “really keeps that to friends, people I have no problem letting know my political beliefs, my religious leanings, my relationship status.” Ashley discussed this lack of privacy as a positive for social media to keep her in check, where there are some things she would never say online that she might in a phone call, so social media allows her to “take more of the party line.”

Power dynamics. Power dynamics will always play some role in the mentoring relationship, but they may be exaggerated via social media. Martha mentioned that she “wouldn’t want any mentee to feel obligated to like follow me because I follow them or something like that. I think you almost have to let them set the pace with that, be more responsive than proactive.” Alan saw the same thing, where a good mentor would “be open to relationships evolving, starting with the premise that the mentor is there to give more than receive and ultimately has the mentee’s interests as first priority.” Steve mentioned that the social media power dynamic means you should be careful, because it’s “very public, typically. Wouldn’t ever want to call someone out for a mistake, not the best way to go because they could be embarrassed. Or if you do, you might think it’s between just the two of you, but it can go viral.” Mentors

needed to make sure to take all aspects of social media mentoring into account.

Discussion

The ways in which the participants defined and characterised their mentoring relationships reinforced much of the findings in previous literature. The common themes of open communication, setting expectations, and mentoring as an opportunity for both parties to learn, suggests that these mentors shared a common understanding as to what constitutes a successful mentoring relationship (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Kajs, 2002; Zimpher & Rieger, 2001). These same characteristics did appear to carry over when the mentoring relationship was conducted over social media. Therefore, it did not change the standards or expectations of what would constitute a good mentoring relationship. Because of the nature of the current practice of public relations, this group of professionals was able to offer a rich understanding of the mentoring relationships via social media. Additionally, because of the growing influence of social media and the demand for these tools in the public relations field, the majority of participants were knowledgeable and proficient in using social media outlets. Several of the participants discussed how their own professional social media channels, as well as blogs and YouTube, served as outlets to connect with mentors and offer advice and guidance to other practitioners. By drawing on the experiences shared in this study and the previous literature on mentoring, it is possible to provide some guidelines for integrating social media in mentoring.

The level of social media interaction depends on the relationship

The area that appeared to raise the most questions is the tension that exists when social media blurs the line between personal and professional relationships. Some of the mentors were comfortable using more personal outlets such as Facebook to connect with mentees and enjoyed seeing a more personal side of the mentee's life, while others saw this as a potential invasion of

privacy. Although there was ambiguity, the participants did not suggest that mentors should avoid using social media altogether. For some of the participants, social media provided an area for them to learn more about their mentees and it provided helpful insights. Social media provided a window for the mentee to showcase his or her commitment to the career and relationship and demonstrate judgment and character; factors that are important even in traditional mentoring relationships (Allen, et al., 2004; Noe, et al., 2002). As the relationship develops, some mentoring relationships become more personal than others. Therefore, it is important for the mentor and mentee to evaluate the relationship before deciding the best social media channels to use. The level of personal engagement through social media may need to be calibrated depending on the particular mentoring relationship.

Let the mentee lead the introduction on social media

Scholars have stated that power dynamics may not be as visible or salient in e-mentoring as in face-to-face relationships (Harasim, et al., 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). However, this does not mean that these power dynamics should be ignored. Several participants suggested that the mentor should also be aware of the power dynamics and allow the mentee to instigate the more personal interactions and sharing on social media channels. To have a clear understanding, it may be necessary to have this conversation toward the beginning of the relationship, so that both parties know what is expected and what sorts of benefits social media can potentially bring to the relationship. Having an open conversation and being able to set expectations is the best way to understand how and when to use social media in these relationships. If a mentor or a mentee would have a preference using a certain social media channel, it may be an important to address that question directly. Because of the power dynamic, the onus should be on the mentor to address the issue. As Sommerick (2007) states, a mentoring relationship that is well thought out will be more ethical and socially responsible. The same standard should apply in the use of social media.

An opportunity to provide constructive advice on social media use

Several participants describe the role of a mentor as providing constructive and critical advice. This supports what Pompper and Adams (2006) describe as the role of the mentor to alert mentees to behaviour or image concerns that may be roadblocks to opportunities and advancement. By integrating social media in a mentoring relationship, it provides an opportunity to offer feedback on what is appropriate information to be sharing online for a young professional or student. For mentors who themselves are navigating the professional and personal uses of social media in their own practices, this is as an opportunity to share their own experiences, challenges, and lessons learned. In addition, social media offers a way to record the progress of the relationship, providing documentation of online conversations that mentees may want to turn to for future reference (Muller, 2009).

Know when to move the conversation offline

In the majority of these cases, social media was seen as just one tool for developing mentoring relationships. While it provided an opportunity to connect efficiently with mentees and other practitioners across many boundaries and borders, participants stressed the importance of offline contact in order to develop a long-term successful relationship. If the goal of the mentees is to develop a long-term relationship, the mentor may need to suggest when it would be appropriate to move the conversation to an offline space. With e-mentoring relationships comes the risk of a superficial relationship (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Ensher, et al., 2003) if both parties aren't willing to invest time and energy into the relationship. According to the participants, the relationship can only prove to be fruitful if there is some sort of face-to-face interaction, whether this is offline or even through an online medium such as Skype.

An opportunity to learn

The extent to which our participants used social media channels to enhance their mentoring relationships varied greatly, but

most of the relationships were still categorised as beneficial and successful. Social media is not a necessity in a mentoring relationship, but as more communication takes place in these channels, it may become more inevitable. Integrating these channels in mentoring relationships is a safe space for seasoned professionals and young mentors to learn from each other on how to build successful relationships online. This learning process could potentially offer insights and lessons to mentees for building online relationships in their practice as well, through their interactions with future clients. One aspect of social media monitoring undertaken by many practitioners is the idea of 'social media listening', a form of online engagement where practitioners pay close attention to what is being said about their clients via social media channels (Crawford, 2009). This unique notion of social media listening can also be transferred to the e-mentoring relationship as well, where mentors engage with their protégés fully and pay close attention to the needs of their mentees.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations that may have impacted the findings of this study. First of all, the researchers did not interview mentees to get a sense of how they perceive mentoring relationships. Future research could interview this particular group to explore how students or new practitioners think mentoring relationships in general and via social media could be beneficial or useful to them.

Secondly, the sample of participants that were interviewed for this study was a diverse mix of professionals, from solo practitioners to corporate to nonprofit. Even though this offered a wide range of experiences to draw from for this study, future research could hone in on one particular specialisation of public relations to determine if mentoring relationships differ according to specialty.

Lastly, this research could be seen as very exploratory in nature. This is due to the fact that current studies on mentoring and public relations are very descriptive with very little theory development. There currently are no theories on mentoring and public relations, or

social media and mentoring. Future research could take the findings from this study and work to develop a model of social media, mentoring, and public relations.

Conclusion

This study explored how public relations practitioners perceive the mentoring function using social media tools. The findings revealed some best practices that practitioners could use as a guide in mentoring protégés. In spite of the challenges associated with e-mentoring, such as the blurring of personal/professional lines, the benefits seem to outweigh the costs. Participants felt that social media channels have been useful for expanding their networks and building strong relationships with mentees they probably would otherwise never have met. With new technologies impacting society at such a fast rate, it is expected that social media will impact how public relations practitioners mentor their protégés, sparking a form of new mentoring that will surely develop and grow, one relationship at a time.

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