

Centre for Lifelong Learning

'It is good to give something back'

(Associate Director, Consultancy)

Final report

The Royal British Legion Mentoring Pilot Project

The Royal British Legion (TRBL) invited the University of Wolverhampton to evaluate the activities of the mentoring pilot. The pilot project sought to offer online mentoring for up to 100 working age members of the ex-Service and veteran community, using up to 200 volunteer mentors. The mentors were to be drawn from business and expected to build working relationships with Service leavers and veterans through online links initially. The aim of the pilot was to enable Service leavers and veterans of working age to have help in making the transition to civilian employment or in moving to a new job in the property and construction industries. The pilot made it clear to participants that no promise was made that mentoring would result in the mentees receiving a job. The purpose was to offer a networking opportunity based around an informal mentoring partnership¹.

This evaluation report is intended for TRBL only.

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¹ to help TRBL and its partners test the take-up, explore and prove the value of online mentoring to service leavers and veterans in the employability space... and to ...enable service leavers and veterans to build supportive relationships with volunteer mentors in business in order to gain insights and better understand their options either in their transition to civilian employment and integration back into civilian life, or in moving to a new job. From TRBL/UoW contract (TRBL, 19/08/15)

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The external evaluation aimed to use different methods to,

- evaluate the extent to which online mentoring is a solution to supporting transitions (including challenges of distance, cost, stigma and monitoring)
- evaluate the effectiveness of the matching processes set in place to support individuals transitioning to civilian employment
- benchmark the effectiveness of the pilot project as set against other mentoring programmes which support transitions to civilian life.

In particular, the evaluation wished to assess,

- the impact on Service and veteran individuals of taking part in the pilot project;
- what works well in relation to the volunteer mentors;
- the optimum conditions which help and those which hinder successful learning and transitioning activity; and
- the lessons learned about systems and processes (including support for mentors).

² to help TRBL and its partners test the take-up, explore and prove the value of online mentoring to service leavers and veterans in the employability space... and to ...enable service leavers and veterans to build supportive relationships with volunteer mentors in business in order to gain insights and better understand their options either in their transition to civilian employment and integration back into civilian life, or in moving to a new job. From TRBL/UoW contract (TRBL, 19/08/15)

Evaluation process

The evaluation structure included two online questionnaires for all active mentors and mentees; a set of semi structured questions for telephone interviews for a sample of mentors and mentees; a set of questions for spouses should the opportunity arise; a set of semi structured questions for pilot project managers; questions for employers and for potential stakeholders (such as the CTP). A brief literature search on mentoring was undertaken. Interviews were held with TRBL Operations Directorate sponsors and project managers.

The Pilot project

TRBL had decided to run the pilot on a software-as-a-service online mentoring platform provided by Insala Solutions. The Pilot uses the basic Insala platform technology with limited customisation. This provides TRBL with a structured, integrated, and fully configurable set of tools that support platform administration, implementation and progress reporting, backed by a mentoring methodology and learning materials.

The Pilot project began in September 2015 with an email invitation to many large organisations and companies in the property and construction industries. The invitation was followed up by face to face meetings. There was a strong commitment from companies almost immediately. The trickle-down response was slow but positive; by March 2016 over 200 mentors from 129 companies or organisations have signed up and are waiting in the system. Continued contact with companies and organisations revealed strong support for the Pilot from companies who identified three key benefits: no cost access to a talent pool in an environment where recruitment agencies are seldom used; an unusual way to engage employees which encourages altruism; opportunities to raise brand and corporate social responsibility profiles³.

A brochure was produced by TRBL that promoted the tag line for the pilot, '*Building Networks for Service Leavers and Veterans*'. The brochure has served as a document to leave behind at meetings with employers and as the key component in the welcome starter pack for mentors and mentees. It is available in hard copy and as a .pdf document. It is colourful and well designed and provides useful information: something similar but with case studies was intended and would be of value.

³ IH 15/02/16

Evaluation progress

The evaluation team jointly created and tested the questions and survey instruments with TRBL over the late summer of 2015. Ethics committee approval was successful. Because of the very few matched mentees the evaluation was suspended by mutual consent in December and January. In February 2016 questionnaires were sent to all mentees who had been matched (6) but only one was returned. Although over 200 mentors eventually joined the Pilot only 9 mentees were matched by March 2016, of 46 on the system (20 per cent). The evaluation questionnaires had been designed for mentees and mentors who were now actively involved. Only 4 per cent of over 200 mentors had been asked for support. In March 2016 emails were sent to one in five of the mentees registered on the system asking if a short conversation might be possible: only one responded. By the start of May a surge in mentees had brought the number of mentees to over 100, with 16 being matched with a mentor. Only a handful of these (7) responded to the questionnaire or wished to be questioned about their experience, although several said they would do so beyond the end of the survey date (April 28). Some eight of the matched mentors responded to the on-line questionnaire. Much of the lack of response related to not yet being matched to a mentor.

The slow take up at the start of the project and the increasing number of mentees coming on-line and being matched up indicates that at the close of the evaluation the project was just beginning to get into its stride. The Pilot project manager had reported consistently of the slow take up of support by mentees⁴ and offered three possible reasons for this: mentees believing that mentors offered did not match their concerns; mentees not being in a hurry where they were not leaving until Spring/Summer 2016; the need for more mentors working in lower level roles such as in the construction trades and handyman services⁵. These three reasons have merit. There is a fourth which is that sometimes potential mentees did not match what mentors thought they could tackle. One mentee reported that his opening approach did not work well:

*It came back with a list of 20+ people... I contacted 10-15 best matches...I didn't tailor it... I should have put in more information... I got an email back - 90-95% people said they weren't interested.
(Army, Cpl)*

Findings

1 The impact on Service and veteran individuals of taking part in the Pilot project

⁴ IH 14/10/15; 28/10/15; 16/11/15; 15/12/15; 15/01/16

⁵ IH 16/11/15

For some mentees the offer of help has been startling and successful:

A great opportunity, I previously found many 'dead ends' at previous attempts to organise work experience within the MOD resettlement structure which overall was very poor (Royal Navy, PO)

Several said that they wish they had taken advantage of it before:

It might benefit people more if they have recently been injured or whatever not yet left or more recently transitioned. Rather than someone where I am. It definitely would have helped if they'd contacted me earlier. (Army, LCpl)

Although the impact was positive on most of those who responded, and given the sample there is no way of being certain how general this finding is, the Pilot project has been helpful to Service leavers in three clear ways. First, it has enabled some to improve their CVs and to have their CVs shown to recruitment staff, '*I was hoping they would put my CV in front of people*' said one. For others it has enabled some work experience, described as 'giving me confidence':

Useful to see how military skill fit into a civilian work place (Royal Navy, PO)

Second, it has enabled some to find their way into networks without which they might well have struggled, and to receive useful advice:

To be honest I was hoping for networking more than anything. I know the people are in large multi national companies... I wasn't expecting a job... (Army, LCpl)

Third, it has enabled at least some mentees to find employment. One of these has since become a mentor. A mentor said,

I have found one out of three [mentees] employment (WYG, construction consultancy company)

Not all the experiences of 'transitioning' have been happy ones, however. One veteran found it particularly challenging,

I found it quite difficult to find employment and I have spoken to so many different people and its 'we offer this, we offer that..'. Certain charities are quite secretive about what they do and offer. It's difficult to know which one to turn to really. I wouldn't say the mentoring scheme has knocked my confidence, it's just my transitioning to civilian life and adapting to civilian life with my injury... (Royal Navy, PO)

And another said he would recommend the Project to others but then said,

A mentor could not be found to suit my requirements (RAF, Lt)

In fact, almost all mentees said they would recommend the Project and their advice was uncomplicated,

Just do it, you will gain knowledge from the service (Royal Navy, Able Rating).

2 What works well in relation to the volunteer mentors?

Although at first there was a slow 'trickle down' effect within companies at the start of the Pilot project⁶ this was understood to be partly because managers were uncertain about the competence of staff to represent their organisations in this way⁷. The number of mentors has increased to beyond the target of 200, although early on they were usually at a more senior level. This has now shifted with more middle and project managers being enrolled⁸. It is perhaps a well-tested management approach for senior staff to take on such new roles to begin with, before encouraging junior staff to do the same.

3 The optimum conditions which help and those which hinder successful learning and transitioning activity

Although this was a clear intention the project evaluation could not hope to identify all the optimum conditions for transitioning activity at this late stage of the Pilot project or with such a small sample. A little longer would have probably enabled the evaluator to interview greater numbers of mentors and mentees who began work only this year. Common among those mentees and mentors reporting that they have been 'successful' or 'very successful' are comments from mentees that they found the direct feedback on CVs, the weekly contact by email, and the opportunities for work experience really helpful. Where it was evident that mentors or mentees were proactive and took the initiative, the transitioning process seemed to be described as more successful.

4 The lessons learned about systems and processes (including support for mentors)

From the mentees' point of view a number of process suggestions for improving the project were made. First, that mentors receive a stronger briefing on how to respond positively to mentees' inquiries:

It was a little bit disappointing that so many people turned round and said no without speaking to me when I first approached. I appreciate that they are very busy and have got full-time jobs but I would like to think that if they had signed up for this they would have obviously been able to commit that time to doing it, so... (Army, Cpl)

⁶ IH 03/09/15; 14/09/15

⁷ IH 14/09/15

⁸ IH 16/11/15; *Mentoring Pilot Final Board Review - Project Close & Next Steps* 17/05/16

This theme occurred more than once. Of the eight 'matched' mentors who responded four of them had not used the information from the website or only found it 'quite helpful'. Most had not received advice on being a mentor, except privately in one case, and three felt they were either 'not very successful' or only 'quite successful'. Mentoring may not be as common in companies as is sometimes thought. This may mean that successful mentoring practice needs to be recycled internally so that new mentors can benefit from others' experience. This could change a '*not very successful*' self-assessment into a '*very successful*' one.

Second, a better match between mentees seeking support and mentors offering time ought to be possible. Mentors referred to the need for a better '*match of levels*' suggesting that, '*lower level perhaps would work better*'. It is evident that at the start mentors were drawn from a senior level - chief executive or assistant director - whereas most of the mentees were seeking middle management or 'trades'. There is now a better balance of roles coming into the Project.

Third, good information to potential mentees may be needed. One commented,

It's a bit vague as to what the actual service is really. But what is it that they are looking to provide. What's this mentoring service supposed to...about what [TRBL] are offering really. What's the difference? What's it supposed to offer? What's the USP? All charities are doing this. [TLRP] need to be clearer what it is they are providing. Are [TRBL] networking, is it for CVs, I don't really know. It might be better to have a clear idea of what it is they are offering. (Army, LCpl)

and a second noted that,

Careers adviser mentioned about a month ago about the TRBL project on mentoring. She told me that RBL had started a mentoring scheme in construction: 'If you are interested here's the email address'. It was a bit vague. Not a massive amount of information. To be honest I didn't really know what to expect. Obviously it's a pilot scheme. If it was a long standing scheme I would be able to do a bit more research. I don't know to be really honest. (Army, Cpl)

A useful observation from the Pilot project manager is the suggestion that direct email marketing to Service leavers has some limitations, citing for example, the *heavy use of email to provide the vast amount of opportunities being offered by different organisations* and the belief that individuals are *overwhelmed by the number of choices and level of effort required to respond*⁹. This may also explain the lack of responses by mentees to the online evaluation questionnaires.

Two useful events (CTP Employment Fairs) attended by the Pilot project manager involved large numbers of Service leavers and provided an opportunity to understand that Service leavers were in need of more guidance about their futures than might have been expected. In parallel, some research has been undertaken with ex-Service mentors to learn what might have made a difference for them when they transitioned to civilian life and to get their feedback on "what single

⁹ IH 16/11/15

action/lure” would have made them sign up with a mentor. Their answers provide the basis for potential marketing case studies. For example,

I didn't recognise the support and development I gained from my first mentor when I left the Royal Navy because it wasn't referred to as mentoring then. He saw that I had potential and an enquiring mind. He merely provided me with opportunities to develop and was a sounding board for my ideas and thoughts. Without that it is unlikely that I would have made the progress I did. (Royal Navy/Skanska UK)

From the working mentors' perspective the project was very successful for some. They recommended that '*short stories on transitions*', '*career pathways*' and '*links to social media services*' be added to the website. Mentors found the website '*very easy*' and '*very helpful*' or '*not easy*' and '*a little helpful*' in about equal measure. All those who responded to the survey were male, most aged 40-59, and the majority were White British. Half had been in the Services (all in the Army) and all were now working in roles such as CEO, chief engineering surveyor, project engineer, construction planning manager. A surprising find was that mentors' most common reason for volunteering was that they, '*...wanted to help others to get on*' followed by '*I know what it is like coming into a new work environment*'. No working mentor thought they were doing this work to learn more about mentoring or because someone had helped them as a mentor, or even that they wished to recruit staff. This altruistic reason¹⁰ for volunteering is worth noting, especially when placed against what they would say to other colleagues about being a mentor. Repeated several times was the notion of deferred reciprocity: '*I felt like I was giving something back*' or '*Veterans should help each other like we did in the Army*' and,

We have a duty to help others, regardless of their background' (Project engineer)

An unexpectedly rich vein of altruistic support for the Service leavers and veterans has been uncovered by the project. There is still a great deal more of this to be used given the large number of mentors still waiting for a potential role. It is suggested that keeping these mentors in the picture, valued and involved, will be critical for TRBL's reputation and continued commitment from mentors' companies. This requires management time.

Conclusion

At its start the Pilot project attempted to explore several variables:

- a light touch informal online mentoring system in an open market environment (typically light touch mentoring is carried out as a developmental relationship within a corporation or learning institution as a

¹⁰ By 'altruistic' I mean concern for the weal and woe of another as a principle of action (Blum, 1980) which, of course includes reciprocity.

means of supporting peoples' professional, career and personal development)

- a property and construction-role based employment focus
- an email based marketing approach to Service leavers and veterans
- a customised web platform mentoring channel/programme enabling a mentee to find a mentor based on industry role and sector, and (if ex-Service) past rank, military arm and length of service
- a web platform that allows mentees to match themselves to mentors from a shortlist based on their profiles and answers made to matching questions
- the start of a significant employment project for TRBL
- mentoring as an additional resettlement service offered by CTP Career Consultants at the nine Resettlement Centres in the UK and one in Germany.

We are aware that this is only a Pilot project and the testing of so many issues for the TRBL is in itself not a simple task. Further, light touch mentoring with early Service leavers from the British Army, for example, has been shown not to work well (Braidwood and Williams, 2009¹¹). Fossey describes this as, *the ineffectiveness of adopting a passive approach* (Fossey, 2013 p7) in relation to early Service leavers and there may be a wider application to this finding.

Future and recommendations

The Pilot project evaluation aimed to evaluate the extent to which online mentoring is a solution to supporting transitions (including challenges of distance, cost, stigma and monitoring). It has found that:

- mentoring clearly works well for some mentees. Care needs to be taken to make the offer much clearer to mentees; the duties and behaviours much clearer to mentors; and the benefits of participation more obvious to all parties significantly earlier in the transition process. TRBL needs to consider its unique selling point.
- all those involved benefitted in some way, although outcomes were not necessarily a job. Apart from employment they included valuable work experience; improvement to CVs; getting into a new network. TRBL will wish to consider what 'success' looks like, preferably in a differentiated way.

¹¹ Braidwood, A., & Williams, C. (2009) Pilot Mentoring Scheme for Early Service Leavers: Report of the Supervisory Group, unpublished.

Fossey, M (2013) Transition Support for British Army Early Service Leavers: An evaluation of the Future Horizons Programme, Infantry Training Centre, Catterick

- mentors benefit from participation and are keen to do more for the very best of reasons. Care needs to be taken to manage both mentor and mentee expectations and continued involvement, all of which require continued managerial support.

The second purpose of the evaluation was to evaluate the effectiveness of the matching processes set in place to support individuals transitioning to civilian employment. It has found that,

- matching is not an exact science. More interventions are sometimes needed in order to help mentees and mentors find their feet. Possibly a third party matching negotiator, in order to avoid feelings of rejection and subsequent lowering of confidence and self-esteem levels. The experiences of other mentors/mentees when shared might be valuable and encourage new partnerships;
- some mentors thought there needed to be better matching of 'levels', finding themselves not confident to help someone at a 'trades' level. Some mentees found the 'no' responses from their approaches to potential mentors difficult to handle;
- the matching process is a critical thing to get right. Relying just on materials on the website may not be helpful (half said they did not use them). Some greater 'hands on' may be needed for some matches to work.

The third purpose was to benchmark the effectiveness of the pilot project as set against other mentoring programmes which support transitions to civilian life. Regrettably there has been limited opportunity to do this. The work of SSAFA's mentoring project, aimed at providing trained mentors for Service leavers is well known and small enough in scale for careful screening, training and matching to need. Much could be learned from this approach and the opportunity to work with SSAFA on mentoring¹² is very welcome. Barclays' Armed Forces Transition, Employment and Resettlement programme (AFTER) was launched in 2010 and has the benefit of the backing from a substantial company offering work placement for two weeks, CV workshops, money management and employment opportunities. The programme is really focused on employment within Barclays as the case studies indicate and it is difficult to see what could be learned from Barclays' approach. However, Barclays also initiated the Veterans Employment Transition Support programme (VETS) in 2015. VETS is a partnership of corporates and charities, which aims to help service leavers to find employment, training, and provides advice to veterans, regardless of when they left the Armed Forces. Of interest here is the combination of policy collaboration, strong promotion and sector collaboration. It is probably too early to judge the programme's effectiveness and it is understood that their mentoring platform component has recently been withdrawn but there should be learning from the VETS approaches. The TRBL Project can both learn and share experience with the other programmes.

¹² *Mentoring Pilot Final Board Review - Project Close & Next Steps 17/05/16*

There are four immediate concerns that need addressing. First, the rate of matching between mentor and mentee was slower than expected and required longer to take full effect in order to reach the targets set. Second, in some cases the level at which mentors work may be perceived as inappropriate or too daunting for potential mentees and so this may take longer for the 'trickle down' process to take effect to enable effective matches. Third, if the Pilot project were to cease now it might not do justice to the investment of altruism and energy from property and construction companies, the large numbers of mentors waiting and those mentees waiting to sign up with a mentor. There could also be a presentation challenge for TRBL. Fourth, the evaluation requires a little longer to know for sure whether light touch mentoring works or not; it appears to be working for some people, though not all, but we are still in a relatively early phase.

At this stage, we see four options:

1. The Pilot project continues for another year as part of the new TRBL employment strategy, to enhance the number of mentee partnerships and outcomes. This will require the investment of a full-time Project manager and some capability for promoting to and recruiting mentors from companies. The advantages are that the Legion,
 - a. capitalises on the investment in this novel approach, which makes sense to both employers and to mentees;
 - b. has a greater opportunity to evaluate the economic value of the programme, and to extend it into another occupational area, such as logistics or engineering;
 - c. leads on this way of working with a number of other charities, and in support of the CTP's objectives in partnership with the CTP;
 - d. can increase the Project's impact in terms of successful placements, jobs and careers in order to be a lead partner in employment support;
 - e. will have a more substantial case for rolling out a full project.
2. To take the next step and customise the web mentoring platform in order to introduce more targeted sub programmes that improve matching options.
3. TRBL offer the day to day management of mentoring and matching to the CTP whilst retaining overall control and funding of the web platform. CTP management could eliminate the self-matching step that allows mentees to review potential mentors and instead accelerate the process by assigning a trained mentor to each mentee.

4. Conclude that the majority of Service leavers and veterans perceive even light touch online mentoring without the help of facilitation and coaching sets the bar too high in terms of their confidence, capability and capacity to engage with matched mentors. Consequently, commence a controlled wind down and exit from mentoring.

We realise marketing efforts are currently being continued to:

1. devise and include case studies for marketing of the kind already started by the Pilot project manager in recent reports¹³;
2. pictorially bring to life the choice and range of the mentors available;
3. encourage mentors to stay, supporting and valuing their altruism, and seek to use the three business benefits identified. A personal email was sent to each registered mentor in March by the Pilot project manager to thank them again for their support and provide a progress update. This elicited a positive response¹⁴;
4. find ways to encourage more mentors at all levels from within the companies that make up the supply chains/contractors to participating property and construction companies;
5. encourage CTP Career Consultants to carry stronger messages about the mentoring opportunities for those interested in a career in property or construction.

Perhaps I should leave the last word to one of the Service Leavers:

Just do it...

(Royal Navy, Able Rating)

Peter Lavender

17 May 2016

¹³ IH 14/03/16

¹⁴ IH 17/03/16