

Mentoring remotely

Addressing issues of geography and infrastructure
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The ideas below stem from discussion at the mentoring event I attended as well as some personal experience. Some are very obvious, but keep reading, you may find one or two ideas that could really help. (Please note I have often referred to Zoom as a means for communication, but you could use any online conferencing facility - Zoom is just a useful shorthand, as saying 'online conferencing facility' each time is a bit cumbersome!)

What can help

Using an online platform for chatting

We are probably all wishing we never had to enter another Zoom room ever again! However, we have also discovered just how useful Zoom, and other such platforms, are. Ideally choose one with the ability to share a screen (e.g. Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Cisco Webex). As you all know, it can help to turn off videos if there are internet problems.

Avoiding interruptions

We've all had people try to talk to us when we are on an online call! A couple of suggestions for minimising interruptions include:

- Having a dedicated room in your office for online calls, so that people know if someone is in there they should not be disturbed.
- Having a notice on your door, or strategically placed on your desk or in your window, informing people that you are on a call.
- Have a policy of: 'If my door is shut (and you can hear talking even though you know I'm the only person in the room), please do not disturb'

Meet regularly

When you only meet online, it is important to be intentional about meeting and to meet regularly. Many mentors seem to find that once a month is a good frequency, though more or less often may be appropriate depending on the mentoring goals. (This should be agreed when you form your mentoring agreement).

Prepare for your meetings

To make the most of the time together, it helps when you have prepared ahead for the meeting by making sure the technology is working and everyone has the right link and has remembered the date and time (it's often helpful to send a quick email or message an hour or so before the meeting to confirm the time and link).

It also helps if you have thought about the direction of the meeting – you may prepare some specific questions to ask to guide the discussion (though this depends on who is taking the lead in meetings, which you will have agreed in your mentoring agreement).

Pre-meeting questionnaire for reflection

Depending on the nature of your mentoring relationship and goals, it may help to send a pre-meeting questionnaire, which allows the mentee to do some guided reflection before you meet together. You may then need to have a longer online meeting in order to process their reflections together.

Powerful questions

We all know about asking good questions – those ‘open’ questions that draw people out and encourage them to share, rather than ‘closed’ questions that lead to a short answer at best, and just a yes or no at worst. Asking the right kinds of questions is particularly important when you don’t work in the same office and therefore aren’t able to observe their work first-hand. You need to know how to draw out of your mentee a good picture of what is going on or how they are dealing with an issue.

Allow time after your meetings

Allow yourself some time after a meeting to make a note of what was agreed and what you want to follow-up on in the next meeting (so don’t book another meeting to start as soon as you have turned off your virtual meeting).

Extra communication

Don’t confine communication with your mentee to the monthly online meeting, but make brief interactions possible in-between through email or WhatsApp or some other messaging service. This helps the mentee feel supported and allows for urgent questions or needs to be addressed as they arise.

More than one method of communication

If someone is struggling to join the Zoom meeting, how can they let you know? It is good to have more than one way of contacting each other, so that if one method fails, you can communicate another way. Sometimes the internet may not be good enough for Zoom but a brief email or a short WhatsApp message may send.

Skype (and other services) can be useful for calling or texting someone’s phone in another country for a reasonable price, if they have no internet connectivity. Of course, if you are in the same country, you can also just pick up a phone!

Did you know it is also possible for people to join Zoom meetings by phoning? If someone doesn’t have an internet connection or doesn’t have a computer or Smart Phone, it is still possible to join a Zoom meeting.

If you can’t connect online, don’t just leave things hanging, but find a way to communicate with each other straight away to avoid frustration on both sides and to find a way to connect again as soon as possible.

Reschedule if necessary

If one of you can’t make a planned meeting or if the technology just isn’t working, reschedule! However, reschedule for as soon as possible; don’t just leave things hanging (i.e. don’t just say, “We’ll try and meet another day”, instead fix a date and time).

Respond promptly

When you can’t just knock on someone’s door, it can be really hard to know whether your mentor/mentee has engaged with any emails or messages you have sent. When a mentor

responds promptly to a message, that will help their mentee to feel supported. (Obviously, there are times when that just isn't possible or appropriate, but on the whole, prompt answers are good.)

Tracking conversations

Use something like Google Docs as a way of making a note of things you have talked about, plans you have made, assignments given, progress made, plans for coming meetings etc. This document can be shared between mentor and mentee to help them both remember where things have got to. (This is useful for any mentoring, not just remote).

Don't just talk about work

When mentoring remotely the relationship may feel very formal and even clinical. However, showing an interest in your mentee's life and talking about non-mentoring issues can help the mentee to feel more relaxed and better supported and cared for by their mentor. It takes more effort to get to know someone when you can't meet up face-to-face, but it is an important part of developing the mentoring relationship. (Remember the '4 stages of mentoring'? The first stage highlights the importance of getting to know your mentor.) Of course, the level to which you may do this will be affected by culture and personality, but in whatever ways are culturally appropriate the mentor should be trying to communicate their concern for the whole individual and not just for achieving the mentoring goals.

Meet face-to-face if possible

If an opportunity arises, it is wonderful to have a proper face-to-face meeting with your mentee. This can be particularly helpful at the beginning as you are getting to know each other. Make the most of opportunities like a conference or branch-wide meeting to do this.

Visit your mentee's training programme

If your mentee is a student on a virtual training programme, request to drop into the occasional session to observe what is happening and then debrief with your mentee afterwards.

MOOCs

You may be able to take advantage of 'Massive Open Online Courses', also known as MOOCs. Maybe someone has already developed an online course that covers some of the things your mentee needs training in. Different websites host these, and you may know the best place to find courses that relate to your domain. A good way to search is to use: <https://www.mooc-list.com/>, which allows you to search multiple MOOCs and online courses at once. (I have found an interesting course on 'The Bible in Light of the Ancient Near East' on the EdX website – university level and quality of teaching, for free! www.edx.org is just one example of a website offering online courses to audit for free or for credit if you pay).

Trello

Using Trello has been recommended as way of facilitating collaboration: <https://trello.com/> (I have no personal experience of this).

Cohort mentoring

All the above tips apply, but some things that are particularly useful when trying to mentor a cohort of individuals scattered across the globe include:

- Having a set time for the meeting every month.
- Using a Google Doc to track everything you talk about particularly for the sake of those who struggle to connect to the virtual meeting.

- Sometimes using a Google Doc simultaneously for sharing of ideas can even be better than trying to hold a virtual conversation, as it allows everyone to share their thoughts without the awkward problem of people speaking over the top of each other due to network delays!

Your turn

What things have helped you successfully connect with your mentee remotely? If you have any good tips, please share them with us all!