



*Trend Research*

# Women as Mentors: Does She or Doesn't She?

A Global Study of Businesswomen and Mentoring

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Women can benefit from mentoring  
and from being mentors. So why aren't  
more women engaging in mentoring  
relationships?

- *Today, women comprise nearly half of the workforce. The additional productive power of women entering the workforce from 1970 until today accounts for about 25 percent of current GDP (McKinsey, 2011). Women are a strong force in the economy, one that is growing as more women across the globe enter the workforce in greater numbers than ever before.*

With such an influx of women into the business world, it would seem inevitable that more women would begin to fill executive offices. However, in 2012 there were no more women in top leadership positions at Fortune 500 companies than in 2011 (Catalyst, 2012). There are a few who successfully make it to the top of their field, but it is a long, hard climb. Among them are familiar names like Meg Whitman, Oprah Winfrey, Indra Nooyi, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. These are all very different women—from different backgrounds, with different education and careers spanning different industries. What they do have in common is the role that mentoring played in helping them along the way.



## Mentoring is widely considered a critical component to career success.

It provides opportunities for protégés to gain a broader perspective and learn more about their business, as well as to network and build social capital (the value of connections to people and their networks). Mentorship is especially important for women's success because they often have difficulty building social capital at work, particularly in settings where there are fewer women (Chrisler & McCreary, 2010). Since there is a growing body of evidence showing how a more gender-diversified C-suite impacts the bottom line (Boatman et al., 2011), this also makes mentorship an imperative for businesses. Mentoring isn't just about boosting careers, and it's not just the women who are mentored that benefit. Mentoring helps retain the practical experience and wisdom gained from longer-term employees. The exchange of knowledge and experience that informs protégés also helps put mentors in touch with other parts of the organization. Businesses benefit not only from the aforementioned professional development of their employees (which can in turn improve productivity and reduce turnover), but also from elevating knowledge transfer between disparate sections of the organization.

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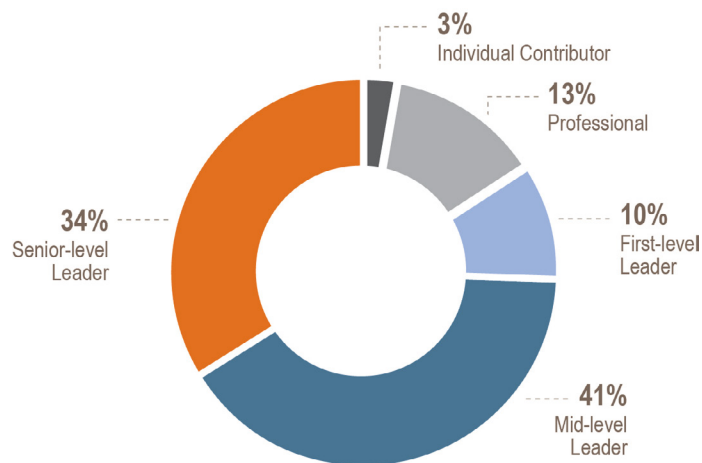
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## A look at the less-explored side of mentoring

It is obvious that professionals who are mentored, leaders who mentor, and their organizations all can benefit from mentoring. As the benefits to individuals who receive mentoring are already widely documented, we decided to take a closer look at the less-explored side of mentoring. Through this survey we sought answers to questions such as: Who is really responsible for making mentoring happen? Are women proactive in seeking out mentors? Do women in more senior roles volunteer to mentor other women, or are they worried about boosting the competition? What will it take to make mentoring more commonplace?

We surveyed a total of 318 businesswomen from 19 different countries and 30 different industries. The respondents on average were 48-years old, with the large majority (75 percent) indicating that they were either mid- or senior-level leaders (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: MANAGEMENT LEVELS OF PARTICIPANTS**



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## Women need to ask

We learned that women are still not seeking out mentors for themselves. Although nearly all women in senior roles (78 percent) have served as formal mentors at one time or another, very few of them had a formal mentor of their own. This is disappointing as there are many sources pointing out how critical having a mentor is for growth and development. An overwhelming 63 percent of women in our study reported that they have never had a formal mentor. This indicates a big development gap, considering that 67 percent of women rate mentorship as highly important in helping to advance and grow their careers. Why are so many opportunities for mentoring being missed?

According to the hundreds of women who responded, it isn't because they aren't willing to mentor; it's that they are not being asked. The majority of women (54 percent) reported that they have only been asked to be a mentor a few times in their career or less, while 20 percent reported they have never been asked to be a mentor. This is problematic because women already have trouble keeping up with their male counterparts in mentoring. Men tend to seek and offer to mentor more readily, and women more typically need to be found and encouraged (Laff, 2009). Although our data show that women are willing mentors, other women are simply not seeking them out.

So why are women not asking? Are they afraid of rejection? If so, then it might help to know that the odds of a mentorship invitation being accepted are in their favor. Seventy-one percent of women in our study reported that they always accept invitations to be formal mentors at work. And, overwhelmingly, women reported that they would mentor more if they were asked. Even though the risk of rejection could be intimidating, more women should be seeking out mentors. The bottom line is if you want a mentor, you just need to ask.

# 63%

of women have NEVER  
had a formal mentor.

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*"It's like walking up to  
someone and asking them  
to be your friend, and no  
one does that."*

—Female executive  
in pharmaceutical  
company

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### A MENTORING SUCCESS STORY

Denise Morrison is a great example of how it pays to be proactive in seeking out mentors. Now the CEO of Campbell Soup Company, she credits early-career guidance from the right mentor with helping her achieve her current role (Emory, 2012). When she was director of sales planning at Nestlé in the 1980's, she began an informal mentorship with then CEO Alan MacDonald. She would go to MacDonald with questions, seek his advice, and share customer feedback insights. Before long, he had recommended her for a promotion which Morrison says was a defining moment in her career. She is now so dedicated to mentoring that she spends as much as 20 percent of her time advising and supporting others.

## It's not a competition

Over the years, many stereotypes have emerged that portray women in the workplace competing with one another. Even as this report was being prepared for publication, *The Wall Street Journal* featured “The Tyranny of the Queen Bee” which depicts women who succeed in the workplace as so protective of their authority that they actively work to keep other women from assuming their place. Contrary to this assumed rivalry and culture of “catfighting”, we found that women do not avoid taking on mentorships because of competition. In fact, the number one reason cited for why women mentor is because they want to be supportive of other women—80 percent agreed (see Figure 2). Additionally, the majority of women (74 percent) indicated that they mentor because they have benefited from their own mentorship experiences.

**FIGURE 2: WOMEN BACK ONE ANOTHER**



% that indicated they mentor other women because they want to be supportive of them

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*“Mentoring helps develop the next generation of leaders by giving beginning and mid-stage leaders the chance to learn from the successes and missteps of an experienced leader.”*

—Senior-level leader  
in finance

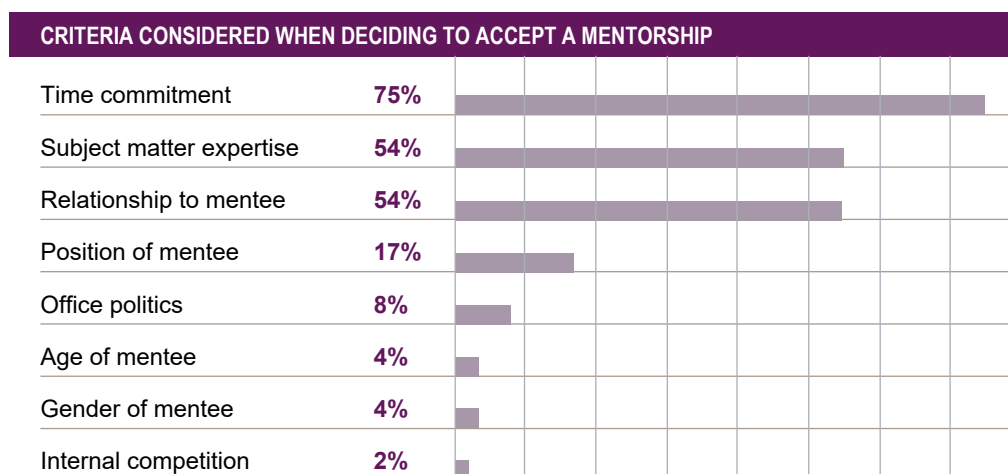
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Our data show that rather than rival other women in the organization, women are actually more likely to sponsor each other and to help other women rise to the top. We can confidently put to rest the myth that women would rather compete than support one another.

## It's about time

So with all the benefits to mentoring, and women willing to be mentors, isn't it about time that more women are mentored? Well, it turns out that time is the problem. The majority of women (75 percent) reported that the time it takes to mentor most affects their decision to accept mentorships. In fact, time commitment was the number one decision criterion for women in taking on a mentoring role (see Figure 3). However, even with time being cited as such a key factor, of those who mentor, only nine percent of women said that mentoring actually takes time away from making progress in their own work. As it turns out, perception does not match reality—once women commit to mentoring, they find that the time it takes to mentor is not a hindrance to their work.

FIGURE 3: WHAT HOLDS WOMEN BACK FROM MENTORING



### MYTH BUSTED!

ONLY

1 in 10

women chose not to mentor because it interfered with family time or other commitments.

Now that we've put time aside, subject matter expertise was the other top criterion women considered when deciding to accept mentorships. In fact, lack of expertise in the topic area is what makes women uncomfortable about taking on mentoring roles. But, curiously enough, a recent analysis by *Harvard Business Review* shows that once people reach the C-suite, technical expertise matters less than their core leadership skills (Groysberg, 2011). In most mentoring relationships, it is not subject matter and technical expertise with which mentees struggle. It's the core leadership skills like influencing, working through problems, negotiation, and interpersonal skills with which less-experienced professionals most often need help. Important note to potential mentors: Do not be reluctant to take on mentorships because of a lack of subject matter expertise.



ONLY  
ABOUT HALF  
**56%**

of organizations have  
a formal program for  
mentoring.

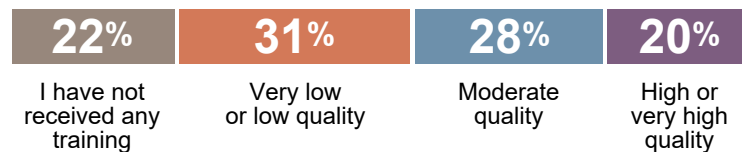
*“Before we had a mentoring program that was employee-run, but not effective. Mentoring is now formal because our new CEO advocated for it.”*

–Female executive  
at a large insurance  
company

## Mentoring: formal = normal

Along with mentoring not being a common practice for women, we also discovered that mentoring is uncharted territory for most organizations. This makes it even more challenging for women to connect with mentors. Only 56 percent of organizations have a formal program for mentoring. And, of those who do have mentoring programs, training is rare and typically ineffective. Organizations are neglecting to arm their leaders with the interpersonal skills (e.g., coaching, networking, influencing) they need to be effective mentors. Only 20 percent of women in our study rated the quality of formal training they received as high or very high, and another fifth of women (22 percent) responded that they have not received any training at all (see Figure 4). This data tells us that rather than having a planned talent strategy in place, organizations are leaving mentoring to chance.

FIGURE 4: MENTORS NEED HELP



To demonstrate the importance of organizational support for mentors, one of the key characteristics of organizations with the largest percentage of women at the C-level is that they encourage or mandate senior executives to mentor women in lower-level jobs (McKinsey, 2010). Formal mentoring programs provide an easier way for women to find mentors, and the numbers of women who report having a formal mentor clearly reflect that (see Figure 5). In organizations with formal programs, half of all women have had a formal mentor in comparison to only one in four at organizations that do not have such programs.

FIGURE 5: MAKE MENTORING FORMAL

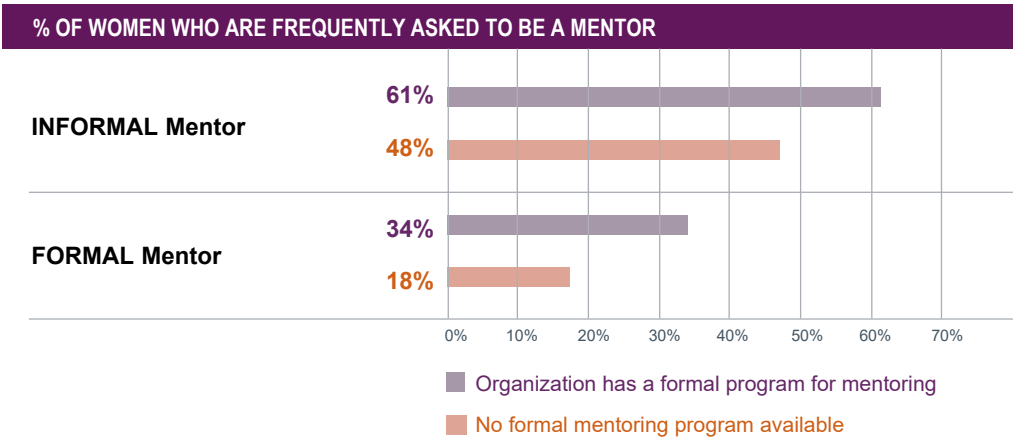




Additionally, more women at organizations with formal programs are likely to accept mentoring opportunities. Three out of four women who work for an organization with a formal program reported that they always accept mentoring opportunities. This is nearly 10 percent more than women who work for organizations that do not have a formal program.

A formal program does more than just institutionalize mentoring. It fosters a culture that makes it more acceptable for women to seek out and ask other women to be their mentors, both formally and informally. Women in higher-level positions at organizations with formal programs reported not only being asked more frequently to be formal mentors, but informal mentors, as well (see Figure 6). Among organizations with a formal program for mentoring, one in three women (34 percent) reported being asked frequently to be a formal mentor, in contrast to less than one in five women (18 percent) at organizations without such a program.

FIGURE 6: FORMAL PROGRAMS ENCOURAGE INFORMAL MENTORING



The data confirm that having formalized programs for mentoring helps increase mentoring. More organizations need to not only put programs in place, but also ensure they are providing mentors with effective training and development opportunities to equip them with the necessary skills. They need to remove the ambiguity of what it means to mentor by better defining the “what” and “how” of mentoring. Note to organizations: It is easy to remove the barriers holding women back from seeking out mentoring opportunities.



### Women need to:

**STOP** waiting for mentorships to be assigned.

**START** seeking out mentors for themselves.

**CONTINUE** accepting invitations to mentor.

### Organizations need to:

**STOP** leaving mentoring to chance.

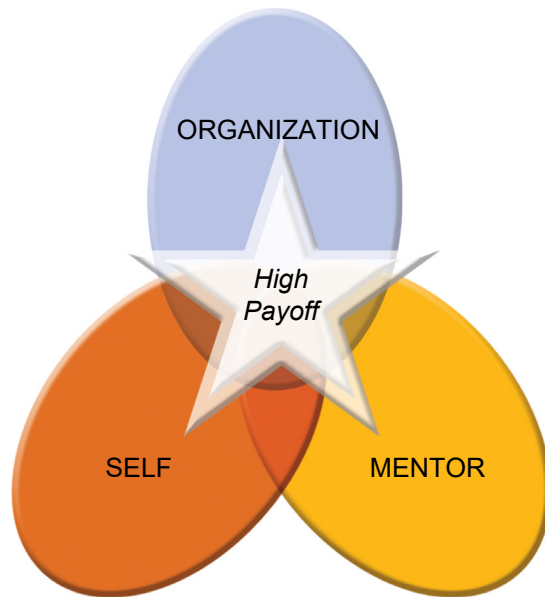
**START** making mentoring contagious—  
formalize programs, provide support and  
training.

**CONTINUE** to encourage mentoring with  
formal programs.

## Mentoring: make sure it happens

With today's complex business climate, mentoring is more critical than ever.

Women are ready to be mentors, and to be mentored, so what will it take to make sure it happens? This research demonstrates what organizations, mentors, and women need to do in order to ensure a high payoff from mentoring.



### ORGANIZATION

Organizations can do their part by not only instituting formal mentoring programs, but also by providing a culture that makes mentoring a common practice. The more ingrained mentoring is in the organization, the more likely women are to be mentors and to accept mentorships. If your organization has a formal program, are your employees aware of it? Are there training opportunities available to potential mentors? How do you know if these programs are working? Take a hard look at your practices. Provide communication around mentoring as well as training and support for potential mentors and mentees so they are prepared to participate.

## **MENTOR**

According to our findings, women have trouble finding other women to be mentors even though there are willing mentors out there. Denise Morrison's example (page 5) highlights this. There is a shortage of senior-level women to look to for mentoring. Women in top leadership positions must be courageous and make themselves available as mentors in order to ensure mentoring happens. Women need to advertise their willingness to mentor.

Whether you are mentoring as part of a formal or informal program, it helps to establish and set expectations up front for the mentorship. Mentoring is more than a loan of your time, it is an investment. And those investments need to be tailored—in some cases, a mentorship might mean meeting 30 minutes every few months. Others might consist of regular meetings every few weeks.

## **SELF**

Women need to be on the lookout for the right mentors to ask. Although the women in our study reported more frequently mentoring women than men (73 percent of the time), only 55 percent reported that they had been mentored by other women. Because there are often fewer senior women to look to, women need to be both on the lookout for, and open to, finding men who will mentor them. Once an appropriate mentor is found, it is important to clearly define desired learning goals. Since learning is the purpose of a mentorship, clarifying and articulating what you want and expect to learn from a mentor is critical.

## Yes, she should!

We set out to answer the question, “Does she or doesn’t she mentor?” We learned that she doesn’t, but she should. Women are eager to take on mentoring roles and support other women, but they are not being asked or given the opportunity often enough. The feedback we received from hundreds of women makes the message clear. When it comes to mentoring—provide women the opportunities, they will provide the time, and everyone will benefit.





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## About DDI

DDI is a global leadership consulting firm that helps organizations hire, promote and develop exceptional leaders. From first-time managers to C-suite executives, DDI is by leaders' sides, supporting them in every critical moment of leadership. Built on five decades of research and experience in the science of leadership, DDI's evidence-based assessment and development solutions enable millions of leaders around the world to succeed, propelling their organizations to new heights. For more information, visit [ddiworld.com](http://ddiworld.com).



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