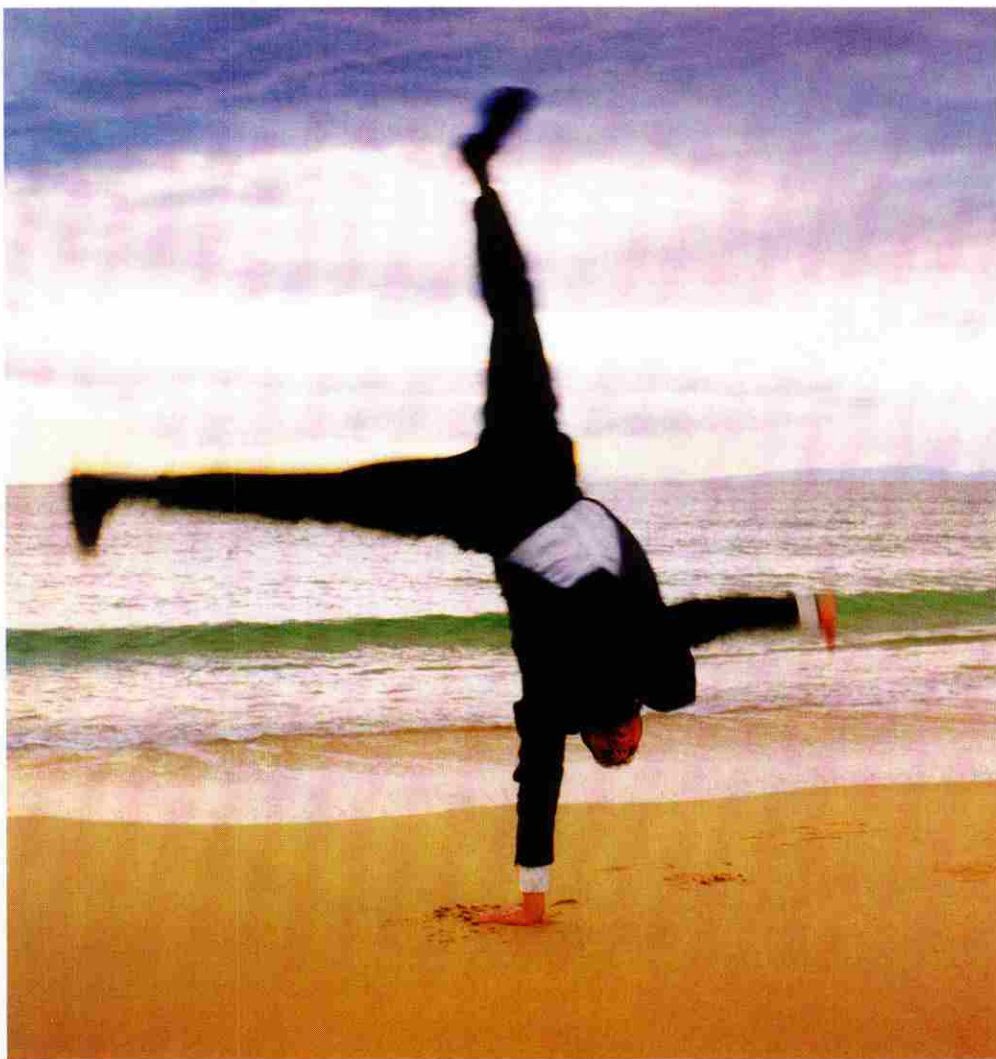




# Playing possum

Could you remain graceful while your 22-year-old mentor criticised your modus operandi? **Tim Phillips** visits the upside down world of reverse mentoring

Eighteen months ago, when Duncan Hopper wanted his fellow directors to find out more about e-business, he turned to the experts: a group of young "possums".

As a director of the financial services conglomerate AMP-Pearl, owners of Pearl Assurance, NPI and London Life, Hopper shares responsibility for developing the new financial products for some 2.5 million existing customers in the UK, as well as growing that number.

"We had to start getting "e" into the culture," he says, "The way to change companies is to get e-savvy youngsters into the boardroom."

The boardroom at the time wasn't at all e-smart. So Hopper turned the idea of

mentoring on its head by using twentysomething company staff to advise board directors.

AMP's younger staff would meet regularly with their assigned director, and discuss e-business, the internet, mobile phones – anything that might help the managers understand the shift in the business environment. Originally 12 in number, this group – named "e-possums" by the company's Australian managing director at the time – now number 65. The average possum's age is 22.

So how did the top brass take to the notion? Not every director thought he had much to learn about the Net. "The sales director was against the idea, but he was →

## The sharp end

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Want to be my mentor?

very interested in stocks and shares. So his possum showed him the websites and services dealing with that. Another director had an interest in fine wine. "His possum looked at sites to do with that," Hopper explains, "and in six months we found – to our surprise – that this was really biting."

In AMP's Peterborough office, 24-year-old Mark Dixon has used his role as an e-possum to move from pensions administration to become a Web developer. It's a well earned reward, because his job was one of the toughest: mentoring the firm's IT director.

"It's important not to clam up, because it can be intimidating," says Dixon. "I remember walking into his office for the first time – it was certainly a nerve-wracking experience for me."

But his spare-time hobby of building websites gave him specialist knowledge: he could show his director which sites he found exciting and engaging, and why.

E-possums work for free, because they like the job. "A lot of mentoring is done out of office hours," Dixon says, "so you have to be flexible, and commit your time – but everybody knows who the e-possums are throughout the business. We're a very visible lot."

## Reverse mentoring - the rules

**Chiumento's experience shows that reverse mentoring has to be planned carefully so that it neither upsets egos nor becomes simply a talking shop without a business purpose.**

- Be clear about objectives. How does this relationship work? What is it here to achieve?
- Assign duties clearly. Who is responsible for arranging sessions? Who decides what they will be about?
- Expect resentment from management. "One of the biggest barriers in our experience is that executives don't want to admit that they have a problem," says Chiumento.
- Be choosy when picking possums. Just because the person is young and has great

technical skills doesn't necessarily make him or her good mentor material. The ability to communicate and be confident in front of the boss is essential.

- Have defined rules. Reverse mentoring may mean criticising the boss or the company. Junior staff should know that this is allowed and how it should be handled.

- Measure what you do, and compare it with your targets so that you know mentoring is actually working.

A concrete legacy of the e-possum programme, which Hopper estimates costs less than £30,000 per year, are AMP's popular in-house cybercafes.

A less tangible result has been a change in the corporate culture. When the company was about to launch a direct investment website, the e-possums invited students in to give their opinions – in effect, being reverse mentors to the reverse mentors.

AMP's project is one of too few in the

UK, says Richard Chiumento, director of the Chiumento Consulting Group. "Managers can believe that their power base relies on the fact that they have knowledge, and reverse mentoring may feel like a threat. In traditional, hierarchical companies, reverse mentoring isn't on the agenda because it's threatening to the bosses. But they may be just the companies that need it most."

**Tim Phillips** is a freelance writer.

## Build on the basics

**Businesses are constantly required to evolve, driving market trends or reacting to them. Companies are placed under pressure to equip their staff with suitably flexible technology that can react to change successfully. The key lies in devising an IT strategy that allows for such change. Over the next few months, each of the issues raised below will be examined, creating a blueprint for a fluid business – one that can continue to react to change successfully**

**Flexibility** is the immediate challenge.

Traditionally, businesses deal with legacy systems by creating more legacy systems. Layer is built upon layer, creating an over-complex base for a system that will be extremely difficult to adapt.

Perhaps it is time for businesses to look at "componentising" so that core applications can be added or removed without adversely affecting the architectural whole.

Another essential for success is **intellectual capital**. People are the vital ingredient, yet they are often an afterthought in systems development, left to follow processes defined with little thought for the people who carry out the work they become slaves to the technology.

Few companies **ask advice of the users**. If there is a dialogue, it is usually about drawing battle lines – mud-slinging along the lines of "this isn't what we wanted. How are we supposed to use it?" and "It's your fault if it doesn't do what you want, you gave us the requirements". If you want to avoid this, consult potential users at all levels and ways in which comments can be bought to bear.

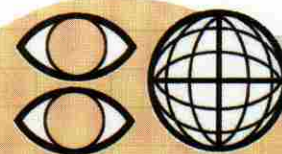
Technology should support your people's activities, rather than hinder or create bureaucratic processes that add little to your business.

Equally, the belief that machines can and should replicate human intelligence is misguided. Trying to mirror the problem-solving capabilities of people in information systems can add lots of code

to systems that could never cater for any situation. In many cases, about 70 per cent of the entire code of a system will be there to deal with exceptions. Look to invest in making systems lighter and more agile and **leave the problem-solving to people**. This also means the systems will be cheaper.

Larger projects have a tendency to fail more frequently than small ones – there's more to go wrong. So it makes sense to **build small** IT systems quickly and in a modular system that can be integrated into a larger, cohesive whole.

**Professor Robert Macredie and Dr Mark Lycett** are leaders of Fluid Business, a research project in the Department of Information Systems and Computing at Brunel University.



The system doctors