

A person's silhouette is visible on the left, looking at a laptop screen. The screen displays a smiling woman in a polka-dot shirt, engaged in a video call. The background is a blurred office setting with bookshelves. The image has a blue and purple color scheme.

Be the Business mentoring

How businesses and individuals benefit from shared learning



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The benefits of mentoring to the individuals being mentored (mentees) are well-chronicled. Being able to learn from the wisdom of more experienced peers, for free, and apply that wisdom to our own organisations, is an opportunity few of us would turn down. But mentors too derive considerable individual and business benefits from mentoring – though this side of the equation is rarely discussed.

A recent report from Be the Business, an organisation established in 2017 to help drive productivity and innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), highlights the symbiotic nature of the mentoring relationship. The report found that Mentoring for Growth, Be the Business's flagship scheme, had delivered clear benefits to mentees, mentors and their respective organisations, since it was launched in April 2018. Mentees reported greater awareness of management and leadership practices and confidence in implementing them, as well as development of soft skills, including communication, teamwork and time management.

The associated benefits to their companies include improved structures, clearer vision,

new marketing strategies, more effective staff retention strategies, and – even in the early days – productivity gains.

But the benefits to mentors are equally significant, and include personal development (particularly around soft skills), a wider network, greater confidence, satisfaction from ‘giving something back’, and contributing to their employers' reputation with stakeholders. They are also more aware of the ecosystem in which they and SMEs operate: the health of big companies depends on the health of their smaller suppliers.

Indeed, many mentors are surprised at just how much they are learning from their mentees – but given that mentees, though in smaller organisations, are typically in more senior roles than their mentors, ‘reverse mentoring’ can be an unanticipated benefit to the mentor. For example, as well as gaining valuable insight into the executive decision-making process and pressures of running a small company, mentors have also learned about innovative marketing approaches and crisis management techniques, and have been reminded of the importance of personal relationships with staff.

Many mentors have been inspired by the creativity forced on small businesses because of having to operate within tight margins and respond to issues quickly. This has encouraged some mentors to push for quicker change in their own organisation, and given them a better understanding of the challenges their suppliers face. Mentors have described their mentees as ‘exemplary’, ‘impressive’ and ‘inspirational’.

Mentors say that because mentoring forces them to reflect on their own experiences in order to help their mentees, it validates that experience, inspiring some to pursue non-executive roles. And because most mentors in the Mentoring for Growth scheme have previously mentored more junior colleagues in their own organisation, the scheme is an opportunity to hone their mentoring skills. They have learned to be hands-off and let the mentee set the pace, and to practise ‘active listening’.

Some admit that simply being able to talk to different people about different things feels like a breath of fresh air.

The need for this kind of mentoring support was thrown into sharp relief by research conducted in 2015, which found that poor management and leadership capabilities in SMEs were largely to blame for Britain’s much lamented ‘productivity gap’. Since the global financial crisis in 2008, UK productivity has continued to lag behind that of its OECD peers. SMEs (businesses with fewer than 250 employees) account for three-fifths of employment and around half the turnover of private-sector companies in the UK.

But despite being widely acknowledged as ‘the engine of the economy’, the research revealed that many SMEs are poor at adopting best management practice, too few managers think long term about talent, there is too little innovation, and the focus is on short-term success – or even, as we are seeing in the current Covid climate, survival – rather than long-term value creation.



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The 2015 report, *How Good Is Your Business Really?*, was produced by the Productivity Leadership Group (PLG) in response to a request by George Osborne (the then Chancellor) to Sir Charlie Mayfield, former chairman of John Lewis Partnership, to dig deeper into Britain's 'productivity problem'. The report estimated that improving the 'long tail' of less productive businesses could create over £130 billion in economic value every year, and called for a business-led response.

To this end, Be the Business was launched in 2017, led by Sir Charlie and chief executive Tony Danker, with funding and support from the UK government and some of Britain's leading companies, including GSK, Siemens, Amazon, BAE Systems, McKinsey & Co and Accenture. Its aim was to boost the productivity of the UK's SMEs through a series of programmes and activities – including Mentoring for Growth, which connects owners and key decision-makers in SMEs with business leaders from top-tier companies whose experience best matches the SMEs' particular needs.

Joanna Swash is one such business leader. She is CEO of Moneypenny, the world's leading outsourced communications provider, delivering telephone answering, Live Chat and outsourced switchboard services for hundreds of thousands of clients across the UK and US. She began mentoring Anton Hanley, CEO of TLA, an online lead generation company for the automotive industry, at the beginning of lockdown in March.

Mentoring is in her DNA, says Swash. "If you are a leader or manager, really your everyday life is about mentoring – in the sense of creating an environment where people can thrive, where they feel safe and secure and able to develop. I don't have to put a 'mentoring hat' on to mentor Anton: it is who I am. If you help people step up, feel supported, and help them with tools and techniques, then you are a mentor."

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Nevertheless, Swash and six of her senior colleagues seized the opportunity to participate in the Mentoring for Growth scheme because they knew how much they would learn.

“We believed we would become better leaders because of the insights it would give us into other businesses and their problems,” she says. “The idea that a mentor simply imparts wisdom is outdated and arrogant. As a business leader you have to be authentic and humble and, because the world changes so fast, constantly prepared to learn. It is also very important for us, as a business-to-business organisation, to understand other businesses and the challenges they face.”

Hanley, who established his business 18 years ago, has grown it into the biggest new-car-lead generation business in the UK – in large part by his desire to learn from others who have trodden a similar path. He explains: “A CEO is always up against challenges and, if you are ambitious and constantly pushing the boundaries, as I am, particularly so. We are facing challenges around taking the business international, and getting the right culture, systems, objectives and management and organisational charts, and Joanna has faced a similar set of challenges – and overcome them.”

Mentoring for Growth has a deceptively simple ‘soft matching’ process, and the mentor and mentee matched this way test out how productive the relationship will be – in terms of both chemistry and expertise – in an initial phone call. Hanley and Swash clicked immediately in an initial mutual fact-finding session: “We quickly established we were similar in terms of ambition, resilience, and our commitment to learn and develop, and exploit the potential

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of our respective businesses,” says Hanley. “The clear alignment of values helps to generate the mutual respect and trust that is key to a strong mentoring relationship.”

After the first session, the pair conducted fortnightly Microsoft Teams sessions, which, after a few weeks, became monthly. “Ideally, we would have met face to face, at least initially – not least to see each other’s offices,” says Hanley. “Lockdown conspired against that. But online has worked fantastically – and it’s very efficient, because we’ve wasted no time commuting.”



Nevertheless, conscious of how valuable Swash's time is, he is at pains to keep the sessions focused and contained – they typically last 45 minutes to an hour, and he provides an agenda of issues he wants to discuss in advance. “It's not like talking to a consultant or a non-executive, who you are paying,” he points out.

Hanley has been so inspired by the mentoring relationship that he's taken on a mentee himself. “It can be easier to give advice to others than to yourself, and in advising others it helps you understand your own challenges in an unemotional and objective manner,” he says.

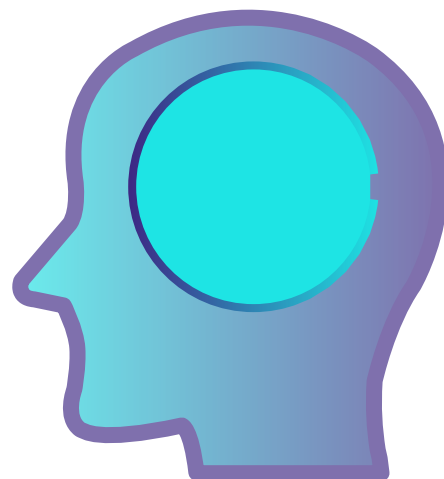
Swash agrees: “Sharing my experiences can feel therapeutic – and can reinforce my gut instinct about decisions I've made,” she says. “I'm very honest about my mistakes, though – and that can provide some of the biggest learning for a mentee – and I'm very comfortable admitting I don't know the answer to something and asking Anton what he thinks. Anton is very intelligent, and responds to what I tell him about how I have tackled things with insights of his own. That whole analytical, reflective approach benefits us both.”

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Swash believes that mentoring online – often from home, where many people continue to work – actually adds to the authenticity of the mentoring relationship: “When people can see you in your natural habitat, I think it adds to the sense of trust that you really need for the relationship to be effective.”

Swash quickly came to regard Hanley as “part of [her] network”, rather than simply a mentee, and Hanley feels the same: “I believe we will maintain a relationship beyond the end of the MfG programme,” he says.

Keith Broom is group finance director of Suttons, a £200m turnover, 60-year-old family bulk-logistics business, with offices around the world. He's always enjoyed mentoring more junior colleagues, many of whom have gone on to become finance directors elsewhere. “It's rewarding to see the progress they've made, and they still ring me up and discuss issues,” he says. Every graduate trainee in Suttons has a board-level mentor, as do people who move into senior positions: for example, Broom recently mentored the operations manager for six months when she became regional director, with new commercial responsibility.



After 25 years' experience as a finance director, Broom anticipates that within the next three years he will stop working full time and pursue a portfolio career. In addition to the personal satisfaction he derives from helping to develop people, he saw the opportunity to mentor through the Mentoring for Growth scheme as a way to hone his skills in preparation for taking on non-executive roles.

He agreed to mentor a young woman working in an entrepreneurial business that is transitioning to a more corporate approach as part of the next stage of its development. The founders have brought in an outside CEO to manage the transition. The CEO recognised that although the woman had long been a lynchpin of the business, the role she had been doing risked disappearing, and he offered her some options for potential new roles in the company – and the support of a mentor through Mentoring for Growth.

“My role here is very much about personal development: my early conversations with her were about helping her work out what

was best for her,” says Broom. He helped her make the decision to take on a company secretary/compliance role within the business, an area that needs strengthening, and then advised her to build her skill set and marketability by getting some relevant professional qualifications. For him, mentoring is very much about “teaching someone to fish, rather than fishing for them,” he says.

But he too has learned a lot through this experience. “I knew I needed to work on ‘active listening’,” he admits. “I’m in a senior position in my business and I set the agenda and drive direction. In a mentoring role you have to let the mentee do that, because the relationship has to deliver what they want, not what you want. Their challenge might well be different from the way you perceive it, but you have to help them work that out – and ensure you are on ‘receive’ as well as ‘transmit’.”

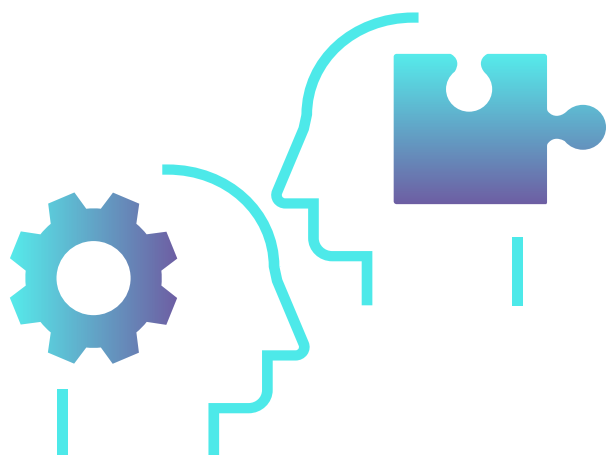


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Personal development has also been the focus of Nick Rubega's mentoring relationship through Mentoring for Growth. Accenture's Technology for Operations lead for Europe, Rubega spent the first 15 years of his career as an army officer, and coaching and mentoring his team has always come naturally to him.

He immediately accepted the offer to be involved in this scheme. "It's about giving back, it breaks up the day job, and a core value of our business is stewardship, so helping other people in their careers is one way we can demonstrate that," he explains.

Rubega is mentoring Denise Baurmann, the MD of Fairmont Residential, a group of care homes that look after autistic adults (see box, opposite). "I like talking to people outside our business in different organisations – and I know my colleagues who also mentor feel the same way," says Rubega. "It's a way of finding out about different sectors, and drawing them into your network, but on a personal level, it is also really nice to feel valued. There is a strong feelgood factor to mentoring."



SMEs: immediate results

Denise Baurmann, managing director of Fairmont Residential, a group of care homes for adults with autism, was keen to take up the opportunity of mentoring support from the Mentoring for Growth scheme. "We are a small company, with limited scope for in-house specialist expertise, and we had been stretched, in particular, with our IT infrastructure," she explains. "People were very keen to sell us a package, but we valued some advice as to the best approach to take."

Her first conversation with Accenture's Nick Rubega, via Zoom, was a scoping exercise, but that in itself led to Rubega setting up a full-morning remote technology workshop for Fairmont's management team, delivered by experts from Accenture, designed to identify the pain points with Fairmont's existing technology system and the best way to tackle them.

But when Rubega chatted through his own background, including his leadership roles in the army, Baurmann realised he may be able to help her on another front too. She explains how difficult it is to find and retain excellent managers in care homes, and says she was so mindful of losing good people that she was cautious about having difficult conversations with them.

"Nick's advice was excellent," she says. "He described the conversations I needed to have as 'fierce conversations' and sent me a pack of slides to help me. I put those into practice immediately: the next time I was unhappy about the way someone had interacted or conducted themselves in a meeting, I gave them candid real-time feedback. People responded very well, and I realised that a lot of my fears had been unfounded."

Her people management skills improved almost overnight, she says. "I approached the conversations in a positive and confident manner, and I found that people actually appreciated the feedback. In some cases I am coaching staff to manage external meetings more effectively."

She concludes: "Nick was very generous with his time – each session lasted about 1.5 hours – and in just two or three sessions I got tangible help on two big issues that had been holding us back. It's been really positive."

Amazon has an extensive and well-developed programme of initiatives to support the small businesses that make up its supply chain, and mentoring through Mentoring for Growth is just one example. But when Sachin Jogia, general manager for Alexa Smart Home International, got involved with the scheme, it was the first time he had mentored anyone outside the company. He mentors people on the advertising operations, adtech and Alexa side of Amazon, and he himself is mentored by Doug Gurr, UK country manager. “I’d asked Doug what I could do to ‘give back’, and this scheme provides an opportunity for us to scale out what we do here for the benefit of the broader community,” says Jogia.

His mentee is Richard Wilde, managing director of Liverpool-based Milexa Group, a wallpaper and flooring design company that he founded 10 years ago. Wilde wanted support in scaling the business and managing a growing team.

“Even in our first half-hour phone call I gave him some homework,” says Jogia. “I asked him to think about specific days he most enjoyed at work over the past few years, and why. It’s a way of teasing out from a mentee what they want to achieve and the extent to which their interests are aligned with their career or company aspirations.”

Talking through where Wilde felt he needed help, and where he didn’t even realise he needed help, led to “some good actions,” says Jogia. He reports that Wilde is grateful for his help – “it’s enabled him to talk to his team about the elements of longer-term success” – but the experience has also been beneficial to Jogia himself. “It made me realise how transferable tools, techniques and ways of thinking at Amazon, actually are,” he says. “It has shown me that

it is possible to go into something you have no context for – I knew nothing about Richard’s industry, let alone his business – and have a tangible impact.”

This inspired him to take on his first non-executive role – chairman of the technology advisory group at the British Heart Foundation.

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Jogia spends several hours a month on his mentorships – he currently has six mentees, both inside and outside the company. “You have to fully prepare for each session, and think about the problems leaders face and how to tackle them. As well as supporting SMEs it helps to nurture leaders – both mentors and mentees,” he says. “Mentoring is time well invested.”

So far, over 600 mentoring relationships have developed through the Mentoring for Growth scheme. Judging by the results so far, the benefits go far beyond the primary objective of improving the management and decision-making capabilities of SMEs.

Clearly, big companies don’t have all the answers, and participants in the scheme talk about mentoring as ‘a mutual learning experience’. The more senior mentors get involved, the greater the potential benefits to UK business as a whole. As Accenture’s Rubega says: “It would be arrogant of any of us to suggest we have nothing to learn: none of us is the finished article.”



Rapid Response Mentoring

Small businesses have been hit hard by the Covid crisis, and in response Be the Business created Rapid Response Mentoring, a concentrated 12-week programme designed to help SMEs through the critical months of the lockdown and its aftermath. Mentors have provided a sounding board for difficult decisions, and supported the development of strategies for survival, recovery and beyond.

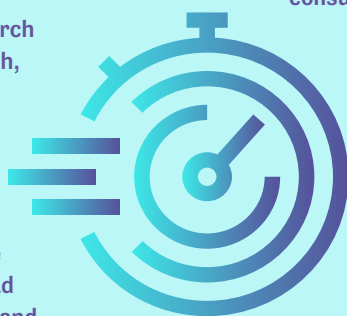
CGA Strategy is a data, research and insight consultancy, which, before Covid, had grown to around 150 people since it was founded in 1992. CGA works across the globe from its headquarters in Manchester and offices in the US. The pandemic meant it had to furlough some employees, and work out how to facilitate remote working during lockdown. But keen not to put the brakes on its plans, it also wanted to find ways of translating some programmes it was already working on – including workforce development and retention, and cross-departmental communication – into a remote context. So when it approached Be the Business for some mentoring help, they suggested it might find the accelerated programme valuable.

Fiona Speakman, client director for the food and retail team at CGA, says that all the ‘pre-work’, in terms of what she wanted to get from mentoring, and the matching process, was handled quickly and efficiently by Be the Business, allowing her and her mentor, Sarah-Jane Penman, business improvement manager at BAE Systems, to launch straight into the relationship without any preamble.

Speakman was looking for personal development as well as organisational support, and Penman has helped on both counts. “Sarah recommended books to read, or formats for documents, as well as process frameworks she has adopted and adapted in her own business that we could use here,” she explains.

“For example, BAE Systems has a staff consultative committee to facilitate cross-departmental communications, with members elected from every part of the business. At BAE they include union reps, but we can adopt the principle of it at CGA. It would give us early insights on what staff are thinking, rather than waiting for any concerns to get to a point where issues are difficult to address. I’ve raised that with my peers on the senior leadership team to see if they think it would be a good idea to implement.” ▶

“Mentors have provided a sounding board for difficult decisions, and supported the development of strategies for survival, recovery and beyond”



Rapid Response Mentoring cont'd

Penman got involved in the scheme after her boss asked her if she had free capacity during lockdown. "But I was naturally drawn to it because of my interests in people and shaping best practice – things that are part of my job," she explains. "I thought this would be a great way of discussing problems with different businesses, of different sizes, in different sectors, and to learn about the nuances."

Penman has found the process cathartic: "To an extent I do impart knowledge, but we also share experiences," she says. What's more, though she had had coaching training, and has mentored apprentices within her part of the BAE business, the Mentoring for Growth role has allowed her to hone her mentoring skills.

"In the early stages I know I talked too much," she admits. "I err on the side of positivity, and believe that nearly everything, to a greater or lesser extent, is fixable. But I can be over-enthusiastic in sharing the benefit of my experience, and I quickly realised that I needed to give Fiona time to reflect, and talk about her own experiences. I felt I needed to 'tell' all the time, but we shifted to a more inclusive, two-way dialogue, and I would probe her more."

Speakman concurs: "I've found the sessions increasingly enjoyable, and it began to feel like a more mutual process. I was surprised that Sarah seemed to be learning as well as me." Speakman drove the agenda from the outset, setting the

topic for each session in advance, which gave Penman the time to think about her response. Initially the focus was on talent retention, but as the relationship evolved "we realised we had opportunities to explore each other's experiences in different fields," says Penman.

One of the consequences is that Penman is doing things differently in her own business. "I realised how lucky you are working in a big company in having the infrastructure and support mechanisms around you that smaller companies are unlikely to have," she says. "But it works the other way too. We have to navigate all kinds of bureaucracy to get things done, which can be frustrating because it slows things down. Smaller companies are more fleet of foot and get quicker results."



This reminder that necessity can be the mother of invention prompted Penman to think about processes and tools she'd used in the past in BAE Systems, "and look at whether we could take them out and polish them up rather than trying to recreate the wheel every time we do something new," she says. "My job is very hectic, but this mentoring experience has given me the time to reflect on past experiences, which has been enormously helpful for me and our business."



ABOUT BE THE BUSINESS

Be the Business is a business-led and government supported independent charity created to close the UK's productivity gap. Chaired by Sir Charlie Mayfield, former chairman of the John Lewis Partnership, Be the Business is spearheading a business-led drive to help companies across the UK improve their performance.

Their range of free resources, mentoring programmes, leadership courses and peer learning groups help ambitious leaders build more competitive, successful, growing businesses.

ABOUT THE MENTORING FOR GROWTH PROGRAMME

Mentoring for Growth is a free small business support programme which matches experienced executives with ambitious SME leaders to help mentor and guide them to the next stage of business growth.

Since the onset of Covid-19, the programme has adapted to help small businesses meet the challenges brought by pandemic.

COULD YOU BECOME A BE THE BUSINESS MENTOR?

If you think you have the skills or experience to mentor a small business owner, Be the Business would love to hear from you.

If your company would like to join some of the UK's leading brands in developing their executive talent through mentoring, we can work with you to develop a programme tailored to your organisational needs.

For more information on the Mentoring for Growth Programme, please visit:
www.bethebusiness.com/mentoring-for-growth-2/

You can contact Be the Business at
mentoring@bethebusiness.com