



Think you know more than your boss? You just might

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Words like “blog,” “podcast” and “iTunes” are a part of the daily lexicon of the under-35 crowd. But to their senior counterparts in the workforce, they can be a foreign language.

Rather than posing a frustrating barrier, many tech-savvy young professionals are using this digital divide to their advantage. What better way to rub elbows with upper management than to turn a PowerPoint lesson into a power lunch?

This access is often vital to success in the workplace today, according to Deb Gore Ohrn, editor-in-chief of the Better Homes and Gardens Creative Collection in Des Moines, Iowa.

A self-proclaimed luddite, Gore Ohrn started asking her intern questions about iPods, blogs and the Web last year. She now oversees several blogs that tie back to her publications and hopes to introduce podcasts, streaming video and more interactive Web features to readers in the future.

“Technology is a great way to establish a relationship with senior managers -- a key to success since a young person’s career can be so positively affected by networking,” Gore Ohrn said. “This is the chance of a lifetime to collaborate with a senior person as a young professional and see how their analytical skills work.”

Her former intern, Tanner Stransky, is now an associate editor in Meredith’s New York office thanks in part to the glowing recommendation Ohrn was able to give him as a result of their mentorship.

Reverse Mentoring

This role reversal is being labeled “reverse mentoring.” Twenty-somethings are finding that when they introduce a boss to valuable career tools through reverse mentoring, they often gain a career counselor in return.

“Reverse mentoring is a fabulous tool for helping a manager or leader learn how younger people are using technology or experiencing a company, and for the younger person to see what is possible for their future,” says Dr. Lois Zachary, president of

Phoenix-based Leadership Development Services and author of *Creating a Mentoring Culture*.

Having studied various forms of mentoring, Zachary has found “reverse mentoring is most commonly seen in those companies that make the biggest investment in their employees and encourage an open flow of ideas between all levels of the organization.”

Although this concept isn’t new, the recent boom of personalized and integrated technologies sparked a resurgence of the trend.

“We’re going to see this mentoring format continue to grow,” says Paul Hagner, associate program director for the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. Hagner set up a formal reverse mentoring program at the University of Hartford five years ago that is still expanding and evolving.

Like many reverse-mentoring programs around the country, Hartford’s serves as a cost-effective way to improve a staff’s technology skills.

Michele Troy, an assistant professor of technology, learned how to infuse radio essays into her class curriculum with a student’s help through Hartford’s program. Students later told her that using technology caused them to put more effort and time into assignments.

“There’s no way I could have done this on my own,” Troy says.

Junior employees may not realize how grateful co-workers are when they receive help with technology snafus, or how much they can get in return for serving as a mentor for someone older. First-year teacher Lauren Murphy serves as an unofficial technology troubleshooter at her west suburban middle school where most of her colleagues are already tenured.

“I’m learning so much from everyone around me that I hadn’t even realized they were learning from me as well,” she says.

Murphy cautions against letting the new position of authority go to your head.

“Never let your ego get ahead of you,” she says. “You have to remember your place. Just because you’re the mentor in this situation, you don’t want to make someone uncomfortable and lose the opportunity to gain a mentor back.”

Stransky understood that thinking.

“I had to make sure I wasn’t overstepping my boundaries,” he says. “It can be an awkward position to teach someone who has 20 years of experience on you that you really respect. You have to be sure you approach it comfortably, but respectfully.”

Reverse-mentoring relationships traditionally focus on technology issues, especially in formal programs like Hartford's or the program at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. Wharton's program pairs the school's MBA students with business leaders from around the country. Although the program originally focused on expanding executives' understanding of technology, the program has since developed into a way for executives to learn about connecting with a younger generation.

"We have changed the program dramatically because mentoring itself is constantly evolving," says Dr. Jerry Wind, academic director and founder of the Wharton Fellow Program.

Reverse mentoring can also involve discussions providing insight into how younger employees like to be managed or how an organization and its policies are viewed by young people.

Reaping the benefits

It's easy when you're the junior person to feel like it's all give, but you need to realize this is a rare opportunity, Stransky said.

He tapped into Gore Ohrn's industry knowledge while leading her through the trials of technology. Both agree that reverse mentoring presents mutual benefits.

"She knew she could ask me for technology help any time because I started to go to her for career advice. I gained a lot of insight into the industry that I wouldn't have felt comfortable asking about otherwise," Stransky said.

Zachary advised that young people "recognize that reverse mentoring relationships are a huge learning opportunity. The mentee has knowledge that can contribute to the mentor's own professional growth and success."

Murphy also found that reverse mentoring can be a win-win situation. She has helped other teachers learn everything from how to navigate the latest teaching software and minimize a window on the desktop, to what technology students will likely already understand and apply in the classroom.

In return, others willingly give her advice and share their teaching experiences.

"As a first year teacher at my school, I feel like I have a million questions for the other teachers every day. Being in the know about something makes me feel important, like I'm paying them back for the advice they give me," she said.

Reverse mentoring's highest hurdle, according to Wharton MBA graduate Chris Wilkerson, who helped set up his alma mater's formal program while a student, is making sure egos are checked at the door so that learning can take place.

“The biggest challenge in reverse mentoring is to get each party to admit and to recognize what they need to learn. Realize that you don’t know what you don’t know,” Wilkerson said.

Wilkerson added that it’s “challenging in our culture to be more knowledgeable than someone senior to you. You have to realize you’re not teaching down to someone younger, but also that you have the authority.”