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HRIA's virtual mentorship program eliminates geographical boundaries

320 members involved enjoy flexibility, sharing experiences

Once a month, Stephanie Plante, an HR generalist at Halliburton in Clairmont, Alta., sits down at her home computer, logs on to Skype and, after about one hour, leaves with answers to her most prevalent HR questions.

Plante is a member of the Human Resources Institute of Alberta's (HRIA's) virtual mentorship program. Her mentor lives in Calgary — seven hours away — and through Skype they are able to foster a mentor-protégé relationship.

“I live in a community of about 50,000 people so there's not a lot of HR professionals in our neck of the woods,” said Plante. “Luckily, for me, I can still be a part of this program and not feel left out.”

The HRIA's mentorship program was launched in mid-November 2010 and has 320 members with 120 mentor-protégé relationships. Through online software Mentor Scout, members upload a personal profile, answer a series of questions and are appropriately matched to either a mentor or a protégé, said Nora Molina, executive director at HRIA.

“Think eHarmony,” said Molina, citing a popular online dating service. “That's essentially what the program does. It matches people's interests and allows you to determine how you want to connect, whether it's face-to-face, (online) chat or Skype.”

In May 2010, after extensive interest from members, HRIA organized a committee of 12 association members to look at the various options for a mentorship program, said Molina. The committee first considered a traditional face-to-face program but decided to look around at other options so they could accommodate their 5,000 membership base across the province, she said.

“We really saw an opportunity for us to deliver a program that had no geographic boundaries — something people could take part in that didn't matter where they lived,” said Molina. “We're seeing a pretty significant number of rural members signing up for this.”

The goal of the program is to help link established human resources professionals with students, emerging HR practitioners and HR professionals looking to transition into new fields of interest, she said.

Mentors and protégés each sign mentorship agreements outlining their time commitment and expectations from the program, which both parties agree upon. They can decide how often they will meet, in what format (such as Skype, telephone or in person), the minimum and maximum length of the meetings and the learning experience expected, said Molina.

Plante decided to seek a mentor through the program in hopes of “learning the ropes” from someone who had been in the business longer than she had, she said. Plante's mentor has given her lots of advice to date, she said, such as how to handle work-life balance, but the most memorable advice was about how she could become a strategic business partner.

“She said, ‘Invite yourself to meetings, tell them you're going to be there and learn the financials,’” said Plante. “It changes the way I look at things. Now I look at what challenges my business is facing

and how I can help them with that instead of being looked at as the person that processes the paperwork.”

The protégés can benefit greatly from the program by connecting to senior people with more experience in HR, but there are many advantages for mentors too, said Molina.

“There’s great rewards in sharing your knowledge and experience with others,” she said. “Supporting protégé development, sharing insight, providing feedback — those are important roles that the mentor can play in encouraging the protégé and watching their career grow.”

Michèle Luit, president of Workplace Solutions consulting firm in Cochrane, Alta., has signed up as a mentor for the program. She has three protégés — one who lives close enough to meet in person and the others whom she communicates with online. As someone with previous mentoring experience at other organizations, Luit was eager to get involved again, she said.

“There’s a real opportunity to stay in touch with the energy that exists within the discipline... to learn what people need from us, to become better listeners and to be able to extend support to someone else to build a bridge from where they are today and where they want to be tomorrow,” she said.

Luit guides her protégés through many different issues, including helping one protégé succeed in her first career in HR and assisting another to handle unresolved conflict within her own HR department.

As a self-employed consultant, the biggest benefit of the program is staying up to date on issues in the field, said Luit.

“It gives me greater insight in terms of what’s happening with the HR community today,” she said. “I find it doesn’t matter what type of context we operate in... our needs and wants as HR practitioners are fairly consistent and it gives me the opportunity to take those learnings and share them with others.”

HRIA suggests protégés stay in that role for one year and then they are encouraged to become mentors themselves.

“I will have the opportunity to pass on the gift of mentoring to somebody else,” said Plante. “I know it’s a big time investment and me, being the protégé, I’m gung-ho and really anxious and I know it’s additional time and effort for mentors, so I hope to be able to pass that on some day.”

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