



SOME CORPORATE COUNSEL

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July 28, 2008 –

When Megan Thompson took a job at Xerox two years ago, she was looking for guidance - and not from just anyone.

"As a woman in a predominantly male field, I felt it was important to connect with other women at the company," says the 24-year-old engineer.

She found what she was looking for through the Women's Alliance, a caucus group at Xerox with more than 800 members, which has a mentoring program that connected Thompson with a veteran colleague, with whom she discusses everything from career advancement to work/life balance issues.

"She's been able to provide me with an insight and an understanding into the business that I wouldn't be able to obtain on my own," says Thompson.

An ever-growing number of junior employees are getting a similar leg up, through a rising number of corporate programs designed to pair female, minority or gay or lesbian employees with similar mentors. Beth Carvin of Nobscot Corporation, which offers software that allows employees to find a suitable mentor by filling out an online profile, says she's fielding "a huge demand for mentoring programs with midsize and large organizations."

Often, mentors and the people they help are connected, as in Thompson's case, through affinity groups or other networks that bring together employees at a company who share a common traits such as ethnic heritage, sexual orientation or religious background. Sometimes the relationships are informal, created through group meetings or other casual contact, other times they operate through company channels, and involve a set number of hours and a prescribed agenda.

Either way, companies are increasingly promoting such relationships as part of an effort to retain workers, particularly those who might feel that they're facing extra hurdles in a corporate environment.

"Most employees want two things: someone to emulate and someone to inspire them," says Ari Kaplan, author of "The Opportunity Maker: Strategies for Inspiring Your Legal Career Through Creative Networking and Business Development."

"Seeing someone like you that has achieved a certain level of success can be truly inspiring."

"It does make a difference," agrees Kristen Johnson, 49, a director in the advisory practice of the accounting giant KPMG, who mentors younger workers through the firm's PRIDE network. "Getting advice and talking through how to handle certain situations is easier when you know the other person understands what it's like to be you."

At the accounting firm Deloitte, which offers a range of mentoring programs, more than 90 percent of employees who've been paired up with mentors have reported that it had a positive impact on their careers, says Barbara Adachi, the managing partner for Deloitte's Women's Initiative.

"Mentoring is really a key issue for women," she says, noting that a mentor can offer advice "not only around career advancement, but also around issues of balance. We all have responsibilities at home, and in addition to a career role model, we can use a life-work role model as well."

At IBM, company leaders take steps to encourage the development of mentoring relationships through the firm's eight diversity networks, speaking to the groups "about what mentoring is all about, and how to establish a relationship with a mentor," says Mary Ann Bopp, who manages the company's mentoring programs.

Communications manager Vineeta Durani, 30, shares a membership in IBM's Asian Diversity Network with Angela Sullivan, the mentor she hooked up with when she came to the firm three years ago.

"With Angela, I not only have a woman executive I can go to for advice, but also someone that immediately understands my background," says Durani. "She's guided me through everything from how to network with people and how to take advantage of those opportunities to learning about corporate strategy."

For her part, Sullivan believes she's reaped her own rewards from the relationship.

"I've enjoyed making a difference in her career, and I also get something out of it. It's nice to have someone I can relate to, but who also has a different perspective because we're in different points in our career."

For Maria Reed, an audit partner at KPMG, finding "people I can relate to" is the most important thing about

For Marisa Roel, an adult partner at KPMG, finding people I can relate to is the most important thing about the company's Hispanic/Latino Network, which she co-leads.

"Before I joined the program, I really didn't know any other Hispanics in the firm. Now I have a whole network of people across the country, and it's opened up so many doors for me both in and out of KPMG."

Not only has Roel benefited from being mentored by executives, but she's also taken on the role of mentor to younger Hispanic employees at the company.

"She obviously understands where I'm coming from, and the struggles that Latinos might encounter trying to balance work and family," says her charge, Oscar Londono, a 25-year-old senior associate. "And to just have someone on her level who's willing to listen and really show enthusiasm for my career has made a real impact."

It can also be helpful just to see someone above you who's succeeding, says Wendy Schwarz, 42, a partner at Reed Smith, who serves as a mentor through the law firm's Women's Career Advancement Initiative.

"One of the reasons women leave law firms in higher numbers than men is because they don't often see someone like them getting ahead," she says.

Although it's early in her career, Thompson of Xerox says she's already seen her mentorship pay dividends. She was recently tapped to join a panel on developing future leaders in the company, at the suggestion of her mentor, who was at the planning meeting.

"A lot of people know my name because of the Women's Alliance, so it's really helped me at the company," she says. "Not to mention that the advice I've been given has been invaluable."

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