One of the goals of many formal mentoring programmes is to bring the organisation to the point, where the majority of mentoring is carried out informally, without the need for substantial, structured support for Human Resources and elsewhere. The problem, in most cases, is that completely informal mentoring – where people come together without guidance and without clarity about the mentoring role – is a hit and miss affair. Not only is the quality of the relationships highly variable, but the pairings tend to exclude people who don’t fit the mould, by virtue of their gender, race, culture or some other differentiating factor.

The good news is that, in general, organisations, which have a strong and extensive formal mentoring process, seem also to develop many thriving, healthy and inclusive informal mentoring relationships. The key appears to be that people, who have experienced effective mentoring (as mentor or mentee) and who have been well-trained in the respective roles, are open to a wide range of developmental alliances. In particular, they appreciate the value of difference and stretch in a learning relationship and seek out challenging partnerships.

This is, it has to be admitted, an area, in which there has been no significant research, so the evidence is largely anecdotal. The nearest to a detailed study of the issue is work by the US academic Belle Rose Ragins, who concludes that relationship quality is the critical ingredient in both formal and informal mentoring.

So how can we ensure that informal mentoring relationships are high quality relationships? The very absence of structure, measurement and control makes it difficult to exert any influence on them. Our discussions with informal mentoring pairs and with HR professionals, who have experience of both formal and informal mentoring is that the key lies in creating an environment, where effective mentoring can flourish. Such an environment would contain some elements of structure, in the form of support available, but require no third party intervention in pairings. Rather, it would allow market forces to drive both the matching process and the quality control of the mentoring provided.
I am not aware of an organisation that has proactively developed such an environment, but the possibility of doing so is of manifest interest to a number of multinational companies – particularly those, which have employees scattered in small numbers in lots of locations. These organisations often find it difficult to arrange matches and control relationship quality within a formal programme.

The essential elements in establishing a positive climate for informal mentoring seem to include:

- An on-line registration and matching system, where people can seek and make their own pairings. The system needs to have very good guidance as to how to go about selecting an appropriate partner and, ideally, a resource, which prospective mentees can go to for personal advice.

- Sufficient, visible role models of good mentoring practice to demonstrate what quality mentoring looks and feels like and to provide a voluntary, informal advisory resource for mentors. If top management can be among those role models, it provides a very strong message to the organisation.

- A mixture of voluntary training resources. These might include a regular open training programme, run in-house or externally with a consortium of other organisations; an e-learning package (our own 12 module resource, *The Effective Mentor* will be available in early 2004) to run on PC or on-line; and a library of wider reading materials on mentoring and related disciplines. It may also be useful to provide an option for people, who have a strong interest in developing their mentoring skills, to take a certificate or degree course through one of the several providers now available.

- An understanding that the quality of mentoring rests to a considerable extent on the amount and relevance of the training both parties have received. While an informal process can’t insist that mentors and mentees are trained, the desire to have an effective relationship should drive both parties away from matching with someone, who is not sufficiently committed to be trained in the role.

- An opportunity for mentors (or developers in general) to meet informally as a mutual support and learning group through an on-line chat room and/ or self-organised gatherings. In this scenario, mentors may request some help from HR in arranging venues and perhaps finding external speakers on specific learning topics, but the impetus has to come from them. Some organisations already run “lunch and learn” events – in one case monthly – along these lines.

- Good practice “snippets”, sent monthly to all managers (or indeed all employees), on developmental behaviours, from both the learner and the developer perspectives. This is perhaps the closest to a formal arrangement the organisation may go. These short advisory bulletins (no more than a few hundred words each time) would be generated by HR, with the aim of stimulating awareness, discussion and incremental improvements in people’s behaviour to mentor and be mentored, coach and be coached and so on.
It should be obvious by now that all of these elements may also be useful in helping a formal mentoring programme to deliver results for both participants and the organisation. Our thinking increasingly is that the mentoring “package” that will give organisations greatest value is one that integrates both formal and informal mentoring, so that they become mutually supportive. Given the lack of experience of combined formal and informal approaches, there is some exciting learning to happen!