TINDER FOR MENTORS: EXAMINING THE PREVELANCE AND VALUE OF MENTORSHIP RELATIONSHIPS AMONGST AVALANCHE PROFESSIONALS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Anecdotally, mentorship has been referenced as playing a significant role in the avalanche industry in the US for years. However, this has never been explored in a quantitative way. In the winter of 2016, we surveyed the membership of the American Avalanche Association to dig deeper into this topic and see if mentorship is really as important as suggested. We received 498 responses; 281 members answered all the 28 questions. Utilizing the data from the completed surveys we conducted descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis of the open-ended answers to compile our results. 77% of respondents had been mentored and 23% had not; 64% had mentored others. Only 12 respondents were not interested in being mentored. Mentorship relationships occurred across all professional job categories. Professionals who had been mentored placed the highest value on mentorship as the best way to gain professional competency and, in addition acknowledged the importance of being part of a professional community, experience and continuing education. Professionals who had not been mentored placed the highest value on experience as a means to gaining competency followed by continuing education and mentoring. As both the mentor and mentee, mentorship relationships were rated as significantly important to workplace safety, field practices and decision-making. Only 67 respondents participated in structured workplace mentorship programs - more common for educators and ski patrollers than for forecasters and guides. Formal and informal mentorship in the avalanche industry supports workplace safety, risk management, and professional development. According to our results, most successful mentorship relationships are based on professional relevancy, personal connection, and are initiated by the mentor. Therefore, it is the responsibility of more experienced practitioners to take on the mentor role.

KEYWORDS: mentorship, avalanche professionals, workplace safety

1. INTRODUCTION

Mentorship is a practice used throughout a variety of workplaces. Tasks and objectives of mentoring vary in different professional settings, but there are commonalities across the disciplines. Mentorship can be defined as a developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced protégé or mentee (Kram 1985). It is used as a tool to foster good practices and to increase professional development through a collaboration where a more experienced person, mentor, passes on the knowledge and expertise onto a newer or less experienced person, mentee. The focus is on a long-term mutually beneficial relationship, different from teaching or coaching. Mentorship is often referenced as a crucial part of knowledge exchange and professional development in the avalanche industry. Employers frequently ask, "Who is your mentor?" Young professionals are told at the start of their careers to "Go find a mentor." The Mentorship Project was started 10 years ago by the American Avalanche Association: "The project's goals are to foster the transfer of information and inspiration from one generation to the next, and to help aspirants gain the appropriate skills, experience, and perspective needed to find a productive niche in the avalanche field." (Williamson, 2006). In 2006 Lynne Wolfe, editor of *The Avalanche Review* (TAR) asked the section representatives for the AAA to help gather career path suggestions from professionals in different aspects of avalanche work and set-up a loose network to connect potential mentors and mentees. *The Avalanche Review* issue 25.4 shared those findings and suggestions on mentorship (Wolfe, 2007). A few aspiring professionals utilized the network. In December 2015 issue of TAR (Wolfe 2015), many respected professionals shared their stories about their mentors and the importance of mentorship to the field.

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This anecdotal evidence of mentorship suggests it has played a significant role in the avalanche industry in the US for years. Why has this never been explored in a quantitative way? In winter of 2016 we surveyed the membership of the American Avalanche Association (AAA) to dig deeper into this topic and see if mentorship is really as important and prevalent as suggested. Specifically we were interested in the demographics of who is mentoring and being mentored and how these mentorship relationships are formed. We wanted to know who initiates these mentorship relationships, why they end, are they formal or informal, and what value is placed on mentorship relationships in the individual process for developing professional competencies relating to workplace safety.

2. METHODS

The sample for this study included the members of American Avalanche Association. Online survey was sent to the whole membership (approximately 1300) via email. We received 498 responses, but due to insufficient data, the final sample included 294 responses yielding a response rate of 34% of AAA Professional members (857 according to AAA membership database in August 2016).

Survey included 28 questions with variety of question types, i.e Likert scale, rankings and open ended questions. Survey method was approved by Alaska Pacific University Institutional Review Board. Data was collected in February-March 2016, and analyzed through August 2016 using descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis methods.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographics

Participating avalanche professionals represented the whole spectrum of ages, generations (Tbl.1) and work experience (Fig.1). The majority of respondents were 25 - 54 years, reflecting the common age of the work force, but the study was able to capture information even from the long retired professionals born before or during World War 2. The gender balance was strongly skewed with 172 males and only 28 females.

Tbl. 1: Age distribution & generational classification (Howe & Strauss, 2000) of survey respondents.

Age	*Count*	*Birth year*	*Generation*
25-34	57	1991-1982	Millennials
35-44	53	1981-1972	Generation X
45-54	45	1971-1962	
55-64	29	1961-1952	Baby boomers
65-74	13	1951 -1942	
75+	5	1941 -	Great Generation

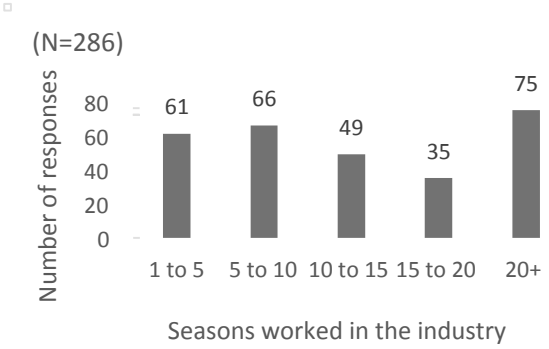

Fig. 1: Respondents' cumulative work experience in the avalanche work counted in seasons.

Respondents classified their work experience by seasons worked in professional setting. Majority of respondents had worked up to 10 seasons (n=127), but 75 respondents reported more than 20 seasons in this professional field (Fig. 1).

Avalanche professionals included their past and current job titles, Ski patroller, Educator, Forecaster, Guide or Other. Majority of respondents had worked in several different industry segments concurrently or prior to settling to their current job. Johnson, Latosuo & Johnston-Bloom (2016) looked at the geographical distribution of this data set in a separate report.

3.2 Prevalence of mentoring

Mentoring is indeed prevalent in the avalanche industry. Almost 80% of respondents (n=222) have mentored others or have been mentored by other professionals. Preliminary analysis of data reveals some common qualities of mentors and/or mentees. We looked at job titles, seasons of experience and gender (Tbl. 2). However, some of the

Tbl. 2. Job titles and experience (in seasons), of mentored & non-mentored avalanche professionals grouped by gender.

	Mentored		***Not mentored***	
Job title	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
Ski Patroller	**26**	5	14	0
Forecaster	24	1	4	0
Educator	22	**6**	13	4
Guide	13	3	5	1
Experience (seasons)	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
1 to 5	20	6	15	4
6 to 10	25	**8**	13	1
11 to 15	20	1	10	2
16 to 20	16	3	5	0
20 +	**42**	2	6	0

responses did not include all the data, for example 76 respondents did not identify their gender. While mentoring in the avalanche world is represented by all shapes and forms, male ski patroller who has been in his job longer than 20 seasons constitutes the most typical professional who has been involved in mentoring according to our sample.

3.3 Value of mentoring

We asked both the respondents who had been mentored (n= 222) and the group that had not been mentored (n=61) an open-ended question:

What are the best ways for an individual to gain workplace competency in the avalanche industry?

When ranking the responses from the group that had been mentored, the majority answered that mentorship was the best way to gain professional competency. The next best method was being part of a professional community, followed by experience, then continuing education/training with an emphasis on intellectual curiosity, and finally communication and feedback. It is significant that individuals who had been mentored placed the highest value on mentorship as the best way to to gain professional competency.
Example responses:

"Mentorship, direct experience and feedback, immersion in a good professional organization."

"Mentoring relationships, combined with continued professional development and pursuit of lifelong learning."

The individuals who started the survey by saying they were not mentored were directed to the same question. Most replied that experience was the best way to gain professional competency, followed by continuing education with intellectual curiosity, then mentorship and then lastly supervision with feedback. For individuals who had not been mentored, mentorship still came up as one of the best ways to gain professional competency but did not hold the same weight as for the group that had been mentored. Many of these individuals checked that they would like to be mentored if the opportunity arose. Example responses:

"Be part of a professional organization, seek out learning opportunities and continued professional development, pursue personal trips/experiences un-mentored, and seek feedback from peers and mentors"

"*Formal training, experience and mentorship - all three are needed to contribute to solid knowledge, wide experience and sound decision making."*

Respondents who had been mentored were asked to look more closely into the specifics of competency and workplace safety with the question, "How important has being mentored been in your individual process for developing the following professional competencies?"

Workplace safety, terrain capability, route finding decisions, mitigation practices, snowpack analysis, field risk management, personnel management in avalanche terrain, developing intuition, dealing with uncertainty, validating field experiences, understanding the limitations of what you know, guidance for anomalies, institutional knowledge and history, general workplace practices and work culture, networking with other professionals, career paths and professional growth, staying current with new technology/protocols/science.

For each of these competencies respondents ranked mentorship from most important to not important in their individual process of development. The responses to this overwhelmingly showed mentorship was valued in the development of all these professional competencies. Nothing stood out as "not important."

In the analysis topics were clustered into three overarching categories:
Workplace safety: *Workplace safety, terrain capability, route finding decisions, mitigation practices, snowpack analysis, field risk management, personnel management in avalanche terrain*,
Decision-making: *Developing intuition, dealing with uncertainty, validating field experiences, understanding the limitations of what you know, guidance for anomalies,*
Workplace Practices and Culture: *Institutional knowledge and history, general workplace practices and work culture, networking with other professionals, career paths and professional growth, staying current with new technology/protocols/science.*

The respondents unanimously ranked mentorship very important or important for everything in the Workplace Safety category. In the Decision-making category, the highest number of respondents marked as most important --*understanding the limitations of what you know*. In the Workplace Practices and Culture category mentorship was ranked most important for developing *institutional knowledge and history.*

3.4 Mentoring practices

Even though mentoring takes time and effort, 165 respondents had mentored others professionally. 114 of the respondents are engaged in an ongoing mentoring relationship, while 51 of mentoring relationships had ended.

Mentorship was most often initiated by mentor, while mentees were initiators in 26% of the cases (Fig. 3). This is an important result, since it makes us wonder about the efficacy of the often-used directive "Find a mentor". Only fourteen mentoring relationships were started by workplace program. Interestingly, twelve respondents explained that the relationship started organically and it was difficult to choose or remember how it began. In two cases, both mentor and mentee were mentioned as mutually responsible for the initiation of the relationship.

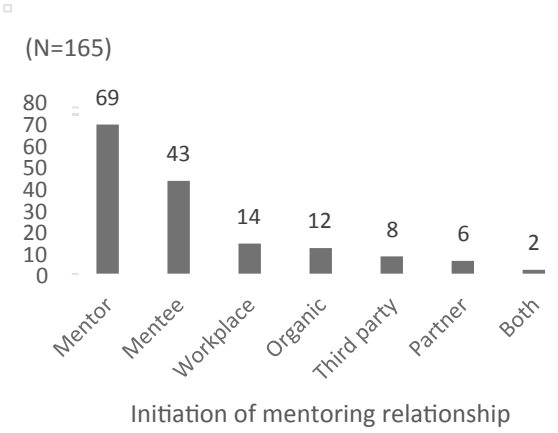

Fig. 2: Initiation of mentorship relationships among respondents. Most commonly mentor initiates the relationship. Workplace program was mentioned in only 14 responses.

The most important contributing factor (Tbl. 3) to the continuation of mentoring relationship is professional relevancy (n=132). Personal connection and good communication are also ranked important by the majority of respondents. Most common reasons for the termination of mentoring were relocation to another region or change of job. Other natural reasons were retirement and death. Only four respondents had ended relationship due to negative reasons, these included poor alignment of personalities and feelings of being used.

Professional relevancy makes relationships last, while relocation & job changes ends mentoring.

Tbl. 3. Contributing and terminating factors of mentorship relationships.

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Contributing Factors	*Percentage of responses mentioning factor*
Professionally relevant	82%
Personal connection	68%
Good communication	62%
Mutually beneficial	57%

Termination Factors	*Percentage of responses mentioning factor*
Relocation	47%
Job change	43%
Retirement	19%
Death	16%

In our study, ski patrollers and educators engaged in mentoring role more frequently than forecasters and guides (Fig.3), but this correlates with the ratio of practitioners in the industry; there are more ski patrollers and educators in the mix than forecasters and guides.

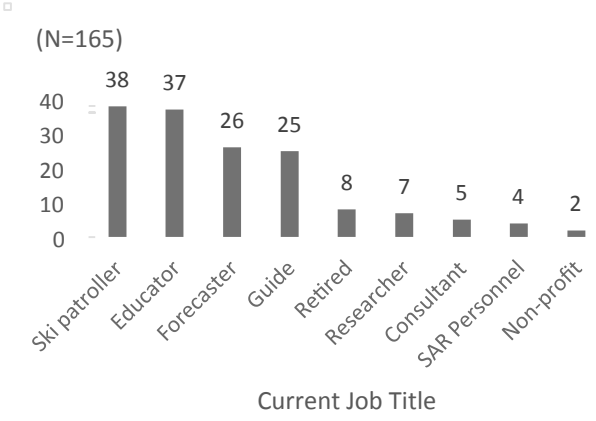

Fig. 3: Number of professionals involved with mentoring within different industry segments. Ski patrollers and educators mentor more.

3.5. Structured workplace mentoring

Majority of workplaces in the avalanche industry do not have structured mentorship programs; only sixty-seven respondents participate in programs that are organized by the employer. This is most common for educators (n=18) and ski patrollers (n=16) followed by forecasters (n=12) and guides (n=10). Both American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) and National Ski Patrol (NSP) instructor training program offer structured mentoring for educators. American Mountain Guide Association also promotes mentoring among its membership.

The effectiveness of structured workplace mentoring programs was ranked very high in creating workplace culture, bringing new employees up to speed and teaching risk management practices (Fig. 4). Three responses rated programs ineffective in matching personalities well or teaching new employees.

We were also curious to learn how often employers incorporate information about mentorship when searching for new employees. Twenty-seven respondents ask job candidates about mentoring during hiring interviews. Mentoring history can gauge potential hire's experience & knowledge base, commitment within the industry and attitude towards learning and receiving feedback. Some survey comments included:
"*Reveals commitment, depth and breadth of knowledge and skills, and biases*."

"Are they humble enough to know they don't know everything, and humble enough to learn?"

"Mentorship implies a level of professionalism, seeking self-improvement, a willingness to accept constructive criticism in order to become better."

On another interesting note, one could argue that asking about mentorship can bring up the conflict between exclusion and equal opportunity. Asking about mentoring could be viewed as promotion of "good old boys club".

"Because if I have not drank beer with their mentor, or do not have a close friend who endorses their mentor, my thought would be the potential "candidate" has not been around the industry long enough"

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our results confirmed that mentorship is as prevalent in the US avalanche industry as anecdotally

suggested. 77% of respondents had been mentored and 23% had not; 64% had mentored others. Only 12 respondents were not interested in being mentored. Mentorship occurs in all sectors of the industry, across multiple generations. The majority of mentorship relationships are informal. They lean on good personality match, effective communication and mutual relevancy, and often sprout very organically. These fundamental factors can be lacking in structured mentoring programs. However, it was reported that both formal and informal mentorship in the avalanche industry support workplace safety, risk management, and professional development. Many mentorship relationships are ongoing, lasting over many years.

According to our results, most successful mentorship relationships are based on professional relevancy, personal connection, and are initiated by the mentor. This was one of most significant findings. It is the responsibility of more experienced practitioners to take on the mentor role to have this legacy of mentorship continue. Mentorship is prevalent and it is valued. Individuals who have been mentored think that mentorship is the best way to gain professional competency specifically as it relates to workplace safety and understanding the limitations of what you know. This result stands out in an industry that operates with known risk and uncertainty. Many of the individuals who were not mentored stated interest in being mentored if given opportunity.

There are some recognized limitations to this study, foremost self-reporting bias. With the subject matter mentorship professionals who have been mentors or mentored others are more likely to answer the survey in the first place. The survey went to the entire AAA membership, not just professional members, so the sample of professionals may be compromised with some outlier subscribers. The survey could have been more straightforward in some of its response parameters placing value on mentorship. This could have made it easier to fill out and analyze.

We have now a data set of mentor demographics including generations, gender and geographical distribution. We also gathered specific names of mentors and mentees. Our plan for a future study is to interview mentor/mentee pairs from different generations and ask more in depth questions about how these relationships were initiated and sustained. We will also collect the individuals' perspectives on the value of mentorship in the industry. Within our data set there are a few lines of three generations of mentorship with influential names in the avalanche industry at the top of the "family tree." This prompts the question if you were mentored are you more likely to become a mentor?

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