

Thinking Space No.30

Mentoring for employment seekers

Dunja Buchhaupt, Jörg Schoolmann KIZ Sinnova, August 2020

Mentoring for employment seekers is a powerful tool to help NEETs to discover their own values and interests in life. It can guide them through the job application process and support them in taking the responsibilities for their own life and actions.

Modern mentoring is based on the original concept of apprenticeship, in which an older, more experienced individual passes on expertise to another individual with less experience. A trustful relationship between a mentor and his mentee is a powerful and productive way of learning. For most people knowledge is abstract when the learning process is solely based on passive absorption and not active participation and self-reflection. A great mentor knows how to challenge his mentee regarding their actions, ways of thinking and mind-set. Moreover, a great mentor is able to provide immediate feedback and ask the right questions, so that the mentee can quickly advance on a personal and on a professional level.

Using mentoring for employment seekers is a powerful tool to strengthen their self-confidence, self-reflection but also self-responsibility and a better understanding which jobs match their skills and interests. As in any human relationship, however, it is not easy to match a mentor with a mentee and it requires quite some considerations. Both sides must have the same attitude and expectation of the mentoring relationship. Also, a respectful relationship needs preparation ahead of its start, both sides need training.

An important prerequisite for participating as a job-seeking mentee is their own motivation to integrate in the job market. Only dedicated candidates should be matched with mentors. Here are some potential indicators for NEETs that clearly show an interest in finding a job:

- The candidate **has already worked on the CV**
- The candidate **has already started to apply** for jobs/ internships

It is not necessary that mentees have the perfect CV at hand, but it must be clear that they have a genuine interest to use the help of a mentor to dig deeper and go further. If mentees are open to listen, talk and reflect on ideas, the work of a mentor will be more efficient and satisfactory for both sides.

A great mentor should be able to listen carefully and ask the right questions. Moreover, a great mentor is able to use a **transformational mentoring** approach and lead through guidance rather than leadership. This means that the mentor is not interested in finding quick solutions for the mentee or even expects something specific from the mentee in return (e.g. “If the mentee is not able to find a job within the next three months then I won’t be the mentor anymore” or “If the mentee is not able to provide me new points of view then I won’t be the mentor anymore”). The mentors actively use a transformational mentoring approach, which means that they first focus on building a trustful relationship with their mentees. They are interested in getting to know the mentees’ values and passions but also their stories and backpacks to get a holistic picture of the person in front of them. The mentor takes time to build up the relationship and sets the focus on the personal development of the mentee. The mentor never tells the mentee what to do (e.g. “You need to apply

for at least 10 jobs per next week”) but tries to encourage the mentees to take actions and be responsible for their own life and decisions – whatever they might look like.

The outcomes of a job-seeking mentoring relationship are less “fact driven” than one might assume. A mentor should never focus on the goal to get the mentee a job or an internship. This is not the mentor’s responsibility and they are not in the position to push the mentee in any direction. Instead, the mentor should rather focus on teaching skills such as:

- **Self-confidence and self-awareness** (“What makes me happy?” or “What have I already achieved in my life?”)
- **New knowledge / skills** (“Which skills do I need to get the job I want?” or “What is something I still want to learn?”)
- **Greater resilience** (“Which tools can I use to relax or calm down?” or “Whom do I trust and whom can I call for advice in difficult times?”)
- **Dealing with criticism** (“How can I use criticism for myself (especially work-related criticism)?” or “Why is criticism actually something positive that helps me develop?”)
- **Communication skills** (“How to behave in a job interview?”, “How to write a formal e-mail?” but also “How can I have good discussions?”)
- **Coping with disappointments** (“What helps me to get something positive from a job cancellation?” or “How can I handle the answer *NO*?”)
- **Community engagement** (“How can I use my own skills and resources to give something back to my own community?”)

The biggest challenge for the mentors (and for people in general) is to accept the mentees exactly as they are without wanting to change the person. Under no circumstances should the mentors let the mentees feel that their own worth depends on the number of applications sent or job offers received. The mentor is a companion who patiently supports the mentees in discovering new job opportunities, interests or skills and helps them to take responsibility for their own (working) life.

Mentors for employment seekers continue supporting their mentees after a job offer. Some mentors wrongly believe that the mentoring relationship terminates with the mentee starting a job/internship/apprenticeship. According to our experience, most of the mentees still need support and encouragement of their mentors. Sometimes mentees find it difficult to handle criticism from their employers, have difficulties to have conversations or to connect with new colleagues. Many of them have learned to abandon the job as soon as challenges arise. Therefore, mentors should prepare themselves for the mentoring relationship “post- job- offer”. It is helpful to have a conversation with the mentees before they start the newly obtained position. The mentors can start to share their own experiences and concerns when starting a new job. This creates empathy and shows the mentee that it is okay to be nervous and insecure about the new challenge. Mentors can encourage their mentees to share their biggest fears and doubts regarding a new job. Both mentor and mentee can then work together on a strategy that will help the mentee to handle these kinds of situations adequately.

Some mentors for employment seekers also take the role as a facilitator for the mentee. This means that the mentor actively supports the mentees e.g. when they face troubles with the employer, the landlord or others. The role as a facilitator is based on a trustful mentoring relationship and requires the authorization of the mentee. The role as a facilitator can be used for certain periods in the relationship and does not need to be

permanent. In any case it depends on the willingness of the mentor to accept this role and the willingness of the mentee to accept the support.