NCWIT Mentoring-in-a-Box: Technical Women at Work
Mentoring Activities Guide

This guide addresses issues technical women face in the workplace, and also reflects best practices in career advancement and guidance. Select activities you and your protégée can do to help her increase her competence, vision, and success. Use activities as written or as a springboard for activities that suit your unique situation.

Activities are organized into four themes:

1. Mastering the Technical Workplace
2. Challenges for Women
3. Advancing in the Field
4. Communications and Networking

1. Mastering the Technical Workplace

Is the protégée new to the job or the company, or has she changed work assignments? Use these activities to build fundamental job skills and organizational awareness.

Explain “Unwritten Rules.” How often have you thought, “If only I’d known that back when”? Share unwritten rules about the office and workplace culture, such as:

- **Key stakeholders** - Sometimes the organization chart does not tell the whole story. Help your protégée know who key influencers are. Also identify the most productive staff, and staff who are advancing in their careers. Your protégée can learn from watching and interacting with these colleagues.

- **Language** - Help her understand insider jargon, especially the TLAs (Three-Letter-Acronyms) used to describe technology functions and products, and other important “companyspeak.” Identify individuals who comport themselves in a businesslike yet collegial and friendly manner. Your protégée can model her behavior on theirs.

- **Organizational Culture, values, and norms** - Point out and give pointers on preferred use of technology and software tools, dress code, events that “must” be attended, communication styles, and organizational values.

- **“Hot” Technology** - Help her identify the up-and-coming technology and tools on everyone’s mind (for example, social computing, robotics, Web 2.0, etc.) and point her to resources on getting up to speed on the technology.

- **Technology Projects** – Point out the unwritten hierarchy in technology projects. Help her identify and get associated with visible projects, such as projects that are strategically important to the organization.

- **Unspoken Resources** - Help her identify the available professional development and networking opportunities within and outside the company that managers may or may not have communicated, such as conferences, women’s networks, training paid for by the organization, or print resources.
Review the Job Description. A job description details essential work functions and basic job requirements. When you start your mentoring relationship, review the protégée’s job description and ask: What excites you most about this job? What do you feel good about? Where do you see room for growth? Set goals based on your discussion. Make sure recommendations you give the protégée align with the protégée’s job description and expectations of her supervisor.

Help your protégée evaluate proportionately where her efforts are going. Is she performing critical job tasks most of the time? Is she engaged in one type of activity more than she expected? If recalibration of effort or expectations appears to be in order, coach the protégée on how to approach these issues with her supervisor.

Tell Your Story. Use your own story as a parable when advising your protégée. When you reflect on your own career path, what lessons can you impart? Think about pivotal events that shaped your career: decisions you made, or purposeful actions you took. Talk about how you have dealt with disappointment. Let your protégée know your career didn’t just happen; you made it what it is.

Encourage Expert Advising. Advise your protégée to seek advice from others. Ask her who seems to have mastery over a particular skill, and coach her in “the ask.” She might approach a colleague and say: When we were working on the xyz project, I noticed you really used block timing effectively. I think you could help me learn block timing. I propose we meet (this long) (this often) for (this duration). Help her rehearse to get comfortable initiating this conversation.

Help Identify Sources of Information. If your protégée asks about basic company policies or other factual information, teach her the most effective ways to acquire the information she seeks. From her new-hire orientation packet to the company intranet, many resources are available. Teach self-sufficiency rather than serving as a “short cut” to easy answers.

Review Her Work. Your protégée may not ask for advice on some aspects of her work, but you know your company's standards and expectations. Read her report draft, watch her in action in a meeting, listen as she explains a complex process, and give advice. Offer coaching and find exemplary models for her to emulate. Find best examples of her work and encourage her to include them in a portfolio.

Promote Selective Reading. Your protégée may not know how to prioritize topics or sources of information for the company and the industry. Recommend key readings and news sources and discuss what you are both reading. You might also recommend that she join or start a study group to keep abreast of advances in the field.

Encourage Other Forms of Continuous Learning. A new staff member may not know when she needs to learn a new skill. If she does know, she may be hesitant to ask for help for fear of being viewed as incompetent. She may learn from osmosis but a “jump start” will help your protégée build skills faster and contribute at a higher level more quickly. Model continuous learning behavior. Talk about classes you have taken and what you learned from them. Discuss experiential learning and how “stretch” assignments benefited you. Discuss her plans for continuing her education formally as well, such as starting an MBA or another advance degree in the coming years.

Suggest Broader Feedback. Many companies have a formal process for eliciting feedback, but if yours does not, help your protégée seek feedback from peers, managers, and direct reports. If your company provides “360” reviews, encourage your protégée to use this tool. Encourage her to share feedback with you. Discuss how to use her strengths to improve her weak areas.
Prepare for Performance Review. The performance review is not only a time to get feedback, but also an opportunity to plan the next phases of a career. Help your protégée prepare—and respond to—the review in the following ways:

- Teach her to use the SMART principles in framing her performance and setting goals that are: Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Results-Oriented, and limited by Time.
- Align preparation for the review to the job description. Link her activities (and especially results) to business impact and technical contributions.
- Role-play a prepared “elevator speech,” a very short synopsis of her work activities. Coach her on using “I did this” in stating her results without overstating her contributions.
- Teach her how to articulate her technological contributions. Stereotyping leads to supervisors underestimating women’s technical competence.
- Help your protégée identify areas of strength and think of ways to use them to mitigate weaker areas.
- Help your protégée identify the resources she needs to be maximally productive, and practice how to negotiate for them.
- Help her identify and then ask for assignments that will make her more visible and give her key experiences for moving up in the organization.

Meet with the Manager. Your protégée’s manager can help you identify strategic ways to assist your protégée. If meeting with the manager alone, be aware of privacy issues. Honor your relationship with your protégée by letting her know when you are meeting and why. Periodic three-way meetings can help all parties—especially the protégée.

2. Challenges for Women

The technical workplace presents particular challenges for women. In many IT workplaces, the ratio of professional men to professional women is 5:1. Women of different cultural backgrounds may be used to a different set of norms, which compounds their challenges. Below are activities that support technical women in their minority role.

Look at Informal Mentoring. Research shows men receive informal mentoring more often than women. Neither the (male) recipient nor the (usually male) mentor may typify their relationship as “mentoring,” but when they get together informally important knowledge is transmitted. Advise your protégée to observe the informal relationships that appear to support her male colleagues. Discuss ways she can get the same benefit through participation in informal activities or through more overt means.

Boost Participation in Meetings. As a minority, women need to exert their presence to be heard in meetings. Instead of deferring to her mostly male colleagues, encourage your protégée to state her views and show her expertise, especially in technical areas. Recommend these tactics to increase participation, presence, and effectiveness in meetings.

- **Preparation** - Together, review the agenda for an upcoming meeting. Discuss strategic ways to prepare and participate.
- **Interaction** - Advise your protégée that it is appropriate to be a critical thinker who evaluates—and even challenges—ideas others bring up in a meeting. Discuss ways to be assertive without being obnoxious, how to inject comments into a conversation appropriately, and how to show passion and back it up with action.
Active Listening - Have you observed a colleague in a meeting and wondered: Are you listening, or just waiting for your turn to talk? Advise your protégée to listen carefully and limit her speaking to critical contributions. Suggest that when your protégée speaks in a meeting, she reference statements made by others. This acknowledges their contributions, and shows she is paying critical attention and “connecting the dots.”

Move Work Forward - Encourage your protégée to contribute to meeting agendas and to call meetings and chair them. Suggest that she volunteer to head subcommittees or ad hoc work groups that move company results forward. Her progress reports in subsequent meetings will display her competence and worth.

Observe Others - Recommend that she sit in on a meeting of another work group that you know is highly functional. Ask her to note what factors seem to influence the group's success. Together, strategize how to apply that knowledge to meetings in her own group.

Observe Other Women - If a woman is shy or comes from a culture where women are traditionally deferential to men, help her notice how other women in the workplace interact successfully. Identify female colleagues who are models she can observe and emulate.

Encourage Self Promotion. Humility is a virtue only to a point. If she does the heavy lifting on a project but stays behind the scenes or downplays her role, a woman's contributions go unnoticed. Encourage your protégée to promote herself, be strategic about information sharing, take credit for her work, and become more visible. Advise her to:

- Volunteer for high-profile tasks and take credit for the results.
- Take a leadership role and pen reports or memos that senior staff will read.
- Host informal gatherings to celebrate team accomplishments. Invite everyone who contributed and be generous in thanking them. Invite senior staff.
- Practice using “I” language appropriately.
- Role-play situations and conversations to practice self promotion without boasting. Discuss how men approach self-promotion. If asked, “Can you do that?” a man is likely to state “I’ve never done it but I am sure I can,” while a women may say “I’ve never done it so I don’t know if I can.”

Make the Most of Alternative Work Options. Many companies have flexible schedules, telecommuting options, or globally distributed teams. Suggest these ways to maintain visibility while working in nontraditional ways:

- Understand the workgroup culture, how tasks are distributed and performed, and the likelihood of working hours in separate locations. Maintain visibility and availability in distributed work.
- Attend strategic meetings face-to-face.
- Be deliberate when turning in work. Clearly state that the project was slated for a certain date and that it was produced on time or early.
- Contribute to highly effective telephone conferences and use efficient communication in phone conferences. Put the same effort into preparing for phone meetings as face-to-face ones. Take advantage of virtual meeting software so remote and co-located participants share a common experience and can contribute similarly. Make sure meeting minutes include clearly stated deliverables and timelines.
3. Advancing in the Field

Women are less likely than men to leave one organization for another in order to advance professionally. When bargaining for salaries, women ask for less than men do. If a protégée waits for someone to notice her good work, promote her, and increase her salary, she's likely to wait a long time. Advise your protégée to take a deliberate approach to advancement.

Set Career Goals. Remind your protégée that her career will happen, but advise how to make it happen with intention. Ask your protégée, What work do you want to be doing in five years? In ten? At the point right before you retire? Encourage her to look beyond her current work path to consider additional ways to excel. Once goals are defined, help her imagine, What would success look like? What would I know or be able to do? These outcomes will indicate which concrete steps to take, and milestones along the way.

Use Company Resources. Large companies have career advancement systems in place. Direct your protégée to trainings, seminars, and other events that serve to groom leaders. Your human resources director may know organizations your company partners with, as well as classes and institutes the company will help employees attend.

Use External Resources. Direct your protégée to additional resources you value. Also recommend:

- Professional support, programs, and career advising offered through organizations such as IEEE, ACM, SWE, and the Anita Borg Institute
- eMentoring through MentorNet
- Career coaching
- Summer institutes at colleges and universities

Encourage Strategic Work Choices. Some accomplishments are extremely notable, noticeable, and long-serving, such as being granted a patent. Encourage your protégée to publish a paper, author intellectual property, engage in an open-source project, take steps to become a distinguished engineer or an ACM or IEEE fellow, or otherwise distinguish herself.

Assemble a Portfolio. Help your protégée summarize her accomplishments in the form of a portfolio. She can include samples of work products, diplomas of certification, letters of support or acknowledgement, internal or public announcements that credit her, and other hallmarks of her work. Help her be strategic in her choices of what she includes. If she seeks to advance up the technical ladder, encourage her to leave more generic accomplishments aside and focus on a technical portfolio with accomplishments important to the company. Suggest that she update her résumé to capture recent accomplishments.
4. Communications and Networking

Seasoned employees know the channels for efficient and effective interactions. Help your protégée know the most strategic ways to engage others.

Discuss Communications Strategies. Discuss company norms and issues around email and personal communications, including:

• Best ways to communicate with key staff using e-mail, voicemail, or other means
• How to format an e-mail signature block for internal and external communications
• Varying levels of detail needed for different communication channels
• Informal channels of communication that matter to a protégée’s projects

Explore Different Modes of Communication. If you are mentoring someone remotely through e-mail, you may find this sole means of communication falls short. Seek advice from other mentors who have used electronic mentoring. They can advise you on ways to use technology to strengthen and vary your interactions.

Be Aware of Cultural Differences. If your protégée is from another culture or is naturally quiet, she may need coaching to become more assertive. Rehearse different scenarios or conversations until she feels confident. Coach her on effective body language and eye contact, and point out models for her to emulate.

Set a Professional Standard. Be aware that the way you speak about the performance, work habits, or personalities of others sets a precedent. Model and encourage professionalism. If the protégée complains or makes disparaging comments about others, reframe the concern so the two of you can address it in a constructive manner.

Help Her Say “No.” Your protégée may be asked to complete thankless tasks at times. If she is new to the organization she will want to be seen as someone who cheerfully pitches in, but help her set limits and make selective choices. Coach her to say “no” in a pleasant and unapologetic way that shows she has clear priorities. She might say: I’m sorry, but the x project is taking all of my best attention right now, and it’s my first priority. Advise her to volunteer for high-return tasks, ones that help her learn something new, give her greater visibility, or allow her to work with talented colleagues.

Seek Feedback. Don’t assume mentoring is working simply because neither of you airs complaints. Your relationship is working if your protégée is meeting her work and career goals. As mentor you are supplying a lot of advice, but feedback should go both ways. Regularly elicit feedback from your protégée as part of your meeting. Ask: Are you getting what you need? What else do you need? How could we do even better?

Expand the Circle. Meet with another mentor pair to share strategies and advice. Conduct a “fishbowl” meeting where one pair meets as usual while being observed by the other pair. Discuss what you observe and brainstorm ways to refine or expand your work together. Consider establishing “mentoring circles” in your organization, where several mentors provide advice to protégées.
Buck the Homophily Principle. Individuals have a tendency to associate and bond with similar others. That’s homophily, or the “birds of a feather flock together” principle. It is natural to gravitate to one another based on common age, gender, or organizational role, but it may not be the best strategy for advancement. Encourage your protégée to step outside her comfort zone and actively build networks as she makes choices about who she carpools with, meets for lunch, or goes to for advice.

Network for Support. Help your protégée know who to meet with to gain support prior to meetings where decisions are made. Help her practice how to pitch her idea to key personnel so they are prepared to help defend the proposal and bring others around. (Many times new staff are unaware that they should network this way, or if they know, they do not have key players identified correctly.)

Travel with Senior Staff. Suggest that your protégée offer to travel with senior staff to conferences, meetings, or trade junkets. Advise her to observe how senior staff represent the company and present the company’s face to the world. Suggest ways she can be indispensable to the team while traveling, and advise how to take advantage of shared meals and taxi rides to get to know colleagues better.

Shadow Senior Staff. Help arrange a brief job shadow. Select a day when you know events occur that will be key learning opportunities for your protégée. Help your protégée prepare for the job shadow, and recommend that she conduct a short debriefing meeting with the senior staff. While she is shadowing you, actively introduce her as your protégée.

Make Career Goals Explicit. Encourage your protégée to be vocal about her career goals and dream assignments. If her manager has never heard her express a desire to work in another country, her name will not come to mind when the manager looks for someone to send on a foreign assignment.