

# NCWIT Mentoring-in-a-Box: Technical Women at Work

## Mentoring Basics - A Protégée's Guide

### Benefits of Mentoring, Readiness, and Tips for Finding the Right Mentor

*Learn why technical women need mentors and how you can benefit from being mentored. Find out what you can expect from mentoring and the best ways to identify and engage the mentor who can help you most.*

#### Why do I want a mentor?

Mentoring promotes your career advancement and success. Research shows that those who are mentored achieve greater career advancement, higher work satisfaction, work success, and future compensation than those who are not mentored.

Mentoring can provide you new knowledge and skills as a technologist and give you the benefit of seeing your work from another perspective.

Mentoring will help you expand your professional networks and can open new doors.

Since women are frequently in the minority in high-tech organizations, mentoring is particularly valuable for helping women participate fully. It has been recognized as a key valuable contributor to women's success in the technology field.

#### Am I ready?

You are ready to make the most of mentoring if:

- You strive to advance in your career as a technologist and wish to increase your contributions to the organization and the field.
- You are willing to step outside your comfort zone, are ready to challenge yourself, and are open to exploring new skills and behaviors.
- You are open to hearing and using constructive feedback. This may involve your mentor advising you on your communication style, helping you prepare for a technical review, or providing constructive criticism on how you handle difficult situations. Ford (2003) accurately notes: "If you are going to get your feelings hurt whenever the mentor suggests that you didn't do a good job or should try doing something differently, then pretty soon you are likely to hear nothing at all."
- You have a sense of what you expect to gain from mentoring. For example, you may wish to learn a new programming tool, be more effective in running technical meetings, or are eager to work on defining your long-term career aspirations.
- Research has shown that people who project confidence and the ability to adapt quickly to new situations are more likely to successfully establish a mentoring relationship. Develop your self awareness around these traits and be willing to further develop these traits in the mentoring relationship.

#### What should I expect from mentoring?

Expect a relationship with a clear purpose. When you and your mentor agree on a shared purpose, your problem solving, decisions, and actions will fall into line.

The mentor relationship will change over time as you reach goals and set new ones. When you have learned what you need, the relationship may come to a natural end.



Mentoring is a human relationship. Like any other, it can have its challenges. To avoid the rare bad situations, set expectations early, identify boundaries, and agree that the relationship can be ended by either party at any time for any reason.

### **How do I find a mentor? Who should be my mentor?**

Depending on your needs, your mentor could be someone who is higher up than you in the company, whose position you aspire to and who can give you insight on how to get where he or she is. You can also seek multiple mentors as long as you are clear on what you want to learn from each of them.

Ask someone other than your direct manager to be your mentor. Also, ask someone whose skills are not too similar to yours; pick someone you can learn from.

Either a man or a woman may make a good mentor for you. Don't limit your focus to one gender. Instead, think about the skills, talents, and access you wish to gain, then seek the individual, man or woman, who can offer them to you.

Potential mentors come with different capabilities: someone who can teach you new technical skills, someone who runs meetings effectively, a visionary technologist, a great manager of technical teams, a leader, or someone with great fundamental skills. Potential mentors include people in other departments, regions, and even other organizations. Try to think outside the box and seek someone who is different enough from you that he or she will cause you to stretch -- to develop professionally and master new skills.

A mentor can provide you access to information and opportunities. He or she can also act as your advocate. Select a mentor who is in a position to offer these benefits. In order to identify the right mentor(s) for your needs, experts advise asking yourself where you would like to be in your technology career about two years from now. Ask yourself: What knowledge and skills would I need to get there, and how might a mentor (or mentors) help me? This will help you determine who might mentor you.

Ask your organization's HR department if there is a formal mentoring program or group in place, especially as it pertains to women on the technical track.

Join professional groups such as associations of high tech professionals, like the ACM or IEEE; Women's Technology groups or e-mail groups, such as Systems; or attend informal networking activities in your organization. These activities can help you meet and identify potential mentors outside your immediate department.

### **How do I ask?**

Approach the problem like an engineer: research and analyze the situation before you ask. First, learn about the person you want to ask: his or her current projects, career path, and role in the organization. This will give you some context for an introduction and help you establish common ground.

Decide whether approaching the individual in writing or in person is best. Tell the potential mentor that you are interested in his or her work and would like to get career advice from him or her. Ask for a first, informal meeting. Before you approach the potential mentor:

- Rehearse what you will say or carefully proofread the e-mail you send.
- Ask someone who knows you both for an introduction.

Consider and articulate what you bring to the table: mentoring relationships benefit both participants. Consider what will make yours a valuable relationship for the mentor. You may be younger and more in touch with emerging technology. Or you may have contacts in certain departments or in a specific region that will benefit your mentor. Don't feel that you can't ask if you can't identify how you will benefit the mentor. Some people are happy to mentor just for the pleasure of helping the next generation.

Describe how your goals align with those of the organization. By working with you, the mentor is not only supporting an individual, he or she is contributing (through you) to the organization and the profession.

Anticipate possible concerns. Let the potential mentor know that the relationship can be easy, mutually beneficial, and minimally time-consuming when guided by the right resources. Introduce this Mentoring-in-a-Box program as a useful tool in fostering a productive mentoring relationship.

### **How do I prepare for the first meeting?**

In addition to its many resources, The NCWIT and Anita Borg Institute's Mentoring-in-a-Box: Technical Women at Work program offers a Set-the-Stage Template and Meeting Plan Template that will help you get started and frame the relationship.

#### *Mentoring-in-a-Box:*

*Technical Women at Work was created by the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) in collaboration with the Anita Borg Institute. NCWIT works to ensure that women are fully represented in the influential world of information technology and computing. The mission of the Anita Borg Institute is to increase the impact of women on all aspects of technology, and to increase the positive impact of technology on the world's women. Visit [www.ncwit.org](http://www.ncwit.org) and [www.anitaborg.org](http://www.anitaborg.org) for more information.*