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## Inside Intel's Mentoring Movement

By [Fara Warner](#)

Ann Otero seems like an unlikely mentor -- at least by the rules most companies apply. The 12-year Intel veteran is neither a star engineer nor a fast-track sales executive. She's a senior administrative assistant.

But Otero has rare gifts that Intel prizes. Among the 5,500 employees at the company's sprawling New Mexico plant, Otero is a master at tapping into the informal people networks that make the company tick. Need to know who to call in human resources about a difficult employee? Wondering how to decode the company's internal teams? Otero knows who to call and how to read the Intel culture. Her ability to navigate Intel is so refined that she's currently teaching her skills to an Intel manager who happens to outrank her. That's the Intel way of mentoring -- and it has almost nothing in common with traditional, corporate mentoring programs. Intel's way is more democratic, more systematic, and faster paced. Most important, it has nothing to do with individual career advancement.

Started in 1997 at one of Intel's largest chip-making facilities in New Mexico, the company's mentoring movement shows that an old-fashioned idea can be updated to work perfectly -- even in an industry that changes with stunning speed. Traditional mentoring tethered an up-and-comer to an old hand for years of personal-development and career advice. It was an approach that seemed best suited for slow-moving industries operating in more stable times. But Intel took the idea of mentoring and reinvented it to fit a competitive environment where what matters most is an employee's ability to do the right things right away.

Intel's version matches people not by job title or by years of service but by specific skills that are in demand. "This is definitely not a special program for special people," says Lory Lanese, Intel's mentor champion in New Mexico. Nor is the company's mentoring-with-a-difference approach all about face time and one-on-one counseling. Instead, Intel's program uses an intranet and email to perform the matchmaking, creating relationships that stretch across state lines and national boundaries. That enables Intel to spread best practices quickly throughout the far-flung organization. Finally, Intel uses written contracts and tight deadlines to make sure that its mentoring program gets results -- fast.

### It Came From the Desert

In the sagebrush-strewn desert about 15 miles north of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Intel's hulking semiconductor facility dominates the landscape. Three chip plants operate here, including one of its newest: Fab 11X. Smokestacks poke into the sky, and in the parking lot, Chevy trucks outnumber BMW sedans. A small version of Intel's famous logo is the only thing that associates the site with the company's better-known Silicon Valley headquarters. It seems an unlikely place for bold thinking about human-resource issues.

But this is where Intel's mentoring movement got its start as a way to train new managers quickly. And this is where its inspiration and innovation still originate. Because of New Mexico's success in spawning a

human-resources mentoring program that has connected thousands of people within the company, Intel has committed money and resources, even in these tough economic times, to fund its mentoring programs for this year.

When the New Mexico factory began pairing up old-timers with new managers five years ago, it was out of absolute necessity. During the go-go 1990s, Intel raided established plants, like the one in New Mexico, in search of managers and technical experts to run the new factories that were opening around the world. The New Mexico factory was left with few experienced people and a fresh batch of trainees who had to learn quickly. "We'd been tapped out," says Lee Ballew, a human-resources development manager who was part of the four-person team that spearheaded New Mexico's mentoring projects. "We'd sent off our experts, and we needed to grow new ones."

Previous mentoring programs at Intel had ground to premature halts. Before launching its new effort, the New Mexico team first sought early assurances of high-level support. "Good things aren't free," Lanese says. "I told management about the cost and commitment and asked them to be mentors as well."

Then the team analyzed the reasons behind past failures. It discovered that Intel's previous mentoring programs had largely been informal. Ambitious young employees who wanted rapid promotions would find a more senior person who could offer them pointers. The only people who took that risk were the ones with a lot of nerve or political savvy -- which made for a hit-or-miss track record.

The New Mexico team didn't want its version of mentoring to be about pushing a few people up the corporate ladder. Instead, the program's success would hinge on how well knowledge was passed along to a new generation. That meant rethinking how mentors and "partners," or those looking to be mentored, were paired up, and then outlining in detail what they should do once they were in a mentoring relationship.

## Keep It Controlled ... Sort Of

The first step in Intel's mentoring program was to create a matching system that eliminated guesswork. For this, the New Mexico team turned to the employee database in order to create an intranet-based questionnaire that could match partners with the right mentor. The system works by having potential mentors list their top skills at Circuit, Intel's internal employee site. Partners click on topics that they want to master, such as leadership, Intel culture, or networking. Then an algorithm computes all of the variables, and the database spits out a list of possible matches.

In New Mexico, a team decides which mentor best suits the partner. At other Intel locations, the partner chooses one mentor from the list. "I knew that people would want instant gratification," says Kevin Gazzara, Intel's mentoring-program manager within the human-resources division. "If the mentoring database didn't match you immediately with a few potential mentors, people wouldn't be as likely to take part."

Once a match is made, an automatic email goes to the mentor asking her to set up a time to talk. At a required class, the mentor and the partner learn some simple but vital guidelines.

**1. The partner controls the relationship.** Partners, not mentors, set up meetings and decide what they want to work on. According to Intel, mentoring relationships that last from six to nine months work the best.

**2. Put the details of the relationship in a mentoring contract.** While not binding, that contract creates accountability that goes far beyond traditional mentoring relationships. "I would never have carved time out of my day to focus on something that I wanted to learn," says Stephanie Wilson, a training manager who was mentored in New Mexico. "But I knew that someone was depending on me to think and learn, so

I focused."

**3. Both the partner and the mentor decide what to talk about.** Once formality is out of the way, candor and privacy take over. The limits of what can and can't be discussed are set by the partner and the mentor together, not by the people who run the program. "We don't have mentoring police," Ballew says. For Wilson, that "no-holds-barred" approach was as welcome as the structure. "I wanted someone outside my department to bounce ideas off of," she says. "Not to criticize my group, but we often think alike. I needed outside perspective."

## Keep the Politics Out

Outside perspective -- not inside politics -- was what the New Mexico team had hoped for when it created its new approach to mentoring. By weeding out the politics, Intel is able to make use of an important asset that many companies never tap into: their employees' vast knowledge. "It's a great medium for the exchange of ideas," says Steve Backers, a corporate college-recruiting manager in Folsom, California who mentors an Intel program manager in Phoenix. "It's about what you want to know, not who you know."

Indeed, unlike many corporations that use mentoring for career advancement, Intel's style is all about learning from someone you have probably never met. That's why this voluntary program is open to everyone -- from workers on the factory floor to senior-level engineers.

Go back to Ann Otero, for example. Most companies wouldn't consider her as a mentor, and it's unlikely that she'd even have the opportunity to be mentored by a senior-level executive. But when she needed help with leadership and time management, she signed up for a mentor who could teach her such new skills. She was teamed up with a senior manager. After working with her mentor, Otero says that she now has enough leadership know-how to feel comfortable speaking up in the high-level meetings that she sits in on.

## Keep Trying New Ways

While Intel has a few hard and fast rules about mentoring, the company tries to stay open to experimentation. "The great thing about mentoring is that it shifts easily to meet training needs, whether you're expanding your business or you're not hiring," Lanese says. "When you're growing, it's great to help integrate your people. When you're not, it can help people make the next leap in their careers."

During Intel's growth spurt, the New Mexico team shifted some of its focus to group mentoring, where one manager helps a small group of new recruits. The team matched small groups of new managers -- usually four or five -- with one experienced manager to work on a specific management problem.

Wilson also took part in the group-mentoring project. She says that group mentoring offered a new way to solve problems and learn management skills -- a way that is very different from management training in a classroom. "At a certain point, what you get in a classroom is academic," she says. "With a small group mentoring each other, you get the kind of deep feedback that won't happen in a roomful of people."

Wilson says that her group wanted help in learning how to manage employee performance. In a classroom, the examples would have been made up or taken from old case studies. In contrast, the group-mentoring program uses real-life examples taken from a day's work. "I had the perspective of four other people about a problem that I was facing," says Wilson. "It felt like the burden was taken off of me. I got to share my workload."

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