

Transforming the workplace: **Piloting reverse mentoring**

June 2018





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Chief Executive's statement

I am delighted to share with you the findings and recommendations from ACE's Progress Network reverse mentoring pilot.

All businesses, no matter which sector they work in, are facing similar challenges. How can we challenge unconscious biases and build more harmonious workplaces? How can we address equality, diversity and inclusion in a meaningful way? How do we adapt to new technology and the changing demographics of the modern workplace? How do we transfer the knowledge, skills and experiences of the retiring baby boomers to a younger generation?



I continue to grapple with many of these questions at ACE, therefore I was fascinated to see the outcome of our innovative reverse mentoring pilot project. We've brought together 22 people into 11 pairs across seven different companies to road test the initiative. We hope that the lessons learnt from our pilot will help companies in the consultancy and engineering industry, no matter their size.

These findings will be equally applicable to those working outside of our industry too – whether you're designing a building or selling widgets, you both face the similar technological and demographic changes and challenges. Our report will inform anyone with a working interest in the area and our "how-to" guide can help any company thinking about a reverse mentoring scheme.

Led by the Progress Network, ACE's emerging leaders group, with the backing of ACE through our chief operating officer, **Anil Iyer**, this report is the first major output from this effective industry group, which also provides early career professionals across the country opportunities to enhance their business and commercial skills.

Our thanks to **Rebecca Wooding**, the network's vice-chair for leading the work in this space, to **Mott MacDonald** for sharing the knowledge of its own reverse mentoring scheme and support in structuring the pilot, and to the other participants from **Arcadis, BWB, Peter Brett Associates, Max Fordham, Tony Gee and Partners** and **WSP**.

We hope that the report's recommendations will encourage other companies working in the infrastructure, natural and built environment, to explore reverse mentoring and how it can positively impact on your business. However, I have no doubt that this report will also be key reading for any organisation looking to implement a reverse mentoring programme.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Ogunshakin', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Nelson Ogunshakin OBE,
ACE President & Chief Executive



Pilot introduction

ACE's Progress Network identifies, develops and empowers the future leaders in the natural and built environment industry. We are constantly looking for innovative ways to achieve these goals.

I have always been an ambassador for improved collaboration and change in the workplace and I am fascinated by the changes seen over last 30 years – not only the causes of them, but their implications too.

I am from the last generation who heard the dial-up tone of the internet. I remember my Mother pre-arranging to meet with her friends at exact times and places – without knowing whether they would turn up.

Technology has, not only made these events a distant memory, but impacted all aspects of our lives. I believe this has led to profound changes in our behaviour and expectations in the workplace too.

I am excited by the power and potential of technology and want to see it used properly in a growing global working environment – sometimes I get frustrated in the disregard for its potential. I am convinced that the current workplace needs more innovation and many companies can be left behind if innovation isn't embraced.

Reverse mentoring is a simple way to ensure the workplace does not lag these huge societal changes. It offers a new dynamic, empowering both parties and helping to reduce unconscious bias – which has limited the pace of change in companies for so long.

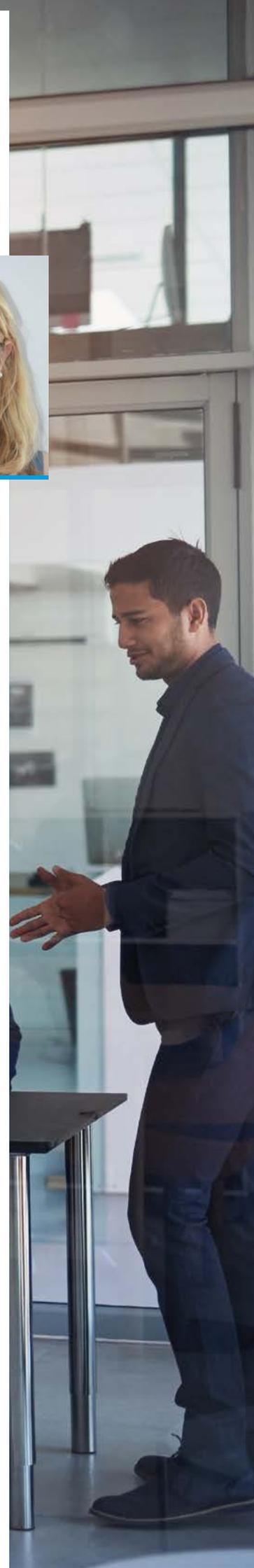
I am a female mechanical engineer and with that a minority in the natural and built environment sector. I am also a millennial approaching middle management, an experience level prone to low retention. As such, I not only have first-hand experience of what it is like to be a minority in engineering consultancy, but also an emerging professional looking to secure their future. My experiences are by no means unique but part of an underlying current that is demanding more change in the workplace.

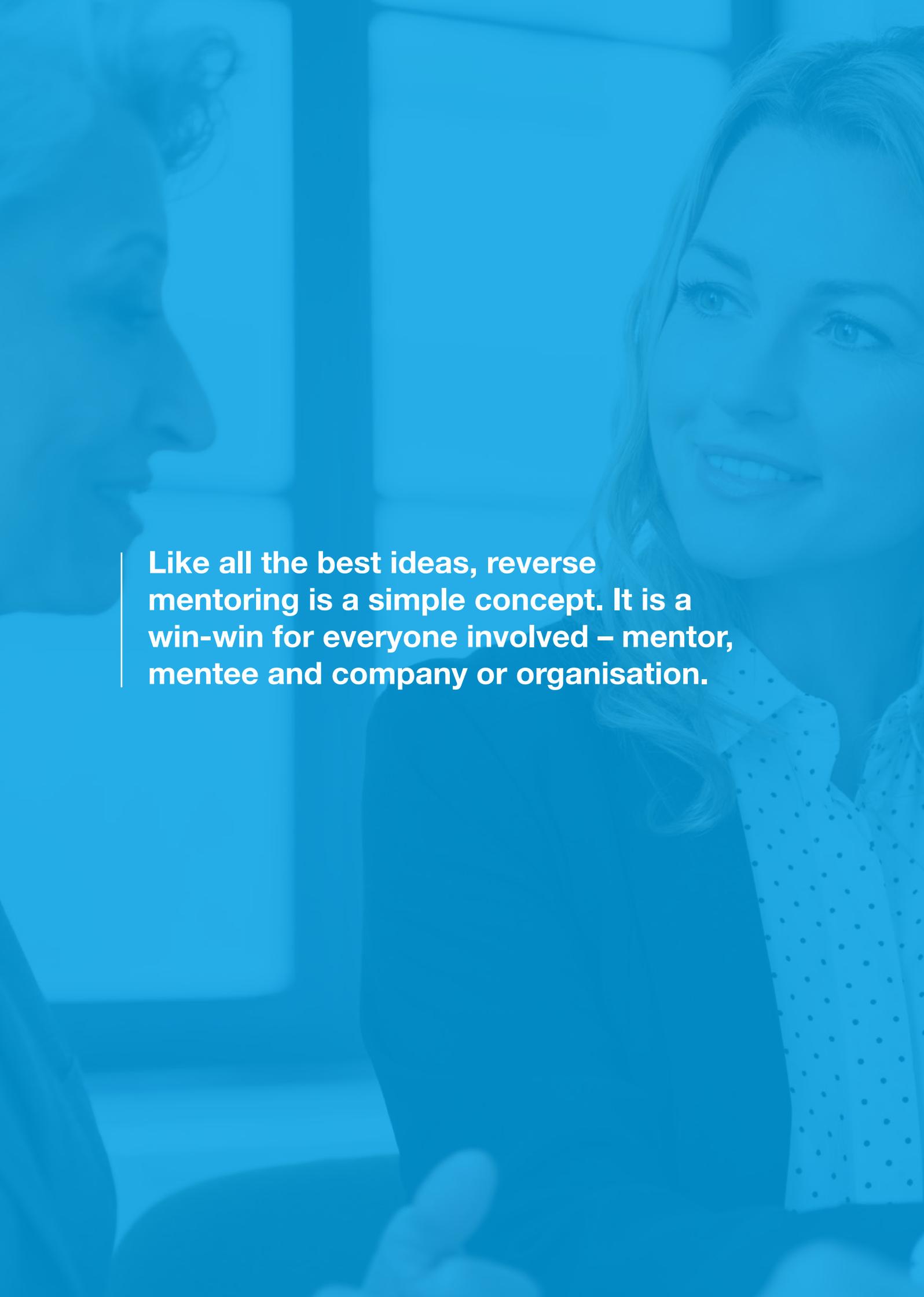
Reverse mentoring offers a comprehensive and flexible solution to these challenges, its principles of “upward” mentoring are applicable to a variety of issues and it is a low-cost solution. Moreover, it can be implemented in any organisation, large or small.

The pilot has been more impactful and successful than I initially imagined. I fully believe that reverse mentoring should be more than a “nice to have” in a company. To be more resilient in this fast-changing world we need more diversity, connectivity and understanding. The need is by no means a new one, but reverse mentoring offers a simple avenue to meet it.



Rebecca Wooding,
First Vice-Chair, ACE Progress Network,
Infrastructure Advisor, DFID.





Like all the best ideas, reverse mentoring is a simple concept. It is a win-win for everyone involved – mentor, mentee and company or organisation.

Why reverse mentoring?

Like all the best ideas, reverse mentoring is a simple concept. Turning the traditional mentoring model on its head, experienced colleagues are mentored by members of staff from either a younger generation, background or experience.

While many schemes often focus on generational issues, such as differing understanding of technology and emerging business trends, reverse mentoring can also be used to help companies break through unconscious bias, reduce discrimination and positively improve workplace diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and age.

The former chief executive of **General Electric**, Jack Welch, was one of the first pioneers to champion reverse mentoring at his company in 1999. Facing uncertainty with the arrival of the internet, but realising its potential to positively disrupt business, he paired twenty-somethings with senior executives at GE to teach them all about the new technology.

Other companies, including global law firm **Linklaters**, have made reverse mentoring a key part of their diversity and inclusion efforts, using it to raise “awareness and understanding of different people’s perspectives and experiences”¹. Under-represented groups are paired, including minority ethnic groups, LBGT+ and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with senior Partners.

Meanwhile, leading consultancy **EY** has used reverse mentoring to tackle the problem of “out-of-touch male executives”, helping to create a cultural shift in how the company operates. Reverse mentoring schemes which pair young women with senior male executives have been recognised as being instrumental in changing company-wide attitudes to recruitment and flexible working².

Many other companies have implemented their own reverse mentoring schemes, including **BBC**, **Microsoft** and **Lloyds of London**.

Unlike most conventional mentoring schemes there is mutual benefit to both the mentor and mentee. Whilst the mentee learns new skills and perspectives, the mentor gains valuable insights into company culture, business strategy and can tap into years of industry experience. All are key skills and knowledge for a younger generation looking to get ahead in an organisation and in their careers.

The benefits to the organisation are obvious as different generations are brought together, empowering both the emerging and established leaders – business reputation is enhanced and employee retention increases. Company culture can be improved, out-of-touch attitudes worked on, senior executives gain a better understanding of issues at the coal-face and businesses can be more modern in how they approach their work, employees and customers.

It is a win-win for everyone involved – mentor, mentee and company or organisation.

Context

Increased appetite for mentoring

Traditional mentoring programmes are increasingly the norm in the US, with more than 71% of Fortune 500 companies running a programme, meanwhile three-quarters of American private sector executives claimed that mentoring has been beneficial for their career³.

Statistics are harder to come by in the UK, but it is clear that there is a growing appetite for mentoring within organisations – 93% of small and medium sized businesses acknowledge that mentoring has helped them succeed and 55% claim that mentoring has had a positive impact on profit⁴.

Consensus has emerged around the positive aspects of mentoring. It provides the opportunity for education and learning, increases employee retention, develops leadership and management skills.

Understanding generational shifts

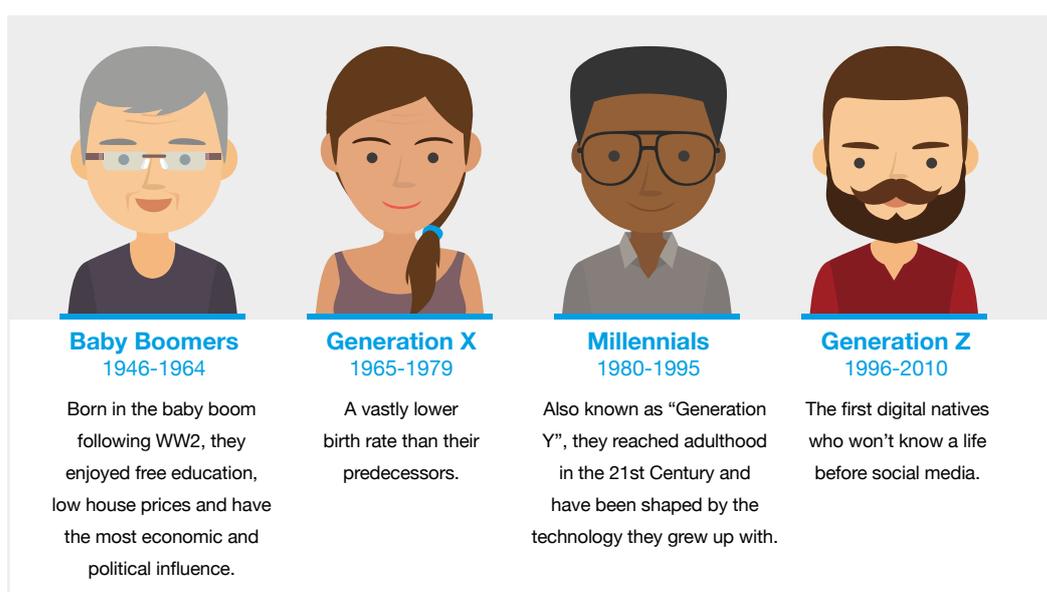
Much has already been written about the demographic changes facing society and their impact on the workplace.

How companies will respond to these challenges will be crucial in ensuring they remain attractive to employees and relevant to their customers.

By 2020 it is estimated that the Millennial and the subsequent Generation Z will make up more than 50% of the workforce. If they're not already, companies will soon be operating in stretched multi-generational environments.

Millennials, and the subsequent Generation Z, share similar traits. They are curious, tech-savvy, globalised and international in outlook. They expect a work/life balance, are unafraid of changing workplaces and are confident to express themselves and ask questions. They want to see internal promotion over external hires, want to e-learn at their own pace and also want job security⁵.

Mentoring schemes in the wider sense are key for these generations. They help to meet their expectations for career development and ensure employers remain relevant and attractive to them.



Changing societal attitudes

2018 has seen a high-profile #MeToo movement spread across social media, the exposé of the Presidents Club in the City of London, and ongoing and growing campaigns for equal pay. Although not directly linked, these events show that attitudes that were once prevalent, are no longer met with a turned blind-eye.

This modern shift in attitudes is reaching the workplace too and puts even more emphasis on institutional teaching around the breaking of unconscious bias and an understanding of the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion across all sectors of the workforce.

Retiring baby boomers and institutional intelligence

At the same time, a generation of baby boomers are reaching the end of their careers. Their retirement not only leads to a loss of expertise, but a loss of relationships too, both of which are extremely complex to extract and pass on to another generation of workers.

Furthermore, companies are realising that retiring baby-boomer executives are increasingly expensive to replace on a like-for-like basis. While there may well be instances where baby-boomers work for more years than their predecessors did, it is also undeniable that the workplace they will be leading in 2018 will be completely different to the one in which they started their careers.

The technological revolutions yet to come

That technology has already changed the way in which we work cannot be denied. For the last decade or so the construction sector has embraced 'new' technology such as Building Information Modelling (BIM). This has seen the emergence of common design modes, collaborative supply chains and a greater understanding of the importance of data. However, we are on the cusp of further revolutions which will blur the physical, biological and digital worlds and affect all areas of our lives. Artificial intelligence, blockchain, quantum computing and mixed reality environments are amongst some of the pioneer technologies which will radically change the way we work, in ways which are currently unimaginable.

While only a fool would claim to be able to successfully predict the impact of these technological advances, companies need to be ready for this coming revolution. Executives may not need to understand the intricate details of them, but they will need to understand enough to make business-critical decisions and employ the right people who do.

Changes in consultancy and engineering

As well as new technology, many consultancy and engineering firms working in the natural and built environment have experienced changes in the diversity of their workforce, a greater willingness to collaborate and knowledge share with their once traditional competitors, and a greater level of multi-disciplinary, multi-generational and multi-national teamworking on projects than has previously been experienced.

Degrees and professional qualifications in building, architectural, engineering and environmental subjects have also moved from a purely technical focus to now also include the promotion of management and leadership, commercial and industry awareness, and communication skills. All these changes result in an environment in which reverse mentoring can comfortably be implemented and flourish.

Reverse Mentoring: Good for your business?



As evidenced by this report, our nine-month reverse mentoring pilot scheme has demonstrably benefited both its participating mentees and mentors. However, apart from resulting in better-educated and empowered employees, can a case be made for overall improvement to business performance from reverse mentoring?

For the pilot scheme, we targeted medium to larger ACE members as we felt they would have a larger talent pool of interested employees. We were also delighted to see all levels at our participant companies get involved. Mentors and mentees received support from company boards, individual business units and HR teams to help monitor the effectiveness of the programme.

However, as the pilot only finished in March 2018 and was limited in size and scope, it is still too early to establish the success of reverse mentoring on employee retention and long-term changes in company culture. This also extends to potentially assessing the impact of reverse mentoring against company or business unit KPIs.

What we do know is that the participants fed into internal discussions and the pilot featured on board agendas. The programme's success was such that all participant companies have indicated they will be continuing reverse mentoring in some shape or form.

Added to this is the fact that I have been made aware of at least another four large ACE member consultancies that have also initiated reverse mentoring programmes and are even expanding their activities in this space. It is probably safe to say that reverse mentoring is here to stay and will eventually become an integral part of our businesses.

Once reverse mentoring schemes are commonplace, I am hoping that appropriate metrics will be created and monitored in the context of the corporate plan of an organisation. This could then feature in benchmarking activities.

While I believe we have demonstrated a strong business case for reverse mentoring for medium, mid-size and large companies, a significant number of organisations are missing out, namely smaller SMEs.

Collaboration across the supply chain is huge in our industry. ACE members are used to working together to deliver projects, but SMEs are sometimes excluded from this owing to their size, putting them at disadvantage in many procurement scenarios. They also tend to have an older workforce and, outside of the larger cities, struggle to hire the skills they need. Could some form of cross-company reverse mentoring be the solution and provide SMEs with the talent, enthusiasm and capacity to engage the procurement process? I see no reason why not, especially when the emerging leaders will be accessing a unique source of skills, experience and knowledge.

The emergence of a more collaborative framework could see SMEs up-skilling not only their knowledge and use of technology, but also their thinking on equality, diversity and inclusion issues.

Reverse mentoring has the ability to deliver wins for all involved across the industry, no matter their size.

Anil Iyer
Chief Operating Officer at ACE



Reverse mentoring pilot

There is no denying that the business world in is changing and that without action UK engineering and consultancy companies risk being left behind. ACE is at the forefront of providing business solutions to new challenges within the natural and built environment. Therefore, an innovative pilot for reverse mentoring was established, with the intention of developing business resilience to member companies going forward.

In line with the philosophy of reverse mentoring, the pilot was suggested to ACE by the Progress Network – a nationwide group led by those within the first 15 years of their career for the identification, development and empowerment of future leaders of the industry.

Discussion quickly turned to how reverse mentoring schemes could enhance company flexibility and future-proof their engagement with the next generation of staff, ensuring that a career in the company remained attractive.

Inspired by the success of company-wide reverse mentoring schemes at a number of ACE's predominately larger member companies, the Network surfaced the idea of a cross-company pilot open to all members, no matter their size.

Championed by Progress Network vice-chair **Rebecca Wooding**, who secured the initial buy-in from ACE and its Board, and guided by ACE chief operating officer **Anil Iyer**, it was agreed to launch the first industry-wide reverse mentoring scheme, which would run for nine months. The pilot also used some ideas from Mott MacDonald's internal reverse mentoring scheme.

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progress network

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Formed to help the emerging generation of consultants and engineers working in the natural and built environments, the **ACE Progress Network** identifies, develops and enables better industry awareness of the future leaders in the natural and built environment.

Regional committees mirror ACE's regions and members come from ACE member organisations large and small. They range from those at the start of their careers to more experienced professionals, in the first 15 years of their career. They are ambitious, enthusiastic, and keen to share their experiences with their peers.

The network provides career development opportunities across the country, allowing members to also develop their business and commercial skills and keep abreast of industry developments. A broad range of consultancy and engineering disciplines are represented, including; civil, structural, mechanical and electrical engineers, lawyers, architects, accountants, project managers, cost consultants and more.

The Progress Network is currently sponsored by **Mott MacDonald** and chaired by **Athena Livesey** of **WSP**.

Finding a focus

While reverse mentoring schemes can focus on a range of issues, including tackling the under-representation of females or minorities at senior levels of organisations and breaking unconscious bias, many tend to focus on technology. It was agreed that the ACE pilot should aim to focus on bridging the technological gap between junior and senior employees, as it was a unifying theme which would run across all participant companies, big or small.

Andrew Zhao, emerging technology strategist at **Mott MacDonald**, helped to drive the thinking behind how technology could improve personal and business productivity and proposed a structure for mentoring sessions, as well as ideas on the specific technology which could be addressed by the pilot. Four sets of guidance notes were produced to help shape the mentoring sessions.

In addition, the pilot would also examine how useful reverse mentoring was in tackling unconscious bias, how difficult it was to find roles for mentors and mentees and whether it could successfully build a “trusted space”.

Finding participants

The announcement of the pilot was made through ACE member communication channels. Participant companies were responsible for finding the pairs, internal promotion of the pilot and review of the candidates. It was stressed that candidates should be self-motivated with managerial support for their involvement at both levels.

Furthermore, the importance in the effective pairing of candidates for the success of the pilot was reinforced. It was suggested that strikingly different personal characteristics should be avoided, that both participants should appreciate the benefits of engaging in the pilot and that if there was any sign that pairings were not working as intended, repairing or new candidate selections should be considered.

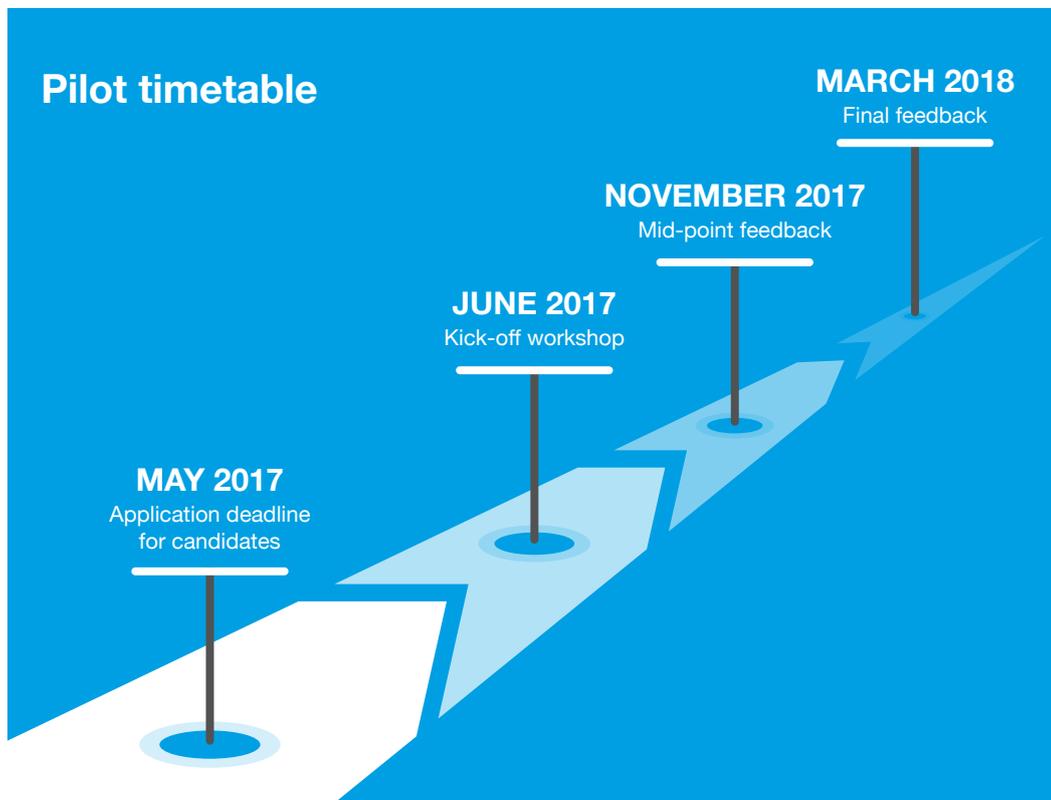
At pilot launch there were 11 pairings across the following companies **Arcadis, BWB, Peter Brett Associates, Max Fordham, Mott MacDonald, Tony Gee and Partners** and **WSP**.

Structuring the pilot

To ensure that all participants were working to similar timetables, and that experiences could be compared, it was decided that the pilot’s activity should be delivered in pre-determined stages with regular feedback sessions for the participant group.

A workshop involving all 22 participants established the ground rules for the programme, while subsequent meetings allowed participants the opportunity to share their experiences with the participant group.

In between, pairs held reverse mentoring sessions at their own convenience within their companies. ACE produced supportive notes to help guide discussions around **technology, personal and team effectiveness, industry challenges** and **business needs**. Although there were no firm rules around the number of sessions held, it was suggested that the pairings aim for one every other month, with at least four sessions held during the nine-month pilot period, as well as ad-hoc catch-ups.



In addition to the meetings, participants were also encouraged to share their experiences with their peers using WhatsApp. Mentor and mentee groups were created with Rebecca and Anil encouraging debate and discussion by asking participants to share their experiences. It was also used effectively to communicate around upcoming feedback sessions. In addition to this, a number of one-on-one meetings with participants were held.

Delivering constructive outputs

Aiming to ensure the pilot delivered tangible outputs, the following questions were highlighted by the participants at the pre-pilot stage.

- Do senior staff have a greater understanding and actively use social media/applications/emerging technologies?
- Do millennials feel empowered and more engaged with wider business?
- Do participants feel there is a business advantage to reverse mentoring?
- Have there been any business innovations/changes/cost savings resulting from the pilot?
- Has the member company promoted the pilot to clients and if so how has this been received?
- Does reverse mentoring have a positive impact on retention?
- Could reverse mentoring have an impact of business resilience for companies in the wider industry?

Pilot Participants

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Emily Bonner & Colin Aston
Zsuzsa Haviar & Paul Hammond

BWB

CONSULTANCY | ENVIRONMENT
INFRASTRUCTURE | BUILDINGS

Joshua Dickerson &
Dave Hollingsworth

 **ARCADIS**

Mohammed Al-Sharifi & Chris Pike
Dima Fadda & Madeleine Bridson

MAX FORDHAM

Vincent Hurley & Philip Armitage

 **pba**
peterbrett

Laurie Blacklock & Glen Player
Dan Phelps & Peter de Souza


Tony Gee

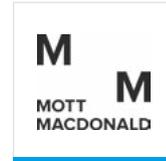
Tom Imeson & Justin Ryan

wsp

Sarah Mellers & Richard Paulson
Angel Ortega Martinez & Carl Gent

Interview

Zsuzsa Haviar and Paul Hammond
Mott MacDonald



1) What's your 'day job'

ZH: I'm a Knowledge Manager, supporting experience and idea transfer through connecting people and implementing processes to strengthen the business; I assess how to create, share, and use knowledge. I feed this information into reports to monitor financial performance and work to support business development in the Mott MacDonald transportation sector.

PH: Like many managers I have broad and multiple responsibilities. As Global Practice Leader for Economics, I provide professional, technical, commercial and innovation support to our international economics team to deliver and grow our projects across all sectors. As Development Director for integrated transport I am responsible for sales, business planning and client focus in our transport planning business.

2) Why did you get involved in the Reverse Mentoring pilot?

PH: I'm the first person to put my hand up and say that there's a lot more I can be doing to build on my technological knowledge and I was keen to show to the industry that it's OK to expose your weaknesses as a senior manager, but that also you need to work on them. Additionally, I was motivated in part by curiosity – I don't know what I don't know and I wasn't dedicating time to find out!

ZH: I'm a keen advocate of technology, I think that's the only way we can keep up with the competition, therefore I'm happy to help to anyone who is open for change and share how I benefit from it. I'm also hoping to pick up mentoring skills I could use in the future and learn a bit more about our business from Paul.

3) What have you looked at in your sessions so far?

ZH: So far we've looked at the most efficient way to share files, folders (email attachments vs. online multi-editable platforms, i.e. OneDrive), how to work in a paperless environment (OneNote) and how to communicate using online platforms (Yammer). My mentee is constantly working between teams in different time-zones, therefore we've trialed using online scheduling tools such as World Time Buddy.

4) How do you think you have benefitted from reverse mentoring?

ZH: My mentee is heading one of our practice communities and during our discussions I learnt a fair bit about his practice, the strategy plan for this practice and how he is planning to implement it. As he needs to interact with people across the globe, I gave him some practical advice on how and he helps me understand why. I have also learnt valuable mentoring skills and hoping to further develop them at the next mentors meeting.

PH: I have built a fantastic relationship with my mentor, Zsuzsa, who has already shown me many time saving tips and tricks with the software we use internally in Mott MacDonald. This not only has a positive impact on time savings, but also on maintaining a strong bond with the future leaders of the industry.

5) What advice can you give to companies struggling with the fast-paced changes in technology?

PH: Companies need to consider whether the pace of change within their company is faster than the pace of change outside their company. If you're seen as lagging to the industry there's a potential risk which you need to address asap. To talk about and embrace change is no longer enough. You need to be the catalyst that causes change.

ZH: In our company, junior professionals with an interest in technology applied to be champions from every part of the business. They received regular training to make sure they are experts in their fields. Having a group of people who have a collective interest, and who can learn together and bounce ideas off each other helps to create a number of experts who can then pass their knowledge on by reverse mentoring, lunch and learn sessions, group training, presentations, etc...

Having a budget assigned towards cultural change could massively help as well. Employees wouldn't feel it is something which they need to do in their spare time, or something which is optional.

6) How important is it for senior staff not rely on junior staff for technological know-how?

ZH: Everyone needs to be part of the revolution and be able to use technology. Cultural change can only be achieved from the top-down. Showing commitment at a senior level can have a massive positive impact on junior staff.

PH: Senior leaders need to lead from the front in all disciplines. While it's true that millennials adopt to change faster than senior staff, you can't dismiss technology as something for millennials only. Be frank and honest about your weaknesses – then do something about it.

7) Can you see reverse mentoring as the norm one day?

PH: Yes. I have a great and stronger relationship now with Zsuzsa and we will continue to build on this relationship long after the ACE Progress Network reverse mentoring pilot is completed. This method of reverse mentoring needs to be valued by individuals as an investment into their and their company's future.

ZH: It can be a time-consuming way of introducing new technology to senior staff and I think it should be combined with other approaches. However, I do think it should become the norm one day as we all learn differently and we should use all techniques available to help us use technology more efficiently and ensure it becomes second nature for everyone.

Findings

Two separate sessions for participants to feedback and share their experiences with the group were scheduled. This was in addition to the on-going conversations held by mentors and mentees in the two WhatsApp groups.

Furthermore, participants were asked to share their experiences in mid-pilot interviews, one of which was previously published in industry magazine, *Infrastructure Intelligence*.

All the relevant information has been collated in this section, so analysis of what worked in the pilot and what did not can take place. This will help the continuous development of future reverse mentoring schemes, as well as helping us to create a framework to help other organisations interested in the concept.

WhatsApp as a group communication tool

The two WhatsApp groups allowed mentors and mentees to share their experiences and discuss any issues with the pilot co-ordinator. The groups were intended to be an informal way for participants to share concerns and build their confidence.

Activity tended to focus around feedback meetings, although it was also used by the co-ordinators to ask questions and proactively generate feedback. The call-out boxes to the right highlight some of the types of conversations had by mentors and mentees. We have removed the names.

It was found that mentees, who perhaps were not used to using WhatsApp to communicate, needed more encouragement to generate discussion and share their feedback.

Increasing technological understanding

The central focus of the ACE pilot, increasing the mentees understanding and encouraging their use of technology was key to the success of the pilot.

Feedback suggested that mentors were surprised at existing levels of knowledge in this area, although there were some participants who shared that mentors were defensive in their own assessment of their use of technology. Others shared that mentees sometimes needed convincing of the merits of using technology and that they ultimately developed a relationship where they were acting as a glorified IT helpdesk, rather than a source of business advice.

Meanwhile, mentees were concerned that they sometimes felt they were having to “reinvent the wheel” and were being pushed towards a technological solution for something that they were already perfectly happy with, for example paper notebooks rather than digital note taking.

Mentee WhatsApp conversations

We had our first session this afternoon.

The most interesting discussion was about the uses and value of social media and how hard it is to separate important stuff from the chaff.

For many people it is also important to be able to separate work and home lives and social media can work to blur the two.

We had our initial meeting yesterday. We thought that it would be good to set out what outcomes we hoped to achieve.

We thought they might be:

1. An understanding of the generation gap here and across the industry, and
2. Suggestions for change to improve communication, collaborative working at a distance, retention and recruitment.

We also thought that exploring the impact of new and emerging technologies on the role of a designer would be a useful additional topic.

Understanding their company

After the mid-point feedback mentors were already sharing that the reverse mentoring sessions had improved their own understanding of how their business worked.

It was found to be particularly useful to understanding organisational and system changes with one participant highlighting the usefulness of the sessions following a period of extensive merger and acquisition activity by their company.

At the post-pilot feedback, there was an almost unanimous view that the sessions have given the mentee further understanding and buy-in to technology on both an individual and organisational level.

Building personal skills

Some of the mentors expressed surprise that they were more comfortable speaking to their seniors than they expected. The equal relationship also meant that they developed a range of additional communication skills – from verbal one-on-one skills to coaching via delivering constructive feedback.

Overcoming challenges

It quickly transpired that there were a number of organisational issues to address. Many pairs expressed frustration with restrictive company-wide IT policies which made working with the suggested apps and online services difficult.

In addition, there were also problems with some mentees initially claiming that they were “too busy” to allocate time to the sessions, which led to frustration for both parties as sessions were moved or cancelled.

In mid-feedback sessions, mentors reported that mentees would take on their “natural” hierarchical role in sessions and wanted to lead the conversations. Interventions by the pilot co-ordinator, and additional sessions, helped to redefine the roles. It was later agreed by participants that the roles should have been more clearly defined at the start of the pilot.

Furthermore, key information should be shared before pairing, such as an individual's technological proficiency, as well as a mentees' needs and skills set. It was suggested that documents/guidance bespoke to the pairing as well as company may have helped.

Revealing and tackling unconscious bias

The kick-off sessions revealed a series of preconceptions. Junior members of staff were seen to be privileged, impatient, demanding, tech-savvy and communicative while senior staff were considered reluctant to change, inflexible and slow to learn, but experienced.

At the final feedback sessions, the pairings were unanimous in their view that their original negative perceptions no longer existed. One claimed that it had “recalibrated their perspective”, others that that they were “more

Mentor WhatsApp conversations

Hey guys. I'm going to be having my first meeting with my mentee next week. Have any of you guys already had yours?

Just wondering how it went and if you have any advice/tips for any of us who are yet to have the first meeting

We are planning to look at more effective internal communication/knowledge sharing amongst 200 people who work across different time zones and location.

We are planning to look at OneDrive, OneNote, Yammer and a few time zone apps and the advantages of using the intranet to make announcements

Have found Flock to cover almost everything we want to combine into one app. It links to your Google drive. It has a great web-based video conference tool.

It's all free and web-based which is great for companies with strict IT restrictions
We're trailing Expensify for our expenses.

comfortable” working with other generation and had a “better understanding” of their approach to work.

Mentees agreed that they saw the benefit in mixed aged/diverse groups at board level and working group level within their company and agreed that younger members of staff should be empowered to help the organisation facilitate change.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Unlike many other reverse mentoring schemes, this pilot did not focus specifically on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) explicitly. However, the pilot did reveal a desire by some members to explore reverse mentoring’s potential in this space. There was a recognition that targeting specific unconscious biases around gender, LGBT+ or race issues in the workplace could be beneficial for some organisations. It was also suggested that the consultancy and engineering sector was perhaps behind others in this space and that reverse mentoring could be used to develop a more representative generation of future leaders.

Using the pilot as a springboard

It was encouraging to learn that some pairings used the initial sessions as an opportunity to go beyond the pilot. One pair started working on a new project to introduce new technology across their company, with the junior members of staff reporting their findings to the senior management board. Many moved beyond the original proposed structure, finding after the initial sessions at least, that they were dealing with more company specific issues.

It was generally felt that the pilot was of greater value when the individual participants in the pilot were able to set their own agendas, broadly around the topic areas outlined but specifically tailored and adapted to their individual organisations.

Location isn’t necessarily a problem

Over the course of the pilot, one participant moved to Australia but continued to work in the same company. The pair’s sessions continued over video-conferencing and although the time difference initially caused some problems, it was found to be as beneficial for participants as their initial meetings were.

Measurement

There was some discussion around measurement at the post-pilot feedback session. Many felt that it would be beneficial to introduce some kind of measurement tool for progress for both mentor and mentee, however it was also felt that this would probably have to be part of a wider set of targets around engagement.

Cross-industry and cross-discipline pairings

There was also a discussion in the value of cross-industry pairings whereby pairings would be at different organisations or even in different industries. As previously mentioned the consulting and engineering sector is collaborative in nature, working with many other companies towards the delivery of a project. Reverse mentoring could be used as a tangible means to create greater understanding and unity across the wider-supply chain.

Along similar lines to the above, one participant shared that in hindsight further thought around the initial pairings would have been beneficial. Had participants from different disciplines and/or business units within their organisation been chosen, it would have led to less uniformity in the conclusions reached by the participants.

Interview

Vincent Hurley and Phil Armitage
Max Fordham



1) What's your day job?

VH: I'm an Electrical Engineer with just under three years' experience from graduation. I'm currently working on a unique student accommodation PassivHaus refurbishment at the University of Oxford with Max Fordham.

PA: As Senior Partner of Max Fordham I wear many hats. I still maintain an engineering role, drawing on my 30 years' experience within the industry, but I also have management responsibilities sitting on equivalent of our board of directors and managing our Cambridge office.

2) Why did you get involved in the Reverse Mentoring pilot?

PA: I am enthusiastic about the potential of IT to improve the quality of working life and also interested in the evolution of working practices. The pilot seemed like a very good opportunity to understand the extent of the generation gap in our practice and to develop an insight into the working practices of other organisations.

VH: I have found that there can sometimes be communication barriers between junior employees and senior employees. I wanted to investigate a way for both juniors and seniors to improve their communication and capitalise on the use of new online tools for this purpose.

3) Do you think you have benefitted from reverse mentoring? If so how?

PA: Definitely. We are half way through the pilot and have understood the reality of the generation gap, which, for us, is smaller than we thought it might be. We have decided to focus more on evolving working practices, particularly in the areas of collaborative working and improving efficiency, and to tackle some more extreme commercial challenges.

VH: Yes, I believe I have gained an insight into how senior management works and the development of a business alongside its IT strategies. It is rewarding to know that my opinions on certain topics are valuable to a senior member of Max Fordham. Furthermore, the relationship has eliminated my fear of the unknown and made me more comfortable when speaking to seniors.

4) What advice can you give to companies struggling with the fast-paced changes in technology?

PA: Maintaining the right balance between stability and change is really tricky. At Max Fordham we have found that allowing individual enthusiasts to experiment with new technology helps us to understand what is valuable. Having a broadly representative group of people involved in agreeing strategic changes has also allowed us to make reasonably

good progress with our systems and functionality. I think that a really interesting question to ask yourself is "If we started up today, how would we work and what would our IT look like.

VH: I don't think there is a hard and fast solution. However, it should be part of a business strategy to actively invest time in learning how to use new software and applications as they come out, at least on a trial or pilot basis, to determine if the technology is suitable for their company early on.

5) How important is it for senior staff not rely on junior staff for technology know-how?

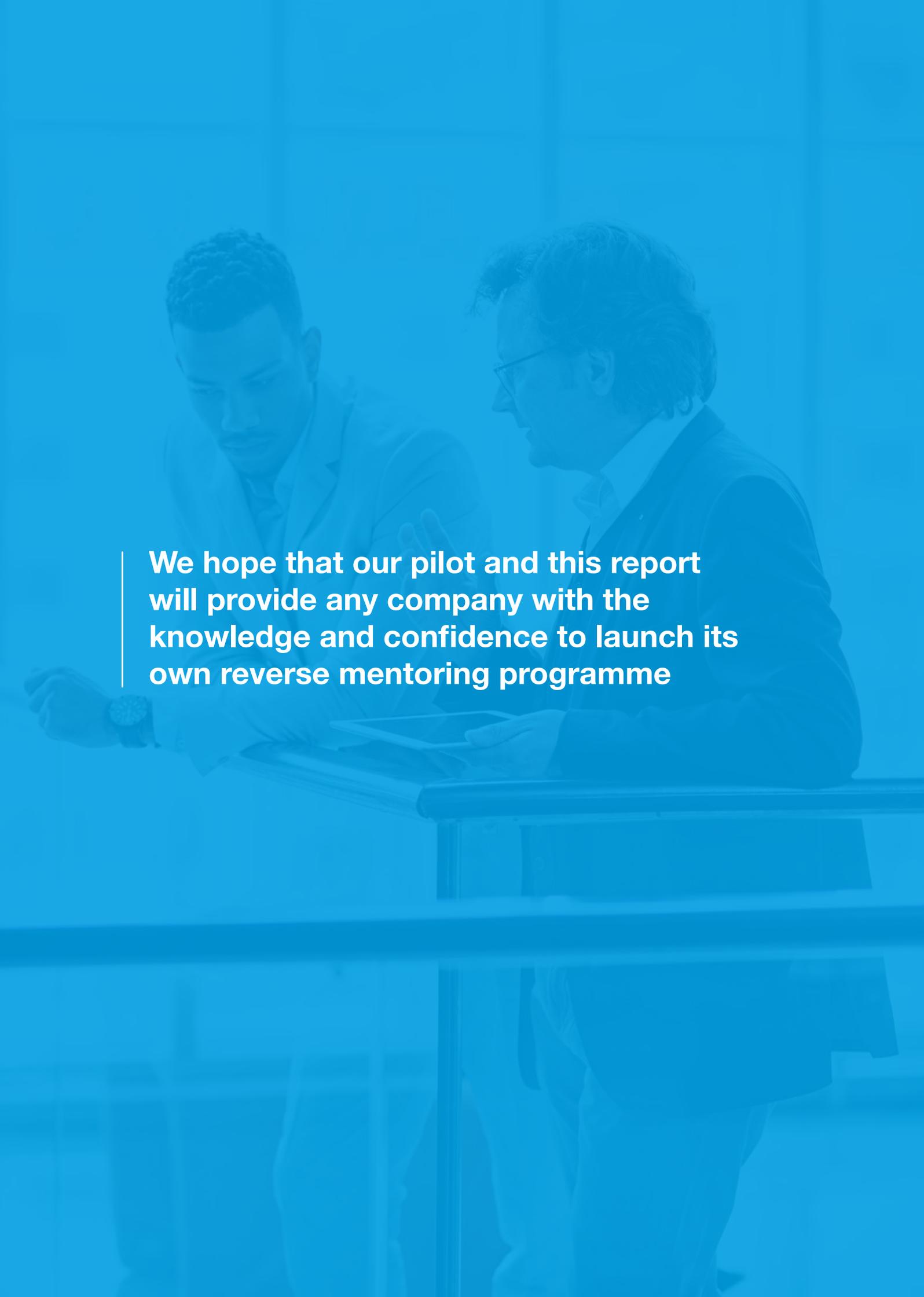
PA: Technology underpins so much of how we work already that it is important for everyone to engage, not just junior staff. Technology holds the promise of improving the quality of work and our working life, but that promise can only be delivered by embracing change. The rate of technological change in the outside world only ever seems to increase and people's expectations are now driven by the functionality they can experience at home.

VH: Very. Failure for all generations to develop simultaneously increase divides in competency, communication and overall understanding and therefore is an unsustainable business model.

6) Can you see reverse mentoring as the norm one day?

VH: Yes. I can see the benefits as a learning tool for both the senior and junior staff. Now that I have had the insight into its advantages, I think it would be a shame reverse mentoring is not widely practiced.

PA: Ideally the contact between people at all levels of experience in organisations should be good enough that reverse mentoring isn't seen as a need.

A photograph of two men in business attire sitting at a table, looking at documents. The man on the left is wearing a light-colored suit and a watch, while the man on the right is wearing a dark suit and glasses. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image.

**We hope that our pilot and this report
will provide any company with the
knowledge and confidence to launch its
own reverse mentoring programme**

Conclusions

The high-level take away headline is that all participating companies will continue with some form of reverse mentoring programme.

We were delighted to see some companies tailor the pilot to better suit their business style and needs over the course of the nine-month period. Some have decided to adapt their programme for the post-pilot stage. In any case, none of the participants felt that the exercise was futile or unsuited to their company or its culture. Indeed, the dialogue between senior executives and younger staff was unanimously considered to be of long-term value to both participants and their companies.

The goals outlined by the pilot participants at the pre-meeting stage are probably a good place to start to draw conclusions and although in many respects these are still early days, there is plenty to be positive about.

Senior members of staff reported that they developed a greater understanding of technology and were actively using many of the programmes, apps and services explored in their sessions. Some had taken this a step further and explored innovative uses of technology across business units and the wider company with their mentors.

The mentors felt more engaged with company culture, had a greater understanding of the working of the business and, probably most excitingly, more confidence to speak to and engage with senior members of staff.

By the time the mid-point and final feedback sessions had concluded, all participants, whether mentors or mentees, reported that their pre-existing views of the other group had changed. Whilst it is still too early to quantify the impact of reverse mentoring on business performance, nearly all the companies that participated in the pilot will be introducing their own programmes or adding reverse mentoring to their existing learning and development activity.

We started the programme with participants from seven companies, **Arcadis, BWB, Max Fordham, Mott MacDonald, Peter Brett Associates, Tony Gee and Partners** and **WSP**. By the mid-point session, the pilot had drawn interest from other member companies who had developed their own reverse mentoring programmes and contributed to further sessions – **AECOM, Arup** and **Ramboll**. This gives us the confidence to state that reverse mentoring will play a valuable role in years to come across the consulting and engineering sector.

Wider than this though, we hope that our pilot and this report will provide any company with the knowledge and confidence to launch its own reverse mentoring programme and hope that it will play its part in establishing the practice as the norm in every workplace.

Our next step, really is a call to action to the wider industry, not just consultancy and engineering companies, but contractors, clients, investors and education bodies working in the natural and built environment to truly embrace reverse mentoring and help to transform the business environment across an entire sector.

Reverse mentoring: A how-to guide

1. Hold a launch event to train participants and tackle unconscious bias early on.
2. Participants should be enthusiastic, self-volunteered and with clear commitment.
3. Set the ground rules early. Create a contract or memorandum of understanding to frame the roles of mentor and mentees and agree timeframes.
4. Ensure company buy-in – budget, time, support – and link to overall business strategy. Work with your company “support network” to make the most of it – HR team, manager.
5. Establish a trusting space and respect the day job, but don’t push back on reverse mentoring commitments.
6. Hold sessions away from day-to-day distractions – at a coffee shop or over lunch.
7. Select the mentor according to the needs of the mentee.
8. Don’t pair overly opposing personalities. Some discussions can be sensitive and change must be seen as gradual, and not intimidating.
9. Review progress regularly – are you on track?
10. Find time to catch-up quickly in-between sessions – does the mentee need further support?
11. Prepare for each session – understand objectives and how to get messages across. Set achievable, bite-size SMART tasks and targets.
12. Pairings should be from different teams which don’t work together on a daily basis.



Thanks to the pilot participants

Our thanks to Arcadis, BWB, Peter Brett Associates, Max Fordham, Mott MacDonald, Tony Gee and Partners and WSP.



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Endnotes

- 1 Linklaters – <https://www.linklaters.com/en/about-us/news-and-deals/news/2018/linklaters-pilots-reverse-mentoring-for-partnership-board>
- 2 The Times, 16 April 2016 – <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/mentors-go-to-work-on-sexist-bosses-d6thwt5qn>
- 3 American Society for Training and Development – www.td.org
- 4 National Mentoring Day – www.nationalmentoringday.org/facts-and-faq/
- 5 Meet the Millennials, KPMG – <https://home.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2017/04/Meet-the-Millennials-Secured.pdf>

About ACE

As the leading business association in the sector, ACE promotes the interests of UK consultancy and engineering companies both large and small, who deliver services in the natural and built environment. Many of our members companies have gained international recognition and acclaim, and together they employ over 250,000 staff worldwide.

The professional services that ACE member companies deliver cover a wide range of sectors including water, road, rail, sustainability, property, major projects, ports and energy.

The ACE membership acts as the bridge between consultants, engineers and the wider construction sector who make an estimated contribution of £15bn to the nation's economy with the wider construction market contributing a further £90bn.

ACE's powerful representation and lobbying to governments, major clients, the media and other key stakeholders, enables it to promote the critical contribution that engineers and consultants make to the nation's developing infrastructure.

Through our publications, market intelligence, events and networking, business guidance and personal contact, we provide a cohesive approach and direction for our members and the wider industry. In recognising the dynamics of our industry, we support and encourage our members in all aspects of their business, helping them to optimise performance and embrace opportunity.

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Association for Consultancy and Engineering
Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street
London SW1H 0QL
T: 020 7222 6557
consult@acenet.co.uk
www.acenet.co.uk

