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7-2022

### Partnering Senior Professionals with Young Employees – an Enriching Strategy for All

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#### Publication Information

Wittmeyer, Carol (2022). "Partnering Senior Professionals with Young Employees – an Enriching Strategy for All." *Shoe Retailing Today* .

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## Partnering Senior Professionals with Young Employees – an Enriching Strategy for All

### Abstract

Many NSRA members are finding increasing challenges to recruiting and retaining employees as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic-fueled “Great Resignation”, a phrase used to describe the extraordinary number of employees quitting jobs during this time. A new Pew Research Center survey finds that low pay, a lack of opportunities for advancement and feeling disrespected at work are the top reasons why Americans quit their jobs in 2021. The survey also finds that those who quit and are now employed elsewhere say their current job has better pay, more opportunities for advancement and more work-life balance and flexibility.

### Disciplines

Business

### Comments

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## Reverse Mentoring:

# Partnering Senior Professionals with Young Employees – an Enriching Strategy for All

CAROL WITTMAYER, ED. D.

Many NSRA members are finding increasing challenges to recruiting and retaining employees as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic-fueled “Great Resignation”, a phrase used to describe the extraordinary number of employees quitting jobs during this time. A new Pew Research Center survey finds that low pay, a lack of opportunities for advancement and feeling disrespected at work are the top reasons why Americans quit their jobs in 2021. The survey also finds that those who quit and are now employed elsewhere say their current job has better pay, more opportunities for advancement and more work-life balance and flexibility.

NSRA retail owners who have dreams of business continuity – family-controlled or not – have always relied on strong relationships with their employees as a key strategy for long-term business success and rewarding leadership opportunities. This strategy is increasingly important for succession considerations. Emerging trends include global statistics that the next generation of family employees increasingly are opting out of the family business opportunity, and ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Plans) are becoming an increasingly popular exit strategy. (ESOPs allow owners the ability to sell the firm to invested and driven employees – family and non-family.) As owners think about ways to build the best bench strength of talent for their long-term business success, reverse mentor-

ing is a strategy that can be rewarding to all involved and can help to create a



Dr. Carol Wittmeyer

firm culture that attracts and retains the best talent. It is also a great strategy for owners who are on the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) forefront, working to build a diverse cadre of employees committed to diversity and serving an increasingly diverse consumer base.

**NSRA retail owners who have dreams of business continuity – family-controlled or not – have always relied on strong relationships with their employees as a key strategy for long-term business success and rewarding leadership opportunities.**

### Foundation to Build On

When we think especially about solving technology problems in our businesses, we realize that we have been

practicing reverse mentoring for years. Yet, oftentimes, asking for help to solve a new software update or technology crisis, is not the most rewarding opportunity for young tech-savvy colleagues. So how can owners build on their current relationships with talented, newly minted professionals in a way that is more systemic and fulfilling for those we count on to take our businesses to new heights? Formalize reverse mentoring, starting at the top, with the owners.

### What Is Reverse Mentoring and Why Is It Important?

“Reverse mentoring is the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as the mentee. General Electric’s former CEO, Jack Welch, is credited with introducing a formal reverse mentoring program in 1999 when he ordered 500 of his top managers to find young employees who could

teach them about the Internet. Since then, reverse mentoring has become a ‘best practice’ among several large corporations, such as Dell and Procter

& Gamble. For organizations, tapping into the expertise and technology savvy of young workers is a clear benefit of reverse mentoring. However, reverse mentoring also holds promise for building the leadership pipeline, fostering better intergenerational relationships, enhancing diversity initiatives, and driving innovation. For individuals, reverse mentoring is an opportunity for learning by both participants and a creative way to engage younger, eager employees.” (Wendy Marcinkus Murphy)

Reverse mentoring relationships are also based on knowledge sharing with the mentee focused on learning from the mentor’s technical or content expertise and generational perspective; emphasis on professional and leadership skill development of mentors; and commitment to shared values including respect, teamwork and continuous learning.

### Important Foundation

For reverse mentoring to work, Lisa Quest, a *Forbes* contributor suggests that owners need to think about these success factors:

**Defined expectations:** Each party needs to be very clear on their expectations.

**Agreed upon rules:** Each party must be fully committed to the mentoring relationship and agree upon the rules that will be followed.

**Willingness to learn:** In a reverse mentoring relationship, both parties act in the capacity of a mentor as well as a mentee; so they must both “genuinely want to learn from and share with the other.” According to a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, the top reason that reverse-mentoring programs fail is that **executives don’t prioritize them**. If a couple of sessions are canceled, the momentum quickly dwindles. Train younger employees in how to structure sessions well – the more executives benefit, the more they’ll want to keep the commitment.

**Trust:** Reverse mentoring requires the trust of each party. The goal is to “push one another

outside of their comfort zones and try new ways of thinking, working and being.”

**Transparency:** Both parties must be open with their feelings and with what they are thinking. They must be able to overcome differences in communication style (since different generations communicate differently) and be open to seeing situations from different angles.



### How to Get Started

Like any business initiative, it is important to have a plan and to invite input on the plan as a way to role model reverse mentoring. And also of importance, is to put together a team to provide valuable input. From the outside, advisors, other business owners from Chamber of Commerce groups and NSRA members can share their thoughts in general and specifically for owners known over decades. And internally, HR and other employees can provide valuable input. Additional suggested steps include:

1. Clarify goals and expectations – define each role and outcomes. Who gets to participate and why? When are meetings scheduled and how are agenda items set? How do the mentor/mentee craft personalized goals?
2. Clarify recruitment and partnering processes – who gets to participate, why and how will the selection and matching process work?
  - a. I am a big believer in two relevant considerations:
    - i. Successful modeling starts at the top. The owner(s) should be involved from the start.
    - ii. Piloting new initiatives to assure the strategy includes time to learn and adjust.
3. Define how the initiative will be monitored. Who will help provide the most

robust feedback for improvement?

#### 4. Launch and monitor!

Reverse mentoring can be an energizing strategy for owners to recruit and retain valuable employees who buy in that their contributions are valued and that they matter. It is also a strategy that can help with revitalizing the business strategy and owners themselves. As one of Estée Lauder’s CEOs, Fabrizio Freda, said, the company “had come to a place where the future could not be informed by the past” and therefore decided to implement a reverse mentoring program. (Jennifer Jordan and Michael Sorell) ■

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