**Help Wanted! Exploring the Value of Entrepreneurial Mentoring at Start-Up**

**Abstract**

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was to investigate the added value of mentoring for entrepreneurs during the start-up phase. This small-scale exploratory research focused on five start-up entrepreneurs in Scotland to determine the entrepreneurs’ perceptions regarding the ‘added’ value of their mentoring support. To achieve the research aim a qualitative research approach was utilised and an embedded case study strategy was followed with data being collected from semi-structured in-depth interviews. The case study findings indicated a selection of perceived benefits of the mentoring experience for the start-up entrepreneurs, which included: gaining business knowledge, getting guidance and prioritizing goals, an increase in confidence and access to relevant networks. The results point towards the utilisation of multiple mentors and peer support at start-up to maximise the full benefit of the mentoring process. The study also provides tentative recommendations to both supporting agencies as well as entrepreneurs to further enhance the value in the mentee-mentor relationship.

**Keywords**:

Entrepreneurs, Start-up, entrepreneurial Mentoring.

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**Introduction**

Since Scotland still lags behind the UK in terms of Total Entrepreneurial Activity, identifying the right supporting mechanisms for entrepreneurs during the start-up stage is becoming increasingly important (Levie, 2013). While there is much debate about the definition of the entrepreneur, we can for the purposes of this paper use Levie's (2012, p. 4) definition: “*People who are involved in setting up a business or owners-managers of new businesses*” as well as “*individuals who have owned and managed a business for a longer tim*e”. Previous research has suggested that social capital (networks and social relations) (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is of great significance in the entrepreneurial start-up process and can provide the entrepreneur with access to various resources that are critical to early success and “…a wider frame of reference both supportive and nurturing to the new potential idea” (Davidsson and Honig, 2003, p.309). One tool identified to potentially help foster greater social capital is mentoring, with its recognised ability to support the entrepreneurial journey (Man, 2006). While much has been written on mentoring in larger organisations (e.g.Barker, Monks, and Buckley, 1999); there appears a lack of material focusing specifically on the exact value of mentoring entrepreneurs during the start-up phase in a business incubator support program. An investigation into this area is much needed, to examine if it is not just the selection of the right entrepreneurs that leads to the success of these programs but that there is also sufficient added value for the mentee in this process. The exploratory research outlined in this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature and the aim of this small scale research, therefore, is to examine the added value of entrepreneurial mentoring for start-up entrepreneurs in Scotland, focusing on five start-up firms who are taking part in a Scottish business incubator mentoring program. The key research questions that drive this research are:

1. What help does mentoring provide the entrepreneur during business start-up?
2. What forms of mentoring add value to the mentoring relationship from the entrepreneur’s perspective?

To address these questions the following literature review will critically discuss the concept of mentoring and the mentoring process, highlight some of its main associated concepts, and then outline the added benefits of mentoring as proposed in the literature. Then the methodology of the research will be presented. The authors will then identify and discuss the key findings of the research highlighting the perceived benefits of being mentored for the entrepreneurs in the study and the beneficial forms that mentoring can take to enhance the value of the mentoring relationship. The paper ends with an identification of the practical implications of the research and offers some salient recommendations both for support agencies and for the nascent entrepreneurs.

**Mentoring and the Mentoring Process**

In order to understand the help provided by mentoring we need to start with a definition of mentoring itself. The starting definition for mentoring that is used in this research is: “*Off-line help from one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking*” (Clutterbuck, 2011, p. 3). The main role of a mentor, according to Clutterbuck (2011), can be seen as directive/non-directive and stretching/nurturing. These dimensions can be seen in Figure 1. During the lifecycle of a mentoring relationship mentors will adopt one or all of these dimensions to support the mentee.

Despite this workable and widely accepted definition of mentoring there is no such agreement with regards to the specifics of the term, ‘entrepreneurial’ mentoring. This is because the circumstances regarding self-employed entrepreneurs are fundamentally different from being employed and therefore, the receiving of mentoring will have a different setting and outcome (Waters et al., 2002). Davies and Taylor, (2004) and Gold et al. (2003) further indicate that in entrepreneurial mentoring, both mentor and mentee bring specialised knowledge to the relationship and in many cases the mentee sets the goals (e.g. Shurry et al. (2001) note that lack of funding is often a reason to reach out to mentors for guidance). This shared input is in contrast with more traditional business mentoring, where the mentor usually sets goals for the mentee, as often the mentor is a higher-ranking employee. While there is no concrete definition then, Davies and Taylor (2004, p. 2) attempt to create one with the following definition. “*Entrepreneurial mentoring involves one entrepreneur acting as ’critical friend’ or ‘guide’, helping to oversee the career and development of a less experienced entrepreneur.”* In contrast to business mentoring, therefore, this definition indicates that the entrepreneurial mentoring relationship is based on the mentor and mentee being more or less equal in the relationship. It is therefore implied that entrepreneurial mentoring will abide by less rules and structure than business mentoring currently does.

Examining the mentoring role in practice and the support it can provide, Kram (1985), Noe (1988) and Waters et al. (2002) suggest that within the mentoring role, the mentor can serve two specific functions to support the mentee. Through a “two-function” model Kram (1985) states that mentoring has more than just a career related function that assists mentees in ‘learning the ropes’. Kram's (1985) model suggests also a psychosocial function exists as well, where the mentor assists with a sense of competence, effectiveness and self-worth (Chao, 1997; Davies and Taylor, 2004; Dobrow et al, 2011; Fowler and O’Gorman, 2005). Documenting if these particular aspects are assisted during an ‘entrepreneurial mentoring’ process is a significant gap in the literature.

The notion of formal and informal mentoring is another area that needs to be explored before an understanding of the value of mentoring can be established. While informal mentoring develops spontaneously and can be difficult to assess the value of (Ragins and Cotton, 1999) formal mentoring can be perceived to be easier to evaluate (Deakins, Graham, Sullivan, and Whittam,1998). In part this is because formal mentoring involves a process whereby a third party matches mentors and mentees to attempt to maximise the benefits of being mentored (Bisk, 2002; Hansford, Ehrich, and Tennent, 2003). In addition, formal mentoring has the advantage of being a more structured process, often with set rules, goals and a bounded time-frame (Clutterbuck, 2011).

Chao (1997) and Clutterbuck (2011) indicate that formal mentoring relationships can progress through three or four notable phases, as can be seen in Table 1, each of will bring unique opportunities to add value to the mentoring relationship. For example, during the start of the relationship the mentee and mentor need to set a clear direction and clarify the role of both mentor and mentee to ensure a positive outcome of the mentoring process (Davies and Taylor (2004). Past research has noted that when mentoring programs lack structure or well defined roles at the start, the mentoring relationship can actually have a negative effect on the mentees performance (Cull, 2006; Davies and Taylor, 2004). Another interesting aspect of the mentoring process worth noting is the literature perceives the ‘middle part’ to be where most of the *beneficial mentoring and learning* happens for the mentee Clutterbuck (2011) ( see Table 1). In keeping with this observation, the research discussed in this paper will primarily focus on the most productive middle part of the mentoring relationship (where both mentor and mentee are actively working on meeting the previously set objectives) with some additional analysis offered regarding the relationship building that takes place at the starting phase (Clutterbuck, 2011)

**Salient Characteristics of Valuable Mentors and Mentees**

In order for mentoring programs to create benefits for the mentee, the literature suggest that some critical factors need to be demonstrated by mentors (Cunningham, 1993). Mentors specifically have to be effective in switching between the different helping styles identified by Clutterbuck (2011) in order to help the mentee to reach his/her goals. Cunningham (1993, p. 4) researched mentoring and created a list of essential mentoring qualities. The most relevant for this research are an ability to communicate; being Introspective and open and being accessible. Furthermore, mentors need to have appropriate personal skills and approaches, and need to have, or be willing to obtain, knowledge needed for the specific purpose of the mentoring. Experience as well as knowledge on business issues is considered useful too. It can however happen that mentors do not possess the necessary qualities needed for a successful mentor-mentee relationship. Clutterbuck (2011, p. 57) refers to this type of value-less mentor as “*the mentor from hell*”. One that does not ‘take time to mentor’; focuses on the mentors own problems during mentee sessions, and has an ‘alternative agenda’.

Most small businesses have a high sense of uniqueness that is at the core of the company (Hansford et al., 2003). Mentors therefore have to be sensitive to act in line with the company’s core value. Dalley and Hamilton (2000) as well as Hansford, Ehrich, and Tennent (2003) identified that most mentoring relationships fail to add value due to differences in three areas related to these core values; business culture, communication and learning style. Due to the nature of the shared responsibility of any mentoring relationship, it is also important for a mentee to seek to develop qualities such as a desire to learn; being people and goal oriented; introspectiveness and demonstrate their own

Initiative.(Cunningham, 1993).

According to Hale (2000) and NESTA (2009), the most crucial barrier to the success of a mentoring relationship is a mismatch in the mentor and mentee qualities. This can be surface as a mismatch in company values or learning style, a mentor with an own agenda, or a mismatch in mentee objectives and mentoring objectives. Because it is the key determinant of success, it is highly important to make an effective match between mentor and mentee. However, while ‘formal’ matching can be done up front, compatibility will develop during the relationship and cannot be fully anticipated beforehand (Cunningham, 1993).

. **The Added Value of Being Mentored**

Even though acknowledgement of entrepreneurial mentoring has increased over the past decade and the literature consistently indicates that mentoring is valuable to entrepreneurs, there are extremely few references that show specific measurable benefits (Garvey and Garrett-Harris, 2008; NESTA, 2009). Garvey and Garrett-Harris (2008) have attempted to fill this gap by conducting a review of over 100 studies on evaluating mentoring schemes. During this review a list of the most quoted benefits for mentees and the enterprise was compiled. A selection of perceived benefits from this review can be seen in Table 2.. One area particularly worthy of note in this research is the finding around the encouragement of ‘positive’ risk-taking which can be seen to support the management of strategic change in the business. Research conducted by Davies and Taylor (2004) on two mentoring programs in the UK has provided similar results, also additionally highlighting the benefit of the ‘improved network’ for the entrepreneur.

In light of this previous literature which has pointed towards some of the benefits of mentoring for entrepreneurs at start-up, the current research wanted to explore further, from the entrepreneurs’ perspective, the ‘added’ value of receiving mentoring support in a Scottish business incubator. Helping to further clarify and understand what help mentoring provides to an entrepreneur during business start-up and also explore what forms this could take to add value to the mentoring relationship.

**Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this research follows an interpretive research philosophy. The research uses an embedded case study strategy where several start-up entrepreneurs in a specific Scottish incubator engaged in a formalised mentoring program were studied (Saunders et al., 2012; Yin 2009). The findings were analysed using data displays as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to create an overview of the situation from which conclusions can be drawn. This exploratory case study was cross-sectional, given time constraints of the research.

When choosing the mentoring programme that was part of the research, consideration was given to the different mentoring programs available in Scotland since relationship duration, structure and processes differs greatly among programs. Because programs have these differences it is important to note the specific context that the participants of the primary research are operating under. The business accelerator program they are a part of offers the opportunity to all start-up entrepreneurs to join a 5 month program, in which entrepreneurs will receive aid in the form of workspace, guidance and mentoring. During these 5 months the entrepreneurs get the chance to ‘prove’ their businesses and earn a place for up to a year and a half. There are no set mentors during this time, and in theory all entrepreneurs can use the same mentor, which creates equal opportunities for each entrepreneur. While some mentoring and accelerator programs offer financial aid, the decision was made to focus on a program that does not offer this for the purposes of the research.

The narrative interview method conducted to collect the research data is based on episodic interviews (Flick, 1998). This approach of interviewing combines single interviews; where the participant is expected to answer specific questions, with a basic narrative approach; where participants are expected to provide information in the form of storytelling i.e. the specific questions will be regarding concrete situations and the narrative approach will provide an overview on the situation and the influence that the specific situations have had.

A semi-structured in-depth approach was utilized during the interviews, with mainly open questions posed (Bryman and Bell (2011). The interview questions were piloted on a start-up entrepreneur and revealed some minor structural issues in the research guide that needed to be solved to improve the flow of questions. The research used a snowballing sampling approach, (Miles and Huberman, 1994). There was initial contact with 24 participants and a sample of five participants was chosen using simple random sampling from the seven who agreed to be interviewed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interviews were opened with an explanatory introduction of the episodic interview principles. Each interview was audio recorded, and lasted an average of 46 minutes. Notes were taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal communication as well as a back-up method of collecting data in case the audio recording failed. Slight alterations were made in the transcripts to clarify statements however no major alterations were necessary.

A thematic data analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized. This approach covers qualitative data analysis through specific phases and provides a clearly structured method for analysing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2014). During the next phase, patterns that occurred in the transcripts were documented and categories were created. This documentation was structured using NVivo. This method was used because it increases both transparency and methodological rigor (Saunders et al., 2012). Within the categories, codes have been created using a thematic coding procedure ( see Bauer and Gaskell, 2000 or Flick 1998). Using these codes and the general categories, data displays on each category were created following the critical incident method (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The findings of this study reflect the perception of five start-up entrepreneurs on a specific mentoring program, and are therefore not intended to be generalizable to the population at large. The small sample size in combination with the complexity of mentoring programs and human behaviour allow for transferability of the results to a similar setting only (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2012). Ethical consideration was given to the research as the primary research method involved in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs and potentially sensitive information was discussed during these interviews. Consideration was given to include multiple mentoring programs, however due to the differences in the programs, as well as the division between financial motivators and knowledge motivators between programs this would dilute the relatively small sample group, resulting in inaccurate data and an unclear result to the research. The decision was therefore made to focus on a single mentoring program and a small sample size.

**Findings and Discussion**

Five in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2014. Relevant demographic information on the entrepreneurs interviewed is shown in Table 3. The random sampling strategy resulted in a large coverage of retail companies, however this was to be expected, as retail is a very broad industry and each of these entrepreneurs operates in a different area of retail.

Four main relevant themes arose from the research: 1. Perceived Barriers to start-ups and how mentoring can help overcome these, 2. Supporting the development of the Entrepreneurial mind-set through the mentoring, 3. Effective Mentor qualities needed if value is to be added and 4. Benefits of entrepreneurial mentoring over time. These themes will be discussed below:

***Overcoming Start-Up barriers through Mentoring***

In this first theme, the entrepreneurs interviewed identified some of the key barriers they faced and to what extent the mentoring experience could support them to overcome these barriers. The main barrier discussed by all the entrepreneurs was lack of business knowledge to achieve success in their industry (E1-5). Engaging in a formal mentoring relationship had a positive effect in this regarding allowing the entrepreneur to gain timely business knowledge when this was required. In addition. three of the entrepreneurs said that when the business was started, they found it difficult to articulate a clear business vision and possibilities for growth (E1, E3 and E4). E1 and E4 even identified their start-ups as initially unfocussed lifestyle businesses. Arguably these entrepreneurs needed the experience of the mentee-mentor relationship to support a shift in their strategic thinking: *“Having run what you would call a lifestyle business for a few years, I thought… how do I truly scale this up and make a sustainable business?”* (E4).

Interestingly, while the literature (Shurry et al. ,2001) indicates that funding is a key barrier to start-ups and a reason to reach out to a mentor and engage in a formal mentoring process, this opinion was not voiced by all the entrepreneurs. E2 and E3, however, did note they joined the mentoring programme to find opportunities for external funding, and make the best of funding opportunities when they arose . As noted by E2, the process of Mentorship was about “ *an understanding of the process of funding …fund raising…”.* Similarly E4 indicated, “*…They… drive you to a stage where if you’re put in front of an investor you know how to present yourself.”*

***Supporting the Development of the Entrepreneurial Mindset***

Supporting the development of an entrepreneurial mindset was identified as a second theme in the research and can be linked to research question 1. Supporting a need to achieve, was specifically mentioned by one entrepreneur (E1, who strongly related to entrepreneurial success stories told to him by his mentor) and tried to achieve similar successes (Lee and Jones (2008) also note the importance of reliving and retelling past events as stories. E2, E3 and E4 noted that besides supporting an achievement mindset the mentoring process helped them to recognise that they could not always achieve their goals alone. This highlighted recognition had a key role in the success of the mentoring relationship, as a negative attitude towards mentors could diminish the returns of the relationship (Cunningham, 1993). E1 for example, revealed that to support his decision making processes he took every opportunity to talk to formal mentors. In the interviews it was clear that the direction that this support needed to focus on is influenced by the mentee’s current networks. While Kram (1985) and Ragins and Cotton (1999) indicate that informal relations are more easily consulted for early stage entrepreneurs, a lack of such connections results in formal mentors becoming a primary mechanism of support for the start-up entrepreneur.

The most likely explanation for a disparate level of support required between the different entrepreneurs in the study can be further highlighted through a comparison of the needs of E1 to E4. E1 appears to have the highest need for help, and the least amount of entrepreneurial experience. E4 on the other hand, has more than 15 years entrepreneurial experience, and explained the following: “*It comes down to how much support you need, if you have no experience or if you have little experience you’re going to need a hell of a lot more support.”* (E4).

***Effective Mentoring: Qualities and Practices***

While the literature indicates several qualities that successful mentors have to possess, all entrepreneurs in the research stated that the initial contact and decision whether to continue building a relationship was actually largely based on gut feeling (as stated in the literature this also could be linked to the sense of equality in the relationship). Assessing the value of the relationship appeared to take place early on in the relationship. As stressed by E5: *“Meeting a mentor for the first time and deciding whether you want to work with them is the same as meeting a girl, you know very quickly if you like her or not.”* (E5) .. The need to tap into a ‘gut’ reaction before a relationship could be developed further was present in all the entrepreneurs interviewed.

The literature touches on mentors who lack one or more of the key mentoring qualities. The five entrepreneurs interviewed had all experienced this type of mentor. E1 indicated that they had had a bad experience with a mentor that lacked the ability to communicate (Dalley and Hamilton, 2000). E1 noted that this mentor was too domineering, taking over the decision making process. The result of this lack of communication skills resulted in an immediate breakdown of the fledgling relationship; “*it was too much for me, I never met him again” (E1).* Furthermore, E2, E3 and E5 reported to have experienced mentors with their own agenda (Clutterbuck, 2011).

E3 highlighted that one of his mentors, as their mentor-mentee relationship progressed, had suddenly revealed that there was a desire to get involved in the start-up beyond a purely mentoring function. E3 had felt that this desire was most likely present from the start of the relationships, and the fact that open communication had been lacking resulted in a sense of mistrust as soon as this mentor revealed this hidden agenda. Consequently, mentoring relationships like this were broken off instantly or very quickly afterwards.

E5, on the other hand, has experienced mentors with an alternative agenda that did possess the ability to communicate this from the start, which had a completely different result on the mentoring relationship. This entrepreneur recognised that there were three benefits mentors received from the mentoring relationship. “*The first is to help others and give back, secondly, to stay active in the business world after retirement, and the third is an alternative agenda for financial gain”* (E5). This entrepreneur continued to state “*the guys [mentors] that I actually get along really well with, they also have an angel investment interest”.* This quote indicates an alternative agenda with these mentors, however it also highlights that the connection with these mentors was strengthened by this underlying agenda. This raises the question of why, when there was an alternative agenda, there was an obvious connection. Using probing questions, this particular entrepreneur elaborated on this by noting that, while his mentors had an alternative agenda, they never lied or kept this from them. "*They said at the start, we wanted to let you know that we’re involved with an angel investment network and therefore we’re not just doing this just because we like to chat with you.”* (E5). Arguably, communication on this alternative agenda created a sense of trust because while there was an alternative agenda, it was not hidden. Furthermore, it was not against the entrepreneur’s core values and therefore, honesty actually strengthened the mentee relationship. This allowed for the mentoring relationship to grow and support the entrepreneur effectively.

During the interviews it was stressed that finding the right mentor-mentee match is a process of trial and error. The entrepreneurs found it essential to engage with a selection of mentors to find the right fit (E2 and E3). When the right match was found, a deeper relationship could be created between mentor and mentee based on honesty and openness even if other qualities may still need to be improved upon during the course of the relationship (Cox et al., 2010).

***The Mentoring Experience: Growing Value Over Time***

Every entrepreneur in the research, except one (E4), indicated that there was a growth in the benefits of the mentoring relationship over time, with additional value being added through each stage of the process, which is acknowledged in the literature by Chao (1997), Clutterbuck (2011) and Davies and Taylor (2004). The exception to this rule, E4, indicated that there was little use for mentors and combined with a low need for help, mentoring in their case was based on singular instances without building up a tangible mentor-mentee relationship. While this is a legitimate transactional way of utilizing mentors, this section will focus on entrepreneurs (E1-3, E5) that have been through at least some of the mentoring relationship phases and sought to strengthen their bonds with their mentors over time.

Entrepreneurs E1-3 and E5 specified, that after a successful initial meeting, a follow-up meeting was usually arranged to ‘kick-off” the relationship. During the starting phase of the relationship a basic level of trust was fairly quickly established (E1-E3, E5, but the depth of topics discussed appears to grow throughout the relationship as revealed by E1: *“Initially I maybe would have been embarrassed that I hadn’t recorded my books. I would have avoided discussing those type of things.”*

The other entrepreneurs (E2, E3, E5) acknowledged this feeling of holding back at the start of the relationship; however, the level of caution fluctuated depending on the entrepreneur’s personality. Both the literature, as well as the research, indicates that during the first phase of the mentoring relationship, sensitive issues are avoided. It can therefore be implied that start-up entrepreneurs are only willing to discuss sensitive issues, after a higher level of trust is built up. Probing questions were used on each entrepreneur, to identify how trust was created and how the relationship moved from phase 1 to phase 2 of the mentor-mentee relationship. E3 shared that, in order for him to feel comfortable and build a relationship of trust, the mentor had to sign a non-disclosure agreement. While the other entrepreneurs highlighted that the growth in the relationship was not attributed to anything but instinct and positive experiences with the mentor at the start.

In two instances, noted by E1 and E2, even after the mentoring relationship finished, a sense of support remained for the ‘Restart of the Relationship’. E1 related that contact occurred on a regular basis during phase 4 and mental support was still given even though the official relationship has ended. E2 had similar experiences and noted that key mentors have become part of his advisory board - underlying the value that the entrepreneurial relationship, and its deepening over time had had for the entrepreneur.

Davies and Taylor (2004) , Cull (2006) and Hall (2003) argued that structure is highly important to the success of the mentoring experience. While the literature on entrepreneurial mentoring suggests that this type of mentoring has less structure than business mentoring, frequent contact appears to be one of the ways that the entrepreneurs create an effective structure in the relationship. The frequency of contact with mentors however, was variable for our entrepreneurs. One entrepreneur said that contact was “all the time” (E1), while others acknowledged that contact was only made when there was a specific issue (E2 and E4). This difference in contact can be seen in Table 4.

**Key Benefits of Mentoring during Start-Up**

There was a general consensus among the entrepreneurs of the perceived help of the mentoring relationship during the start-up phase. All participants reported that the main benefits were related to, guidance and prioritizing, access to business knowledge and development of confidence and growing of networks,. This section will focus on these perceived benefits and discuss the entrepreneurs’ experiences.

*Guidance and Prioritizing*

All five entrepreneurs acknowledged that guidance and prioritizing is arguably the most important benefit received from the start-up mentoring program. This is in line with the literature (Section 2.5) and the psychosocial function of the Two-Function Model (Kram, 1985). Regardless of the need for help, entrepreneurs acknowledged that guidance was sought for specific issues. *"What you should be doing now is making contact with manufacturers in China. So they just give me the guidance, to keep me in check so I’m putting the right foot forward first.” (E1)*

Searching for guidance on specific issues relates well to the development of the entrepreneurial mindset and fits into the entrepreneurial behavioural pattern of learning selectively and purposefully. The research presented revealed, that a higher need for help and the level of trust achieved both saw an increase in the amount and coverage of guidance requested. This was true of all the entrepreneurs, except E4, as guidance was sought on a more frequent basis and on a wider range of issues as time passed and bonds were strengthened.

### *Business Knowledge*

Gaining business knowledge was also identified as a highly important benefit of the mentoring relationship at start-up. The entrepreneurs in this research have identified several areas they felt had benefitted, including, Finance; Sales and marketing; Legal and general General business management.

### *Confidence*

Besides gaining knowledge, all entrepreneurs revealed that gaining confidence was a benefit of mentoring. This finding reflects others studies in the literature. The mentor serves the following function in this respect. “*An open and honest sounding board where you can express any fears and issues you may have in a supportive environment*.” (E2)

The function of having a sounding board that understands the position the entrepreneur is appeared to have a significant impact on the confidence of the entrepreneurs. E4 stressed that it can be very lonely running a business and the possibility to discuss decisions and receive confirmation and recognition boosted their confidence. However, it largely depended on the entrepreneur’s network and background whether the mentor fulfilled this role in the mentor-mentee relationship.

### *Network*

Four out of five entrepreneurs further reported that the network of the mentee had also benefited from the mentor-mentee relationship and the literature also noted this. E1, E3 and E4 said that their mentors utilized personal networks to aid the entrepreneurs, whereas E2 noted he built his network through adding mentors. Adding social capital from increasing diversity of contacts in his field. E5 indicated that networking could be a potential benefit however due to his business eventually closing this benefit was not present to the extent of the other entrepreneurs.

### *Mentoring relationships that Add Value*

### As noted previously, all but one of the entrepreneurs in the research perceived formal mentoring that takes place over time and at fairly frequent intervals tended to add the most value. However there were other forms of mentoring that also appeared to add additional value during the start-up process identified through the research. Two of these are outlined and discussed below.

### *Peer Support*

A result of a positive formal mentoring relationship can be the desire to support others who are in the same situation that has been faced and overcome with the support of a mentor. While engaging in these informal peer mentoring sessions, knowledge obtained through interactions with mentors could be shared between entrepreneurs. This positive attitude to pass beneficial support on to other was summed up by E4. “*A particular business struggled early on in the program so I offered help through my connections and find the information they need at the start of the journey. If someone had done that to me when I first started, it would have saved me a lot of time*.” (E4)

The sense of being in the same boat is clear in this quote, as an unconscious connection is made to issues that have occurred previously to this entrepreneur.

Arguably peer support is the result of positive mentoring experiences and the feeling to give back creates a virtuous circle. NESTA (2009) has stated that when entrepreneurial mentoring has a positive outcome, the possibility of this entrepreneur becoming a mentor for ‘the next generation’ is high. This is seen with E4, who noted that while the business failed, there were possibilities to start supporting entrepreneurs with the knowledge obtained during the program as well as the financial knowledge obtained during his career. This process has already started as, currently, two start-up entrepreneurs are mentored by this individual. Therefore, while the literature does not identify peer support as a benefit it could be argued that the willingness to help other entrepreneurs is indeed an outcome of a positive mentoring relationship.

Several of the entrepreneurs in the study indicated peer support was an important result of the mentoring relationship. Knowledge obtained through mentors is shared among entrepreneurs, and more importantly, the mentality of the entrepreneurs’ changes. Being guided by a mentor creates a deeper understanding on the value of mentoring, and the entrepreneurs want to give this back. This resulted in at least informal mentoring, or in one case, becoming a formal mentor to the ‘next generation’ of entrepreneurs.

### *Multiple Mentoring*

In contrast to traditional business mentoring programs, most entrepreneurs in the program under study had 2 or more mentors they were regularly using. A close bond was created with some of these mentors and these relationships went through the four phases identified earlier, while others appeared to have the right knowledge to help get specific issues solved but the emotional connection was absent and therefore this form of connection did not add as much value over time to the entrepreneur .

While business mentoring is usually limited to a single mentor, entrepreneurs in this mentoring program seemed to be utilizing multiple mentors. This suggests the use of multiple mentors at first phase of mentoring to enhance the result of the entrepreneurial learning experience. The frequency in mentoring contact differed per mentor however, indicating that a good match between mentor and mentee needed to be made in order to start a mentoring relationship. While the support of the mentor during the first phase was shying away from sensitive issues, these were not purely psychosocial (Kram, 1985). Furthermore, this also related to the feeling of being more equal in the relationship. We found that mentors, where a strong connection was made and who identified the type of needs each entrepreneur had, were consulted on a more regular basis. While not all relationships in this research have reached this stage yet, it can be argued that phase 4 of restarting the relationship only occurs when a strong connection over time is forged between mentor and mentee.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

The benefits that mentoring provide the entrepreneur during business start-up and what forms of mentoring add value to the mentoring relationship still needs to be further explored. However, this small scale in-depth study has gone some way to answer those questions in the discussion and finding section above. The following recommendations aim to create more value of the mentee-mentor relationship and are related to this research’s main findings. They are intended for support agencies and the entrepreneurs in its mentoring programs:

1. In order for the supporting agencies to create more value in the mentoring program, an increased awareness and support to develop relevant mentoring qualities is recommended. Surprisingly all entrepreneurs interviewed identified that they had to deal with mentors that were lacking qualities needed for a successful mentoring relationship which resulted in several failed attempts to find the right match.
2. Furthermore, the recommendation is made to have potential mentors undergo training which will enable them to identify the type of needs each entrepreneur has.
3. In order for the entrepreneurs to gain the most from mentoring relationships, the recommendation is made to openly discuss issues that arise in order for the support to be optimal.
4. Furthermore, it is indicated in the findings that the value from mentoring is optimal when a relationship is built over time rather than when mentors are consulted on a needs only basis. Therefore, the recommendation is made that when entrepreneurs engage in a mentoring program, to have regular contact and create a bond with the mentor, growing the relationship and broadening the type of support overtime. This will result in a more reliable source of help when it is needed.
5. Finally, it is clear from the data that other types of mentoring relationships should also be explored. For example, peer mentoring is highlighted and more radically ‘team mentoring’ is also suggested where more than one mentor is working with the entrepreneur simultaneously to support the development of the necessary skills for the entrepreneur to succeed.

Despite the obvious limitations to the research approach, such as a small sample size of five (ruling out generalisability of findings) and a focus on one mentoring program the authors have sought to rigorously present an accurate representation of the phenomena under investigation and identify key elements of the research that would support the reproducibility of the findings. Since the literature on entrepreneurial mentoring during the start-up phase is limited future research is needed to explore this concept further. In order for future research to add a significant contribution, a longitudinal study is advised where a larger sample group from different mentoring programs is researched.

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**Tables and Figures:**

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| --- |
| Directing  **Nurturing**  **Stretching**    Non-Directing |
|  |

**Figure 1: Four Basic Styles of Helping (Clutterbuck 2011, p.17)**

**Table 1: Phases of Mentoring Relationships (Clutterbuck 2011, p. 108)**

**Table 2: Benefits of Mentoring for Mentees and Enterprises (Nesta 2009)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Entrepreneur** | **Gender** | **Age Range** | **Industry** | **Previous Work experience** | **Interview**  **Time** |
| **E1** | **Female** | **25-35** | **Retail** | **None** | **38.15** |
| **E2** | **Female** | **35-45** | **Retail** | **Entrepreneurial**  **Experience** | **44.12** |
| **E3** | **Male** | **25-35** | **Technology** | **Entrepreneurial**  **Experience** | **54.33** |
| **E4** | **Male** | **25-35** | **Retail** | **Entrepreneurial**  **Experience** | **47.58** |
| **E5** | **Male** | **36-45** | **Retail** | **Accounting Experience** | **46.50** |

**Table 3: Demographic Information on Interviewees**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Entrepreneur** | **Contact Over 5 months** |
| **E1** | **All the Time** |
| **E1** | **Two weeks** |
| **E2** | **Regular Basis** |
| **E2** | **Need Only (multiple Mentors)** |
| **E3** | **Two Weeks** |
| **E3** | **Four Weeks** |
| **E4** | **Need Only (Multiple Mentors)** |
| **E5** | **Four Weeks** |

**Table 4: Mentor/Mentee Contact**