

Mentoring in the workplace: Exploring the experiences of mentor–mentee relations



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Orientation: The way work is performed changes continuously and mentoring is becoming more prevalent in the workplace and this rapid modification of work profiles mentoring relationships as vital.

Research purpose: This study explored the mentor's and mentee's experiences in the same relationship at a construction firm offering a formal mentoring programme.

Motivation for the study: A more comprehensive understanding of the mentoring relationship was required to aid organisations with agile and robust talent and skills development interventions.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research design was employed and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Data were analysed in two phases: (1) direct content analysis and (2) thematic analyses. The study's findings are singularly reported to comprehensively understand the mentoring relationship's lived experiences.

Main findings: The experiences of the mentoring relationship in a workplace context are viewed as informal, mutualistic, and context-bound. Four key themes emerged from the mentoring relational interaction: (1) positive relationship, (2) growth and enablement, (3) psychological safety, and (4) purposeful.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings could assist organisations in realising the importance of mentoring relationships in mentoring programmes, as the interaction proves effective in solving pressing challenges, such as attracting and retaining talent and addressing skills gaps.

Contribution/value-add: This study conceptualises the mentoring relationship from an organisational context and contributes to the limited available literature on the topic. Possible recommendations are offered to improve workplace mentoring relationships.

Keywords: experiences; mentoring relationship; mentor; mentee; organisation.

Introduction

Globally, organisations face significant financial and operational challenges, with increased talent shortages because of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Alhamidi, 2022). Various organisations offer mentoring programmes to transfer skills and knowledge and develop future leaders (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Stapley et al. (2022) state that mentoring programmes are practical and beneficial in ensuring organisational expansion and sustainability. However, the mentoring relationship is central to the success of these mentorship programmes. Despite this, research on the lived experiences of the mentoring relationship within organisational contexts is disproportionately sparse and yet to be fully conceptualised in literature (Hu et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021; Mantzourani et al., 2022).

A vast body of literature (Mohana & Enoch, 2020; Poon et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019) focuses on mentoring relationships, either the quality (Astrove & Kraimer, 2021) or the success of the relationship (Gakonga & Mann, 2022). Conversely, limited perspectives concentrate solely on the experiences of the relationship (Liu et al., 2021) and from the viewpoints of mentors and mentees in the workplace. Zhou et al. (2019) add that both perspectives must be explored to comprehensively understand the mentoring relationship, thus addressing a long-standing research gap. Hale (2018) proclaims that a clear conceptualisation of the relationship is required, especially in workplace settings. Furthermore, the relationship has also not been holistically understood theoretically.

Given these arguments, this study aimed to explore the mentor's and mentee's experiences within the same mentoring relationship in a workplace context. The research participants were well-positioned to reveal their veracious and authentic experiences of the mentoring relationship. The general objective was to explore the mentors' and mentees' experiences in the same relationship in a construction firm. This study was timely as it calls for more studies to address the limited insights and conceptualisations of mentoring relationships within organisations.

Literature review

Mentoring

Mentoring is widely recognised as an agile workplace learning mechanism because of the changing, complex, and challenging nature of the world of work (Davey et al., 2020). Steinmann (2017) defines mentoring as a continuous relationship between the mentor (often the experienced individual) and the mentee (usually the less experienced individual). Mentoring involves the mentor sharing knowledge, skills, and experiences to equip the mentee to reach their optimum potential. Contemporary definitions of mentoring have widened from skills development to personal growth (Koopman et al., 2021). The interaction has shifted from directed (where the mentor owns the control) to more self-directed (with the mentee holding the control). The relationship goals have also moved from 'knowledge transfer to critical reflection and application' (Steinmann, 2017, p. 5).

During mentoring, mentees receive training, guidance, and advice from mentors within an assigned amount of time (Steinmann, 2017) and form a close-knit relationship. Generally, mentors have extensive education, knowledge, and experience (Eby & Robertson, 2020). In contrast, mentees are focused on learning specific skills at the start of their careers and view mentors as trusted role models with prior experience or familiarity with the developmental goal (Ard & Beasley, 2022). Mentors act as a resource to mentees, orient them on workplace requirements, and continually support them in building their self-esteem and confidence (Stapley et al., 2022). However, Gee and Popper (2017) argue that there is no sole framework to ensure effective mentoring; instead, the framework is relative to the environment, the intention, and the individuals.

The mentoring process

Heeneman and De Grave (2019) assert that there are invaluable benefits to outlining a mentoring process, making the relationship life-changing. Effective mentoring requires a systematic approach that dictates direction, guidance, and cadence (Steinmann, 2017). According to Kram (1983), the mentoring process is linear and consists of four phases, namely: (1) initiation, (2) cultivation, (3) separation, and (4) redefinition. Each step is driven by the mentor's and mentee's needs and the organisation's workplace objectives. Eby and Robertson (2020) state that setting realistic expectations and achievable goals is essential, with accountability levels and

regular development feedback from both parties. Lastly, tracking and measuring the success of the mentoring process assists in shared learning between the mentor and the mentee. Consequently, more emphasis is placed on the relationship's significance rather than the mentoring's success (Steinmann, 2017).

The structure and delivery of mentoring have evolved from the traditional face-to-face interaction. As a result of COVID-19 and remote working, electronic mentoring has become increasingly favoured (Iqbal, 2020), allowing mentoring to occur worldwide (i.e. a mentee and a mentor can be based in two different locations and still share a relationship). In hybrid work modes, mentoring is used as a support system to enable employees to reach performance objectives while adjusting to a new working method and maintaining connections with leaders and colleagues (Laker, 2021). Furthermore, in a global survey conducted by Deloitte among millennials, it was found that mentees want to be mentored by individuals who are accessible via real-time channels (Liu et al., 2021).

The mentoring relationship

Relationships, for this purpose, are regarded as the verbal and non-verbal behaviours between the interacting individuals and are seen as continuous interactions that occur over time (Baxter, 2011; Roos, 2016). The mentoring relationship is a social partnership involving an 'interpersonal exchange influenced by both the mentor and mentee perceptions of each other' (Pfund et al., 2016, p. 240), occurring formally or informally. Formal mentoring relationships can last between 6 to 12 months and 5 or more years if developed informally (Kram, 1983; Ragins & Kram, 2007). According to Kram (1983), the mentoring relationship is intense and interpersonal, which is enacted through career (e.g. exposure and guidance) and psychosocial support behaviours (e.g. counselling and role-modelling). In addition, the relationship is dyadic, professional, and intentional (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021) and facilitates learning and collaboration with the goal of professional and personal development (Mantzourani et al., 2022).

Roos (2016) denotes that the self-interactional group theory (SIGT), which was the underlying theory of this study, refers to relationships as 'reciprocal, continuous communicative interactions between members of different generations' (p. 141). Mentoring relationships are not isolated but embedded in the broader work environment. The mentor-mentee interaction occurs in a particular interpersonal context within the workplace for a specific purpose. The workplace provides the boundary for the nature of the relational interactions in a mentor and mentee's interpersonal context. From an interpersonal perspective, mentoring relationships help mentors and mentees to collaborate in sharing knowledge and transferring workplace skills. On an intrapersonal level, the mentor and the mentee simultaneously grow and develop from the mentoring interaction (Roos, 2016; Zhang et al., 2016).

In addition to self-interactional group theory (SIGT), this study draws on the general systems theory, highlighting that a system cannot be viewed as fixed independent parts but as a combined whole (Indira, 2014). The mentoring relationship is reciprocal between the mentor, the mentee, and the organisation (Stapley et al., 2022). Therefore, a lack of commitment by any of these parties could result in an ineffective relationship. Mentoring concentrates on the holistic development of mentees rather than single parts. The general systems theory further describes breaking whole pieces into parts to determine how the pieces work together in a system (Marais & Meier, 2010). Similarly, the mentoring relationship must be understood within its context (i.e. the organisation) and by mentors and mentees. Moreover, if applied correctly, mentoring can be a powerful and valuable instrument to ensure organisational growth and longevity, at all levels, within organisations (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

Experiences of the mentoring relationship in the workplace

In the workplace, effective mentoring relationships expand professional networks and lead to career opportunities, improved employee engagement, job satisfaction, and higher levels of resilience and well-being (Davey et al., 2020; Grossman, 2013). Previous studies have found the mentoring relationship to be positive, mutually beneficial, and yield positive outcomes for mentors and mentees, resulting in a virtuous circle (Sheehan et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2019). Empowered mentees subsequently display increased motivation, stimulating their need to succeed (Mantzourani et al., 2022). Comparatively, mentors attain intrinsic satisfaction by knowing that they have contributed to the advancement of their mentees, reaching a sense of belonging and self-actualisation. Mentors also benefit from self-enhancement by developing their leadership skills and reflecting on personal learning (Steinmann, 2017).

Relational and individual factors also contribute to an effective mentoring relationship, namely: (1) the congruency between the perceptions and expectations of the mentor, mentee, and organisation and (2) the constancy of communication and accessibility of the mentor (Zhang et al., 2016). For the relationship to flourish, establishing trust, accountability, sharing viewpoints, asking questions freely, mutual respect, and maintaining similar values are imperative (Mantzourani et al., 2022). Equally, Green and Jackson (2014) point out that unsuccessful relationships can cause dissatisfaction between mentors and mentees. These include the mismatch of a mentor to a mentee or vice versa, personality clashes, a lack of commitment, inadequate mentoring knowledge, experience, and skills, and the absence of organisational support (Dehon et al., 2015).

Organisations are pivotal in facilitating mentoring relationships and contributing to mentoring experiences by providing structure, guidelines, and policies (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Mantzourani et al. (2022) highlight that mentorship programmes must consider well-articulated design structures

to ensure that those involved in the relationship can develop adequate characteristics to enhance their mentoring experience. Liu et al. (2021) recommend that organisations offer timeous training to mentors to help establish their role, which could eradicate perceived power imbalances and the overlap in work and social boundaries.

Worldwide, organisations find it challenging to devise innovative workplace initiatives (that are not monetary related) to retain and recruit qualified individuals (Alhamidi, 2022). Therefore, the mentoring relationship is a critical people intervention strategy for supporting, developing and retaining high-potential employees (Menzin et al., 2020). However, according to Hu et al. (2016), limited research examines the role of the organisational climate within the mentoring relationship, specifically, the mentors' perceptions of the mentoring support mentees receive. Moreover, Spiekermann and Lawrence (2020) declare a lack of knowledge on the relationship's role in mentoring or how mentoring relationships develop over time. The experiences of the mentoring relational experiences embedded in an organisational environment have not been extensively understood. Thus, this study aimed to explore the mentors' and mentees' experiences within the same relationship in a construction firm. Furthermore, the study sought to provide an understanding of the return on the mentoring relationship, make recommendations to improve the relationship and offer a more comprehensive definition.

Research design

Research approach

The critical realism approach was used to understand the realities, translations, and experiences of the mentoring relationship in its natural setting.

Research strategy

A qualitative research design was followed to explore the lived experiences of the relationship. The focus was on understanding the meanings mentors and mentees ascribed to their relational interactions (Creswell, 2013).

Research method

Research setting

This study was conducted at a global construction firm in the Gauteng province, offering a formal mentoring programme. The organisation predominantly specialises in construction services (engineering design and project management solutions). The formal mentoring programme has been active for the last 2 years and the organisation initiated and matched the relationships. As a result of the scarce and critical skills required within the construction industry, the mentoring programme helps to build and retain technical and specialist skills. Furthermore, the programme aimed at mentors equipping mentees with the necessary knowledge and practical experience to achieve professional certifications.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Permission to take forward the study was sought from the scientific and ethics committee of the Economic and Management Sciences Faculty of the North-West University. Approval was also obtained from the organisation's Human Resources Director (HRD) to conduct the study. The HRD acted as the gatekeeper and was briefed on the study's undertakings and ethical protocols.

The researchers maintained various roles throughout the study, which included conceptualising the research topic, reviewing previous research, writing the literature review, data collection, transcribing, coding, and analysis, and writing the study. The researchers minimised personal bias by employing various strategies to ensure data integrity and trustworthiness.

Research participants and sampling methods

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling. Neuman (2011) states that criterion sampling is a non-probability sampling method that selects participants through a pre-established criterion. This criterion included: (1) the participants must be a mentor or a mentee, (2) the participants must be involved in the same mentor–mentee relationship, and (3) the partnership must be 6 months or longer. Participants included mentors and mentees employed at the organisation and were from the engineering, finance, quantity surveying, and human capital departments. The participants were recruited through the HRD and part of the organisation's formal mentoring programme. The mentors were qualified senior leaders with more than 5 years of working experience and acted as the direct manager for some mentees. The mentees were graduates and junior consultants with less than 3 years of work experience.

The study's sample size depended on the availability of mentoring relationships at the organisation. Eight relationships were closely studied – five mentors and eight mentees, with two mentors mentoring more than one mentee. Table 1 reflects the breakdown of the relationships and the participants' biographical information.

Data collection methods

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with research participants, including mentors and mentees in the same mentoring relationship, to explore the relational interaction holistically. The interviews were conducted virtually to ensure strict maintenance of the COVID-19 regulations. The duration of the in-depth semi-structured interviews was 30 min–45 min, depending on the interview's participatory nature. All voluntary participants signed consent forms and returned them to the researchers before the interview. Participants (mentors and mentees) were interviewed separately via a secure online platform and asked identical questions about their experiences of the same relationship from a mentor's or mentee's perspectives. The following interview questions were asked:

TABLE 1: Participants' biographical information ($N = 13$).

Mentoring relationship	Mentoring role	Participant (P)	Age category	Gender
MR – 1	Mentor	Participant 1	31–40	Male
MR – 1	Mentee	Participant 2	26–30	Female
MR – 2	Mentee	Participant 3	26–30	Female
MR – 3	Mentee	Participant 4	26–30	Female
MR – 4	Mentor	Participant 5	26–30	Female
MR – 4	Mentee	Participant 6	26–30	Female
MR – 5	Mentee	Participant 7	26–30	Female
MR – 6	Mentor	Participant 8	31–40	Female
MR – 6	Mentee	Participant 9	31–40	Female
MR – 7	Mentor	Participant 10	26–30	Female
MR – 7	Mentee	Participant 11	26–30	Male
MR – 8	Mentor	Participant 12	26–30	Male
MR – 8	Mentee	Participant 13	26–30	Male

MR, mentoring relationship.

- Please describe your relationship with your mentor or mentee in as much detail as possible.
- Describe an example where you experienced the relationship as positive and optimal.
- Provide an example of a negative experience with the mentor or the mentee. Please include everything you can remember (i.e. from where it started, its progression, and how it ended).
- What recommendations would you make to optimise mentoring relationships in the workplace?

Probing questions were asked to obtain rich details about the mentoring relationship (Neuman, 2011). All participant interviews were conducted in English, and data saturation was achieved even though eight relationships were studied. In the collection and analysis phases, conceptual coherence was applied to cluster homogeneous concepts and data.

Data recording

Participants provided permission for the interviews to be audio and video recorded, which was also included in the consent form. The researchers ensured the safety and confidentiality of all participant information by storing it on their password-protected laptops.

Data analysis

Data were analysed in two phases to ensure richer findings. The first phase focused on deductively investigating and separately analysing the two data sets to understand the meanings participants attached to the relationship. Direct content analysis was utilised to analyse the textual data of mentors and mentees to understand their perceptions, meanings, and experiences of the relationship. The second data phase is as highlighted and involved combining and analysing the data using thematic analysis. Therefore, the study reports both phases of data analyses singularly to obtain a complete view of the experiences of mentoring relationships.

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Credibility was applied to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the results based on the research design. The

researchers rigorously studied the obtained data by identifying pertinent characteristics significant to the research topic (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researchers provided thick, detailed descriptions of the experiences of the relationship and research findings to ensure transference to other contexts. An independent co-coder was appointed to check transcriptions and ensure precise data translations and interpretations of themes (Neuman, 2011). Furthermore, the researchers provided the same information about the study to all participants, and a standard interview protocol was followed. All participants' responses were captured as per their narratives to mitigate the researchers' personal biases and dispositions.

Reporting style

The study utilised a narrative qualitative reporting style. The direct responses of the participants were used to support the study's findings and represent the participant's experiences.

Ethical considerations

The research committee approved this study in the relevant research entity of North-West University. Ethical clearance was obtained by the Economics and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-00026-21-A4). The researchers maintained all ethical obligations throughout the study and ensured that no harm was caused to the participants. Participants provided informed consent to the researchers to participate in the research and were made aware of withdrawal from the study at any point.

Results

Four key themes emerged from the study, with several subthemes. Table 2 provides a summary of the key themes and subthemes.

Theme 1: Positive relationship

Mentor's and mentee's experiences within the same mentoring relationship appeared to be positive and aligned

TABLE 2: Summary of key themes and sub-themes.

Key theme	Sub-theme
Positive relationship	Personal attributes
	Open communication
	Commitment
Growth and enablement	Exchange of knowledge and skills
	Gaining practical experience
	Mentor accessibility
	Continuous feedback
Psychological safety	Freedom
	Collaboration
	Respect
	Shared trust
	Honesty
Purposeful	Goal-orientation
	Professional networks
	Empowerment

with each other's perspectives. The relationship experiences were constructive, less formal and more intimate between the mentor and the mentee (Roos, 2016; Steinmann, 2017). When research participants were asked to describe their relationship experiences independently, the following quotes transpired:

'It's an easy-going, good, and open dialogue relationship.' (MR – 1, P1, Male)

'It's been a positive experience.' (MR – 4, P5, Female)

'We have a good relationship; we understand each other and get each other. It's more of a sisterly kind of relationship.' (MR – 4, P6, Female)

Participants were also asked to share a negative relationship experience during the interview. Almost all participants declared they had no negative experiences to share, except one participant noted an overlap of personal and professional boundaries:

'It is involving my mentor too much in my personal life, as she always brings it up. Sometimes, I don't want to revisit these things, and she will want to go back.' (MR – 4, P6, Female)

According to Fornari et al. (2014), a challenge for many mentors is striking a personal and professional balance. Therefore, setting relationship boundaries, expectations, and limits is vital. In comparison, Hu et al. (2016) assert that the overlap across the different contexts could be attributed to the mentor's caring nature or other characteristics whereby they take a deep interest in the mentee's journey.

Subtheme 1.1: Personal attributes

The personal attributes of both mentors and mentees largely contributed to them experiencing the relationship as positive. Participants stated that a positive attitude, responsibility, and patience are essential:

'A positive attitude, patience, and friendliness.' (MR – 1, P1, Male)

'He's very nice, patient and motivating. He doesn't get upset easily; he's willing and susceptible to change. He is willing to adapt, even though he has so much more experience.' (MR – 3, P4, Female)

Mentors specifically noticed that the mentee's willingness to learn heavily impacted the mentoring relationship:

'They are willing to try and learn, so I think it's an attitude. They are very interested in learning about themselves and others and want to improve, which helps because sometimes you must draw that out of people.' (MR – 4, P5, Female)

Subtheme 1.2: Open communication

Research participants stated that open communication was a significant experience in the relationship, with the occurrence of more interpersonal communication. The following quotations are supportive of this subtheme:

'We have open dialogue and communication.' (MR – 2; P1, Male, 31 – 40 years old)

'We have good and transparent communication. She helps you communicate with other people in the workplace at different levels, and that's positive for me.' (MR – 5, P7, Female)

'We both really have good communication between us, which I think makes our relationship positive.' (MR – 7, P11, Male)

Subtheme 1.3: Commitment

According to Allen and Eby (2008), the quality of mentoring relationships increases if commitment is prevalent, especially within formal programmes. Commitment also resulted in positive mentoring experiences, with mentees acknowledging effort and added resources as indications of commitment and dedication from their mentors. Furthermore, participants affirmed that commitment was necessary from both parties for the relationship to flourish:

'Mentors and mentees need to show commitment to the relationship and process.' (MR – 4, P5, Female)

'I feel that my mentor is committed and enthusiastic. For example, she gives me additional resources to help me.' (MR – 5; P7, Female)

'You have to put in the effort, or the time, from both ends.' (MR – 6, P8, Female)

Theme 2: Growth and enablement

Participants declared that the relationship led to growth and enablement, thus making the mentoring experience mutually beneficial and rewarding. Moreover, mentees learn and grow within their specialised field of expertise, while mentors develop their leadership skills and achieved satisfaction from mentoring:

'Through this, I am learning to lead others better, and it is just that thing of knowing that I've passed on a skill to someone. I've made a difference in someone's career.' (MR – 6, P8, Female)

'I constantly upskill myself because I must be able to equip her. The learning is mutual. I also learn from my mentees.' (MR – 1; P1, Male, 31 – 40 years old)

'If I just look at when she started to where she is now, there has just been a massive growth in so many different ways.' (MR – 5, P5, Female)

Subtheme 2.1: Exchange of knowledge and skills

Participants' experiences of the relationship indicated the successful exchange of knowledge and skills, resulting in professional and personal development. The following quotes were shared by participants during the interviews:

'He has a lot of knowledge and experience. He is very forthcoming and very willing to share.' (MR – 3, P4, Female)

'It gives me someone to go to for guidance and learn new knowledge, so I'm not alone.' (MR – 5, P7, Female)

Subtheme 2.2: Gaining practical experience

Obtaining practical experience for mentees has been fundamental to their relationship experiences, as they are recent graduates or junior consultants, and mentoring allows them to transition into the workplace. Through the firm's mentoring programme, mentors equipped mentees to

bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experience, allowing mentees to apply their theoretical knowledge practically. In turn, mentors also obtained practical mentoring experience and saw the value of offering hands-on exposure as they have personally previously experienced the benefits of being mentored. Participants' experiences entailed:

'The work environment is very different to what you learn at university or what you become accustomed to in your studies. So, by having a mentor, I can get practice on things like how to manage projects.' (MR – 1, P2, Female)

'It's difficult to adjust to the workplace, and having a mentor helps with that adjustment and translates what we learnt in university to actual real work.' (MR – 2, P3, Female)

'I am also getting mentoring experience. I take this quite seriously because I was part of quite a good mentorship program, so I see the benefits.' (MR – 8, P13, Male)

Subtheme 2.3: Mentor accessibility

Mentors ensured that they were accessible to their mentees via various communication channels, thus being easily reachable to mentees. The following quotes support this relationship experience:

'He's like constantly available. If I need help with something or need guidance.' (MR – 3, P4, Female)

'I make myself available for him. He can text me, call me and email me. I ensure I give him time, even outside our mentoring sessions.' (MR – 8, P12, Male)

Subtheme 2.4: Continuous feedback

Participants declared that the relationship requires a systematic feedback process by both individuals. Mentors provided mentees with timeous feedback that assisted with personal development and improved their quality of work. In comparison, mentees provided mentors with feedback on their progress, relationship experiences and suggestions for improvement:

'He gives very detailed feedback on all my documents, and I incorporate it into my next revision, and my work becomes better. His feedback is also quick.' (MR – 1, P2, Female)

'It's a two-way thing. I make sure I give him feedback immediately while we are working on the task. I also ask him what he needs and what else I should do to improve his mentoring experience.' (MR – 8, P12, Male)

Theme 3: Psychological safety

Workplace psychological safety is the belief (underpinned by trust and respect) that it is safe to undertake interpersonal risks despite adverse consequences, which contributes to increased work engagement, motivation, and performance (Ahmad et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Participants experienced the relationship as safe and non-judgemental, with mentors acting as sounding boards for mentees. The following quotes contribute to the connection being experienced as psychologically safe:

'I can say whatever to her, and she doesn't judge.' (MR – 4, P6, Female)

'I feel comfortable to ask her any question; even if I don't understand something, I don't feel bad asking her to explain it again.' (MR – 6, P9, Female)

'No parties must be scared to talk to each other.' (MR – 7; P11, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 3.1: Freedom

Participants experienced the relationship as flexible and non-authoritative and felt free to ask questions. These relationship experiences suggest that the context (i.e. the construction firm) promotes proactive workplace behaviours, where freedom, acceptance and respect are achieved:

'He is not authoritative. He gives me much freedom.' (MR – 1, P2, Female)

'She is just there to guide, or if I just need any advice on anything. I can ask her anything.' (MR – 4, P6, Female)

'The relationship is just free, open and friendly.' (MR – 7, P1, Male)

Subtheme 3.2: Collaboration

Psychological safety has been widely recognised as salient in collaboration and is rooted in mentoring to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and skills (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Thus, emphasising joint efforts rather than single efforts. The supportive participant quotes are as follows:

'He allows input and collaboration on projects and tasks. The quality is also quite high, so that sort of becomes engraved in you, so when we give documents out, it needs to be of a certain standard.' (MR – 1; P2, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

'We have collaborative goals where we both do parts to ensure we meet the goal or the deadline.' (MR – 5; P7, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 3.3: Respect

In the workplace, collaboration is facilitated by respect, owing to everyone holding different ideas and opinions and should be respected for them. Participants asserted the proceeding:

'There is mutual respect between us, and that's important. She also respects my knowledge, feedback, and suggestions.' (MR – 1; P1, Male, 31 – 40 years old)

'I respect him, and he shows me respect, although I have a lesser experience. He values what I say.' (MR – 2; P3, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 3.4: Shared trust

Mantourani et al. (2022) highlight that mutual respect results in shared trust. Mentees value being trusted when given tasks by mentors, even though they are less experienced than their mentors and trust their mentors with their development. Participants declared the following during their interviews:

'I think there is much trust between us to complete tasks on my own, which shows me that she values and trusts me.' (MR – 7; P1, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

'He also trusts me to complete what we decided on.' (MR – 8; P12, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

'I trust my mentor with my growth and development, and she trusts me to get work done.' (MR – 8; P13, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 3.5: Honesty

Research participants stated that transparency was vital for the relationship to function and promoted respect, trust, and openness. The succeeding quotes depict these statements:

'They should just be as involved and be honest as they can be... it makes the relationship more trustworthy.' (MR – 2, P3, Female)

'There is honesty and transparency between us, and that makes our relationship open and good.' (MR – 6, P9, Female)

'There are no secrets or holding back on anything. We are real with each other.' (MR – 8, P12, Male)

Theme 4: Purposeful

The mentoring relational interaction occurs for a specific purpose within a particular context (Roos, 2016). Participants reported that the mentoring relationship was purposeful and undertaken for a specific reason (i.e. to build knowledge, gain practical hours for professional registrations, and develop specific job-related skills):

'We do the mentoring programme for a reason, and my role is to help her attain the knowledge and skills to prepare for her board exams.' (MR – 2, P1, Male)

'I am in the mentoring programme because I need to register as an engineer with the The Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA), and he is already a qualified engineer, so we focus on the requirements for that in every session.' (MR – 1; P2, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 4.1: Goal-orientation

Participants denoted that targeted developmental goals must be met to accomplish the purpose of the mentoring process. The following quotes support this subtheme:

'There are goals in place to help us, and I have helped her create a development plan.' (MR – 2; P1, Male, 31 – 40 years old)

'We have goals that we have to meet according to different timelines.' (MR – 2; P3, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 4.2: Professional networking

Mentees reported that the relationship helped to develop their professional networks with other experienced professionals outside their organisation, which they leveraged to achieve mentoring goals and attain guidance. The following quotes are representative of this subtheme:

'She was able to connect me with two people, and they proved to be valuable in the advice they gave me and their guidance, so she put me in touch with people from her network.' (MR – 6; P9, Female, 31 – 40 years old)

'He referred me to another well-experienced engineer who works in a completely different environment, much bigger than our company, so I can connect with him to understand more about the field as I am still new.' (MR – 8; 12, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

Subtheme 4.3: Empowerment

The focus of mentoring is to help individuals develop in their careers and be autonomous (Steinmann, 2017). Mentees declared that the mentoring relationship had led them to become confident and independent, implying that mentoring is an empowering experience. Mentors openly shared their knowledge and expertise and ensured they holistically understood mentees to unlock potential and meet mentoring goals. The following participant quotes encompassed these views:

'It's helped with my confidence.' (MR – 5; P7, Female, 26 – 30 years old)

'It has helped my ability to self-start and be confident in the quality of my work, and that has helped.' (MR – 7; P11, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

'He tries to understand you as the person you are, and then he uses that to mentor you to make you better and emphasise your qualities that need some work.' (MR – 8; P12, Male, 26 – 30 years old)

Discussion

Outline of results

This study aimed to explore the mentor's and mentee's experiences within the same relationship in a construction firm. The results indicate that the relationship experiences are beneficial. The exchange further depicts having a significant return (the positive aspects identified) on the mentoring relationship for mentors and mentees.

Experiences of the mentor - mentee relationship

The study's findings infer that the relationship experiences are positive and progressive. Participants described the relationship as casual, informal, and intimate, with mentors and mentees sharing a deep connection and likening their experience to a sibling relationship (with the mentor taking the role of an elder brother or sister). Kumar (2021) concurs with this finding and states that mentoring relationships are tightly knit, and mentees often associate mentors with elder siblings. Open communication, the personal attributes of mentors and mentees, and commitment also played a vital role in mentors and mentees experiencing a positive relational interaction. A recent study by Tetzlaff et al. (2022) found that communication during mentoring must be adaptable, effective, and transparent. This outcome is consistent with the participants' experiences in this study.

Mentoring involves exchanging knowledge and skills (Eby & Robertson, 2020). This study confirms and credits the mentoring relationship as two-fold and mutualistic. Both parties equally benefited from the relational interaction (for different reasons), predominately from growth and development. The relationship allowed mentees to thrive in the workplace and get closer to achieving their career aspirations to become registered professionals. Mentees greatly valued their mentor's widespread expertise, knowledge, skills, and experience. Simultaneously, mentors

needed to continuously upskill themselves to ensure mentees were given a replete mentoring experience. The mentoring relationship allowed mentees vocational learning opportunities, thus promoting workplace learning. The association provided a platform for mentees to convert their theoretical knowledge into practice and obtain hands-on work experience within their area of specialisation. These research findings concur with a study by Hamilton et al. (2019), where mentees (recent graduates) experienced positive outcomes from participating in a mentoring programme, which assisted them in transitioning from university to the workplace.

Li et al. (2019) proclaim that mentors play a distinct and direct role in supporting and encouraging mentees. This study found that the accessibility and availability of mentors were not only limited to the mentoring sessions. Furthermore, mentors ensured that they allocated sufficient time to mentees and encouraged communication. This corroborates the mentor-mentee relationship's closeness and the mentors' supportive disposition to facilitate the growth of mentees. In addition, mentees valued the frequent feedback received from mentors, as it helped to improve their quality of work. Al Khajeh (2018) adds that quality work enhances business satisfaction, improves resources and time, reduces errors, and builds trust among employees and managers, ultimately resulting in organisational performance.

The mentoring relationship was further experienced as psychologically safe and developed by trust (Ahmad et al., 2022). Edmondson (1999) declares that psychological safety is the shared belief that the workplace promotes a safe and conducive climate for employees to embark on interpersonal risks. Several studies (Baer & Frese, 2002; Huang et al., 2022; Kulik, 2021) have attributed psychological safety to higher employee engagement, job performance, employee commitment, loyalty, and organisational achievement. Successful interpersonal relationships in the workplace positively influence the psychological safety of employees, which is indicated in the mentoring relationship (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Mentees reported that the mentoring relationship allowed them the freedom to brainstorm new ideas, collaborate on work projects, and ask their mentors questions. Therefore, mentees felt comfortable and free from harm in participating actively and committing to the relationship.

Pollard and Kumar (2021) maintain that effective mentoring relationships depend on trust, which was a significant finding in this study. The participants' experiences indicated that the relationship was largely formed on shared trust and respect. Mentors trusted mentees to complete specific tasks irrespective of their limited experience, thus enhancing mentees' confidence levels. This further indicates that mentors and mentees respected and valued each other's opinions and advice regardless of their heterogeneity, experience, and knowledge. This study emphasises the importance of building trust, respect, and honesty to ensure a favourable mentoring relationship. Moreover, Mantzourani et al. (2022) state that if the mentoring relationship depicts

shared respect, trust, and honesty, it will help to create a supportive, stable, and safe mentoring environment.

The study's findings confirm that the mentoring relational interaction occurred for a specific purpose in the organisation. On an inter-individual level, mentors aimed to equip mentees to gain practical hours to register as certified professionals. Whereas other mentoring relationships focused on developing skills relevant to the mentee's role. Within the group level of the SIGT, the relationship proved to be interdependent, and both individuals relied on each other to achieve the mentoring expectations and goals. Krishna et al. (2020) emphasise that the mentoring relationship begins with the mentor's and mentee's microenvironment but gradually moves towards the macro environment (making mentees more competitive through their enhanced skills as the relationship progresses). The relationship also led to the expansion of professional networks.

Although mentors were responsible for mentoring more than one mentee in parallel, the mentors displayed the same level of commitment and enthusiasm towards the mentees. A study by Christensen et al. (2020) shows that mentors and mentees who shared the same attributes, gender, and age resulted in the mentoring relationship being more robust and fruitful. These findings contradict the results of this study, as the mentoring relationships were diverse, and mentors and mentees simultaneously experienced positive relational outcomes. This study confirms the relevance and usefulness of the mentoring relationship in organisations, especially within the multi-cultural South African context. As a caution, Davey et al. (2020) recommend that precise boundaries are established to prevent blurred lines between professional and personal goals, which could hinder the intention of the mentoring relationship.

The evolution of the mentoring relationship is heavily influenced and informed by the overarching structure and constituents of mentoring. Sawiuk et al. (2022) state that the organisation often initiates the relationship and decides on the mentoring process. However, the organisation can concomitantly lead to the success or failure of the relationship in terms of offering adequate support and resources (MacCallum, 2007). This coincides with the general systems theory as it maintains that a system cannot be understood independently but as an entity (Marais & Meier, 2010). The mentoring relationship depends on all those involved, and if any party digresses, the relationship can be affected (Kram, 1983; Stapley et al., 2022). Therefore, this research study concludes that the mentoring relationship exists between the mentor, the mentee, and the organisation. The study's findings describe the mentoring relationship as an intense, growth-enabling, context-bound relationship that led to benefits such as respect, trust, empowerment, and goal achievement.

Practical implications

Significant practical implications are highlighted in this study. While mentoring is widely covered in literature, little is known

about the experiences of mentors and mentees in the same mentoring relationship. The study sought to provide an in-depth understanding and illuminate the mentor's and mentee's experiences from an organisational perspective. The findings can be utilised to emphasise the effectiveness and applicability of mentoring in the workplace, specifically the importance of the mentoring relationship as a talent and leadership intervention. Organisations should recognise and invest in formal mentoring programmes, which could assist in managing complexities that disrupt overall organisational functioning. Mentoring might further harness employee strengths and potential to fully engage and optimise their work environment as it nurtures a learning culture.

Limitations and recommendations

This research study is not without limitations. Firstly, a single data collection method was utilised. Although this was beneficial in obtaining rich data about the experiences of the mentoring relationship in the workplace, future studies could focus on exploring the relationship from the perspectives of the mentor, mentee, and the organisation. Furthermore, other qualitative data methods, such as storytelling or focus groups, could broaden the knowledge base of the mentoring relationship. Secondly, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the study's findings must be considered in this context. Lastly, the sample size might be too small to provide a holistic view of the mentoring relationship because of the availability of participants. Therefore, future research could study a larger sample size across different organisational sectors. The findings of this study cannot be generalised to other contexts or informal mentoring relationships. Still, extending data collection methods to a broader group of participants might be worthwhile.

This study also puts forward the need to conceptualise the mentoring relationship within a theoretical perspective, structured framework, or model, which could offer a visual formulation of the relationship and more expansive views of the interaction. Additionally, the study recommends that organisational mentoring programmes be carefully structured and that organisations be actively involved in providing the necessary support and training. Although formal mentoring relationships were studied, mentees should have the opportunity to self-select mentors or have more than one mentor in other business areas and not be limited to mentors in their area of specialisation.

Conclusion

The study's findings are distinctive as the experiences of the mentoring relationship were studied from both the mentors' and mentees' perspectives to provide a view of the relationship in its entity. This research aids organisations in understanding the importance of implementing mentoring programmes in the workplace and recognising the impact of the mentoring relationship. The study further contributes to the limited understanding of the mentoring relationship within a

workplace context. The study concludes that mentoring relationships must be defined within their context and purpose. Furthermore, the mentoring relationship is two-fold, encompassed by mutual respect and trust, psychological safety, and collaboration and formed for a specific purpose. It is recommended that future studies take a multi-perspective stance by including the organisational viewpoints to offer a more detailed description of the mentoring relationship and not only limit it to the views of mentors and mentees.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

J.L.R.N. was the main researcher, a MA Industrial Psychology student, co-conceptualiser, responsible for the literature review, data collection, interpreting the results, and writing the mini-dissertation. A.B.E. acted as the supervisor, conceptualiser, co-coder, and critical reviewer of the overall research study. M.W.S. was the co-supervisor, conceptualiser, co-coder, and critical reviewer of the overall research study.

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Data availability

All information pertaining to the organisation and the participants are reported using unique identifiers. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, A.B.E. The data are not publicly available because of restrictions (e.g. adhering to ethical requirements of privacy).

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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