

# Need career guidance? A mentor can help

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## THE DEGREE360

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Managing a fast-paced career can feel a little like navigating a minefield. You want to excel, of course, not only by doing your best work, but by being innovative, confident, and creative. At the same time, you're trying to steer clear of mistakes you've seen others make, as well as the plethora of unforeseen pitfalls that can cause a career to stall or become obsolete altogether. Whether you're at the beginning of your professional career, or at the peak of it, it's hard not to feel like you're on your own. But it doesn't have to be that way. Support and guidance can be yours, if you find and retain the right mentor to help see you through.

Many professionals and publications throughout the years have espoused the virtues of having a career mentor. Adweek recently traced modern day mentoring back to none other than Homer's *Odyssey*. In the Greek epic, Odysseus goes off to fight the Trojan War and leaves Mentor to oversee his household and guide his son, Telemachus.

"Nearly 3,000 years later, the need for guidance persists," writes Adweek's Carolyn Hadlock. "And those who have acquired expertise and wisdom should share their wisdom with the next generation of leaders -- especially in this age of digital transformation and disruption."

## Benefits of having a mentor

With technology taking on a bigger role in today's workplace, and the new demands caused by such a shift, modern professionals need someone they can turn to for guidance and advice. And according to an article from Mashable, the ability to glean lessons from the real-life experiences of a mentor is the most obvious benefit to having one.

But that's not all. Learning from a mentor with years of experience could improve your career in innumerable ways. Along with offering career guidance, mentors can provide much needed emotional support and encouragement. In tough situations, they can dole out the advice that you need to hear -- not necessarily the advice you *want to hear*. A mentor can also provide an objective point of view, which can be especially helpful for professionals whose workplace is set on doing things a particular way, all the time. And, as an article in *The Week* recently pointed out, mentors can also "act like a role model, giving you something to emulate and aspire to."

## Finding the right mentor

A good mentor can instill his or her mentee with confidence and self-esteem, all while providing guidance, advice, and the much needed perspective of an objective party. In addition, the most sought-after mentors have excellent listening skills, aren't judgmental, and are patient, trustworthy, and able to be completely honest 100 percent of the time. When searching for a mentor, keep that in mind. After all, finding a mentor isn't just about finding someone who's willing, it's about finding someone that fits your personal style and understands you. The following tips may help:

- **Make a list** - A good way to start your search for a mentor is to make a list of the qualities that you're looking for. For example, do you want someone with experience directly related to your career? Or, are you looking for a mentor with an outside perspective? A lot of it might depend on your personal situation and your own dreams and goals. Regardless, creating a "mentor wish list" of sorts is a great place to start.
- **Find people you want to emulate** - Once you've compiled a list of the qualities you're looking for in a mentor, look around and see if you know anyone who fits the bill. "Seek out mentors at business and women's associations in your area, non-profit organizations, church groups, community groups such as business chambers of commerce, and even within your family," suggests author Lisa Quast in a recent *Forbes* article. It can also help to make a list of professional men or women who have the career that you ultimately want to achieve.



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March 6, 2014

- **Reach out** - Once your list is complete, you'll need to decide who to reach out to first. In an article in The Week, author Eric Barker suggests reaching out to potential mentors in short, to-the-point email form. "Writing a multi-page email to a very busy person doesn't show you're serious -- it shows you're insane," writes Barker. "So respect their time and start small. Asking good questions is a great way to build a relationship." And if email isn't your thing, you can also try reaching out through other means, such as over the phone or through Twitter, Facebook, or even LinkedIn. However, the rule of simplicity still applies.
- **Set up a meeting** - Once you've made a friendly contact, it's time to set up a meeting to explain your objectives. Tell them what you're looking for in a mentor, and explain what you hope to learn from them. If they're interested, brainstorm ways you can keep in touch, whether it's a regular face-to-face meeting or phone call, or informally over email. Maybe you could even shadow your mentor while they work on a specific project, or spend a day seeing what they do firsthand. The options are limitless.

Whether you're starting a new career or decades into one, the advice and guidance of the right mentor can be priceless. And if you've just begun looking for a mentor of your own, the good news is they may only be a phone call, message, or email away. Make a list of professionals you admire. Chances are, one or more would be happy to share their experiences (good and bad) and offer advice on your current career path.

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