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# ICT mentors in community and voluntary organisations



“To help and support people to manage their own learning in order to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the person they want to be”.

Coaching, mentoring and assessing. E Parsloe.  
Kogan Page, 1992

This is the thirty-eighth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

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- 36. Valuing People – for education providers
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## Introduction

The ICT team at NIACE was asked in 1999 by the Department for Education and Employment, now the Department for Education and Skills, to administer the “Adult and Community Learning Laptop Initiative”. Under this initiative, 1,500 laptop computers, scanners and printers were distributed to voluntary and community organisations and to local adult education services for use in widening participation. Over 600 organisations across England received equipment as a result of the initiative.

During the course of monitoring visits to these organisations, it became apparent that many were using, or thinking of using, the services of volunteer helpers in their ICT programmes. Such volunteers are known by different organisations as ICT Mentors, ICT Volunteers, ICT Supporters, Computer Buddies, Internet Angels, etc.

Whatever title they are known by, such volunteers fulfil a vital role in IT classes everywhere. Without them, many voluntary and community organisations would not be able to offer the range of IT training courses which they do, or might not even be able to offer IT training at all. Indeed, a recent survey ‘E-Learning in Leicestershire’ shows that some adult education providers were experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining competent and qualified ICT tutors. The main reason suggested for this was that people with ICT skills could obtain better paid jobs outside of education. Using the services of volunteers/mentors in the IT classroom does help to ease this problem somewhat.

As a result of a number of requests from community and voluntary organisations, NIACE has recently produced a resource pack aimed at providing useful information to volunteers who are already acting as, or wish to become, ICT mentors. The pack also contains useful information for co-ordinators of ICT mentoring programmes.

## What is a mentor?

Mentoring is an increasingly popular concept in today's world and mentors provide a much needed support system in businesses, in schools and in other educational institutions. There are two types of mentoring:

- Natural mentoring – this usually occurs in an informal way through friendship or collegiality
- Planned mentoring – this occurs through a structured and formal programme.

A mentor can help a learner to:

- Raise his/her achievement
- Develop his/her personal and social skills
- Raise his/her self-confidence
- Build his/her self-esteem.

Raising self-confidence and self-esteem is particularly important for adults who are returning to learning after a long gap in their studies, especially for those who had bad experiences during their school days and may not have studied since then. They need the motivation to learn and this is where a mentor can prove to be of great benefit.

Most of us can probably identify with someone who has had a significant and positive influence on our lives and to whom we look as a role-model and adviser. It may be someone who has helped us in our learning, in a new job or career and could be a friend, relative, work colleague or teacher.

Some examples of famous mentoring partnerships are:

Gandalf and Frodo in the *Lord of the Rings*  
Ben (Obi-Wan) Kenobi and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*  
Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*  
Captain James Cook and Captain William Bligh

Can you think of people who have acted as mentors to yourself? What did they help you to discover about yourself? What did they help you to learn? What skills did they help you to develop?

## Who makes a good ICT mentor and what skills and qualities do they require?

ICT Mentors are not necessarily experts in their field but are people with an interest in IT, who have reached a certain level of competence in the subject and who wish to share their advice, knowledge, skills and experiences with their peers. As well as helping others, mentors are very often people who have a strong interest in furthering their own growth and development.

ICT mentors can be recruited from a number of sources, e.g. they may be:

- Retired or unemployed people with time on their hands
- People seeking a change in their career
- Volunteers from neighbourhood or community groups
- People already working for or recommended by volunteer bureaux
- Learners who have recently successfully completed ICT courses with the organisation.

By the very nature of their work, a mentor takes on a number of different roles, e.g. those of coach, facilitator, critical friend, role-model and adviser, and in order to fulfil these roles successfully, the mentor will need a variety of skills and qualities. For instance they will need:

- Good communication and listening skills
- Self-confidence
- Patience
- Reliability
- Flexibility
- Trustworthiness
- An ability to encourage and motivate
- A friendly and approachable manner
- A good sense of humour

They will also need to have enough free time to devote to a mentoring programme.

## Why use ICT mentors?

Mentoring should be a two-way street where both the learner and the mentor benefit from the relationship. It serves to raise the learner's self-

confidence, and self-esteem, and increase his/her motivation and achievement.

The mentor achieves personal satisfaction from helping others grow in confidence whilst at the same time developing and enhancing their own skills and knowledge. Many also find opportunities for further progression and career development and go on to become a qualified tutor.

We should also not forget that there are distinct benefits too for an organisation offering an ICT mentoring programme, e.g. it provides:

- A possible source from which to recruit ICT tutors for the organisation in the future
- A valuable resource to complement existing teaching staff and enhance the services offered by the organisation – ICT mentors can help to relieve the workload and stress on existing teaching staff.

An ICT mentoring programme can also help to improve results and success rates and help in the retention of learners.

## Key considerations in an ICT mentoring programme

Much care and thought should be given by co-ordinators when setting up an ICT mentoring programme within their organisation in order to achieve the most successful results possible. Think about the following key stages:

- Identify and clearly state the aims and objectives of the programme
- Identify your target group, i.e. the learners who need extra help
- Recruitment of ICT mentors – perhaps by advertising in the organisation's own prospectus/leaflet, or by placing adverts in local newspapers, neighbourhood magazines or on notice boards in libraries, volunteer bureaux, etc.
- Vetting procedures for ICT mentors, e.g. obtaining references and remember to build sufficient time into a programme for police checks to be carried out where necessary.
- Induction/training for ICT mentors
- Matching mentors and learners
- Briefing the learners about a mentoring scheme and its possible benefits

- Monitoring the progress of ICT mentors
- Providing support systems for ICT mentors, e.g. who can they turn to in the organisation for further help and advice
- Giving feedback to ICT mentors on their performance
- Evaluating the programme

Other issues that co-ordinators should also bear in mind when organising an ICT mentoring programme are:

- Reasons for unsuccessful mentoring programmes
- Reasons for unsuccessful mentoring relationships
- Equal opportunities issues covering gender, age, disability and cultural issues
- Health and Safety issues
- Insurance
- How to support older learners
- Tele-mentoring, i.e. offering mentoring services via e-mail.

## Progression routes for volunteers

Some organisations are now developing their own training schemes to offer to their volunteer mentors and in many cases are able to offer accreditation for successful completion of the course. For example, Leicester Adult Education College runs a 5 week training course for volunteers working in its IT department covering such subjects as: how adults learn, how to identify and meet learners' needs and the role of volunteers in IT courses for adults. At the end of the course, the college offers an Open College Network IT Volunteer Certificate and encourages its volunteers to consider progressing onto the EMFEC (East Midlands Further Education Council) Stage 1 Teacher Training course.

*"I am enjoying this chance to pass on my knowledge to others the best way I can and would like to end up doing this as a full-time job."*  
Trainee mentor working as a volunteer for Shipley Communities Online, Shipley College, Yorkshire.

After gaining considerable experience in the role of ICT mentor, volunteers may wish to progress onto becoming a full or part-time tutor. There are many qualifications currently available for tutors in further and adult education, for example City

and Guilds offer the 7307 and 7407 Further and Adult Education Teachers Certificates. The institute also offers other awards such as the 7327 Teaching Assistants award and the 7321 Learning Support award. Further details can be found on the following website: [www.city-and-guilds.co.uk](http://www.city-and-guilds.co.uk). Volunteers should also check with their nearest college of further education for information on the latest training courses and awards.

## Quotes from learners who have become ICT mentors

*"I feel useful and helpful – it's great to be appreciated by students, tutors and WEA staff. It makes it easier for students to make quicker progress because I am able to give an individual support when the tutors are busy"*

*"Because students know me and I am one of them, there are no barriers between us – they can ask me questions without feeling stupid".  
Volunteer with the WEA in Leicester*

*"Volunteering has really given me a sense of well-being and satisfaction in the knowledge that I am able to help expand people's knowledge a little bit. I recommend it to anybody. I have been asked to tutor classes for the WEA and I have also been offered some teaching hours at the local college – all from volunteering! So much for my retirement!"  
Volunteer with the WEA in Mansfield*

## Useful Resources

### Publications

**Consenting adults – making the most of mentoring** (Video and Accompanying Booklet) Channel 4 Television, 1995

**Developing skills for information technology tutors : an open learning pack for tutors of information technology.** Alan Clarke, Jackie Essom and Victoria Forty. NIACE, 1999. ISBN 1862010536 £120.00

**E-Learning in Leicestershire.** K. Lindsay. Unpublished report produced for Leicestershire Learning and Skills Council, 2002

## **ICT mentors : a support skills resource pack for volunteers and programme co-ordinators in community and voluntary organisations.**

Jackie Essom. NIACE, to be published in 2003

## **Mentoring schemes : a practical guide to running successful schemes.** Hertfordshire TEC, 1999

Hertfordshire Learning and Skills Council produce a number of publications on mentoring including 'The Mentors Handbook', 'The Mentees Handbook' and 'The Mentors Diary'.

## Useful Organisations and Websites

### **European Mentoring Centre**

Burnham House

High Street

Burnham SL1 7JZ

Tel: 01628 661919

Website: [www.mentoringcentre.org](http://www.mentoringcentre.org)

Maintains an extensive library on mentoring

### **National Mentoring Network**

First Floor, Charles House

Albert Street

Eccles, Manchester, M30 0PD

Tel: 0161 787 8600

Website: [www.nmn.org.uk](http://www.nmn.org.uk)

Maintains a resource centre for community mentoring

### **Becta**

Website: [www.becta.org.uk](http://www.becta.org.uk)

Offers advice and guidance on ILT champions. Also produces useful information sheets on such subjects as visual impairment and ICT, physical disabilities and ICT.

### **The Mentors Forum**

Website: [www.mentorsforum.co.uk](http://www.mentorsforum.co.uk)

Hosted by Business Link, Hertfordshire. The site contains information about individual mentoring schemes and also looks at studying mentoring as a subject.

NIACE, the national organisation for adult learning, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.  
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