

## **AskMax.co.uk web-based mentoring**

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AskMax is a mentoring product using the world-wide web as a vehicle for providing stimulating challenges, thoughts and ideas to cohorts of staff. Each 'Max' is a selected coach, fully versed in the methods and is signed up to our best-practice charter. Each coach will typically get 6-15 mentees assigned to them. Max is 'invisible' to the mentee, so cover is easily arranged if our coach has to be away for a time. All approaches by mentees have to be responded to within twenty-four hours in the working week.

The first organisation approached was in 1999 and it is in the high-volume, retail sector. The organisation was undergoing a great deal of change in their supply-chain and Ask Max was seen as a valuable way of achieving rapid healing of issues amongst staff throughout the UK.

### **Getting the Best from a Mentoring Approach**

Where ideas, stories and advice are given, three options are provided if possible. Because brains are adapted to rapid comparing, two solutions would typically lead to a preference for one solution provided by the mentor. When the mentee is given three solutions, thinking become more complicated as the comparing process requires several comparisons sequentially, viz.

- 1     A + B
- 2     B + C and possibly,
- 3     A + C

As the comparing begins, the mentee will typically switch from comparing and start to process at a more creative level. This helps mentees to get away from yes/no reactions and to think more productively, sometimes finding their own solutions or an adaptation of one of the solutions put forward by the mentor. We expect greater motivation to arise from the mentee's solutions than from any of the mentor's suggestions.

Max is genderless and where a mentor is unavailable, their list of mentees is fluidly taken over by another Max (eg Max AA., Max AB et seq.).

### **Unique Selling Parameters**

The programme was sold to the L&D Manager and the Director of Supply Chain HR. It was understood that staff who were emotionally involved with issues would have the benefit of having to be logical about the issues in order to be able to describe their situation to Max - itself an immediate, potential benefit in both wellbeing and productivity. As so much 'damage' to the working community was coming from management itself, the provision of a wholly third-party service was seen as a bonus. Almost no support was required by

the organisation and summary reports giving information about the types of issues coming forward would allow management to implement support structures and to plan learning and development initiatives for the future.

### **Implementation Methodology**

A pilot group of executives were offered the opportunity to take up the Ask Max product. They were given a basic summary of the objectives of the offering, how the system would work and over what time-frame. For those wanting more information, example situations were provided showing how the email-based mentoring method can help executives through a range of issues. Forty-four executives were placed on the pilot list and about half of them (21) used the service within the first three month period. The company budgeted for total usage (44) but was only required to pay for the number using the service in each three-month period.

### **Data**

Ask Max provides a summary of issues by category and we worked with the organisation to adapt and agree suitable headings for these categories. Each mentor would be categorizing each individual issue within these headings to provide data for the summary. From the first three month period, 67 individual requests came to the five Ask Max mentors. All mentors were experienced coaches and all familiar with the requirements of the service.

The average response time of mentors was 28 hours 11 minutes (including weekends and twenty-four hour working)<sup>1</sup>. The average mentor work-time was just under 27 minutes with the shortest and longest work-times being 4 and 65 minutes respectively. Mentors were paid on an agreed, fixed basis (per mentee using the service, within each three-month period).

The categories of individual issues (19 of them) were grouped as follows under six headings. These groups are shown together with a percentage for the incidence of that group of category arising:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Rôle/Job</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Performance Review Issues</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Training</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>General Development</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>12</b>

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<sup>1</sup> Later studies included calculations with the weekend break subtracted. Typical response times on that basis then reduce substantially, with one cohort in another organisation enjoying average response times of 4 hours, 18 minutes.

The majority (68%) of users only used the service for one category of issue within a three month period with some bringing two issues (22%) and just two people bringing more than two issues (three and four respectively).

The number of mentor-replies needed for any given category of issue to reach an agreed completion were as follows:

Mentor replies needed 'x' to complete	Number of incidents needing 'x' replies
1	14
2	8
3	8
4	2
5	1

### **Anecdotal Feedback from Mentees**

"Speaking to somebody that I either don't know or doesn't know me is great"

"Thank you for your useful service"

"This opportunity has allowed me to re-focus on my current role and the weaknesses that I have identified and to relate the role I am now in to some of my successes in my previous roles"

"Meant that I actually did something about the issue, I was avoiding it"

"It allowed me an external view of the issues and helped me put a plan of action together to cope with the situation. Though the issue is still not resolved I feel 100% better about it and feel that it will be resolved in the future"

"The great benefits of the process are in its simplicity and impartiality (no hidden agendas) i.e. simply having someone that is not related to the company asking you questions, challenging your thinking and providing advice and guidance"

"Have used the e-mail service and have found that it excellent"

"The responses have been of an extremely useful nature"

"The process which you suggested I go through before the meeting was tough but my manager was so impressed with it that he is looking to spread it throughout the team as part of our development process. Thank you Max."

"The advice you gave has been invaluable"

"Thanks again for some great advice, I shall put all of your recent e-mails into a plan of action"

"Thanks for your reply, it is definitely one of the most useful e-mails I have ever been sent"

### **Conclusion**

The Ask Max model works very well and in this pilot met expectations for both the business and a majority of users. The only changes made since this early pilot have been client-specific. The uptake of the service was higher than expected (21 from 44) reflecting, possibly, the general stress-level in the workforce at the time. The uptake may well have been even greater had staff been permitted to self-select onto the service rather than being nominated

as a group. The third-party confidentiality of the service appeared to provide a trustworthy prospect for almost half those offered the service even though they were selected by management. The Ask Max mentoring model should not be as challenging as face-to-face coaching but in any case provides (for many people) the opportunity to detach emotionally from an issue and to logically present it to a third-party. Once mentoring began, research and actions by staff began to be taken, sometimes after a long period of inaction and distress over an issue.