E-MENTORING FOR SPORT SCIENCE: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

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Recommended Citation
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze one innovative and specific technique in the human resources management within the sport field. In the last decades in the organizational settings, also in the sport sector, the new technologies have caused significant changes. Technology affects many human processes, the decision-making process, the financial business, the learning and training processes, the teaching activities and so forth, by defining new tools, such as e-mentoring, that can improve these significant and critical processes. Therefore, in our society an important role is played by the technology with advantages and disadvantages. This paper investigates mentoring, recognized as a learning and competence development goal-driven process, supported by new technology in order to understand context and factors of technology that affect mentoring relationships within learning and training process in the sport context, considering their own specific characteristics. Sport increasingly becomes a very important business for its growing economic and social impact and, it is also recognized a much interesting research field in many different disciplines such as medicine, management, economics and so on. Athletes tend to achieve the same goal, that is a high level of performance in any sport disciplines; for this reason the supporting and guidance process for athletes plays a key role for their success. Athletes and also all the individuals with different roles and functions operate in the sport system (technicians, referees, and so on) need to be trained and develop their knowledge and competences. In the recent years, mentoring in the sport field, especially supported by the technology, is recognized as a key factor in the professional and psychological developmental process. This explorative study is conducted through a brief review of the literature on the topic and the analysis of two e-mentoring experiences in the Italian sport context in order to evidence mentoring main functions and application areas, systematize and clarify the main contributions on this issue and identify new research perspectives.

Keywords: technology, e-mentoring, e-learning, sport, training.
1 Introduction

Most organizations in any contexts consider human capital one of the maximum organizational assets in establishing and keeping a competitive advantage; for this reason, many organizations are supporting developmental activities such as training and learning process by investing considerable resources (Pfeffer, 1994; Becker, Huselid and Ulrich, 2001). In this perspective, public and private sport organizations tend to pay more attention in their role to increase individuals’ skills and competences by becoming more and more important in order to face such phenomena as stress related to the performance, technological advancements and talent wars demand (Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod, 2001; Branham, 2005; Lim and Morris, 2006). In any settings, individuals can improve their background and learn many important elements through interactions with others, especially those with different background, expertise, and seniority in their organizations (Hayes and Allinson, 1998). Mentoring is recognized as one important relationship that serves as a forum for personal learning (Kram, 1996). Within any organizational contexts, mentoring is a relationship where two individuals interact, a senior person (mentor) with advanced experience and knowledge and maturity, and a junior individual (protégé/mentee), the former guides, advises, suggests the latter for his/her professional and personal development; it’s an exclusive dyadic relationship “person to person” between protégé and mentor (one-to-one) (Kram, 1985). Also mentoring can be conceived as a multiple developmental relationship phenomenon because of the existing of different relationships in which a protégé can have more than one mentor or vice versa, with a variety of mentors who give more contributions in terms of perspectives, knowledge and skills. Mentors can provide two main functions: career development support and psychosocial roles. Within organizational settings positive outcomes are associated to mentoring, such as higher levels of job satisfaction and promotions and support, counselling, friendship in terms of psychological dimensions. Mentoring as instrument of human resources management is an innovative learning and training instrument or a significant tool for organizational socialization.

In the management literature, learning and training have generally been studied in the context of information seeking during socialization (Morrison, 1993), in which socialization is viewed as the acquisition of knowledge about performance standards, important people in an organization, organizational goals and values and jargon (Chao et al., 1994). Some scholars evidence the importance of “learning to learn” (Rawson, 2000; Kram, 1996). “Personal learning” is defined as knowledge acquisition, skills or competences contributing to individual development, including the interpersonal competences of self-reflection, self-disclosure, active listening, empathy, and feedback (Kram, 1996). The individuals can enhance personal learning through one specific vehicle, such as mentoring relationships (Kram, 1996). Mentoring is also described as a learning and competence development goal-driven process (Godshalk and Sosik, 2003). Furthermore, the quality of individual and collective learning and training is a key for the organizational success.

According to research, mentoring is an innovative learning technique. However, mentoring, at the same time all the economy and management, is affected from new technologies too. On the other hand, many processes have been deeply changed by the technology, in fact, these processes historically required physical interaction among participants, instead they have adopted the use of virtual means such as e-commerce, online distance learning systems, ATMs automatic teller machines, and so on (Overby,2005). In the last decade there is a significant increase in the use of the Internet especially for management education and also in the sport settings.

This paper investigates the application of new technologies in the innovative learning techniques as mentoring programs. Mentoring plays an interesting role within many sporting organizations, in which it supports the traditional learning and training tools. The relevant role of mentoring programs is increasing deeply thanks to the technology and internet by promoting the application of specific e-mentoring programs.

Mentoring relationships are important instruments for the development of people in the organizational environment especially in the sport field. Technology can affect mentoring relationships thanks to
computer-mediated-communication (CMC). There is an explosion of e-mentoring or mentoring online programs in different organizational settings (manufacturing, tourism, schools, universities, etc), and more in educational settings, but this phenomenon is still underrepresented in the literature and is new in the sport field.

Hence, this study shows that the adoption of e-mentoring programs is an effective solution because it is possible to overcome geographic, demographic and time boundaries, especially negative effects related to gender stereotypes for women career in the sport field. The investigated context constitutes an unique application area for e-mentoring programs because of its peculiarities and criticisms in terms of the importance assumed from some factors such as, for example, the athletes’ motivation, the psychological status, the increasing sport business especially for some sport disciplines (see for example the soccer sport business). In this scenario, individuals who operate in the sport field, especially the athletes but also the referees or other workers’ categories, face many challenges for the high level of pressures they undergo and need to manage; hence, mentoring programs, more specifically e-mentoring programs, can really provide an useful instrument in order to support the professional and psychosocial development process in the sport field.

In this exploratory study, we conduct a brief review of the literature on mentoring and e-mentoring also applied in the sport field and we try to evidence some relevant implications derived from e-mentoring applications thanks to the analysis of two experiences in the sport field in Italy.

2 Mentoring in the sport field: characteristics and functions

In the wide category of innovative learning and training techniques, mentoring plays an interesting role. The origins of the concept of mentoring go back to Greek mythology. Homeric narrates that Odysseus, Kingdom of Ithaca, before leaving for the war against Trojan, gave his son, Telemachus, to an old and good friend: Mentor. This story gives the first possible conception of the term mentoring, it means “to entrust a young person in training and learning to an expert adult”.

Historical and cultural evolution offers numerous examples of mentoring, evidencing that always the relationship with an adult, with experience and maturity, means privileged and more effective for the development of young people in many settings, for example the relationships between head expert-apprentice, doctor-medical students, teacher-student, etc. (Hunt and Michael, 1983). Mentoring within organizational context is “a relationship where there are two individuals, a senior person (mentor) who, thanks to his/her advanced experience and knowledge and maturity, has the duty to guide, to advise, to suggest junior individual (protégé/mentee) in his/her professional and personal development”; it is an exclusive relationship “person to person” between protégé and mentor, there is a dyadic personal and constant relationship (one-to-one) (Levinson et al., 1978; Kram, 1983; Burke, 1984; Thomas and Kram, 1988; Noe, 1988; Fagenson, 1989; Scandura, 1992).

Last studies evidence a different vision of mentoring relationship in which a protégé can establish relationships with more than a mentor within organizational context (Kram and Hall, 1996; Higgins, 2000; Higgins and Kram, 2001; De Janasz and Sullivan, 2004); therefore, mentoring is as a multiple developmental relationship phenomenon (Higgins and Kram, 2001), where a protégé has not only one mentor, but he/she has multiple relationships with several and distinguished actors who has typical functions of mentoring within network of persons, establishing multiple simultaneous relationships. This developmental network perspective suggests that individuals are better served, if supported from a variety of mentors, who give more contributions in terms of perspectives, knowledge and skills (Varriale, 2013).

Regarding mentoring functions, mentors provide career development support, which involve coaching, sponsoring advancement, providing challenging assignments, protecting protégés from adverse forces, and foresting positive visibility. Moreover, mentors provide psychosocial roles, which include such functions as personal support, friendship, acceptance, counselling, and role modeling (Kram, 1985). Some authors consider these two mentorship factors of career development and psychosocial functions
Within organizational settings mentoring, as an effective instrument in socialization process, training and learning process and career development, has positive outcomes in terms of higher levels of job satisfaction and promotions (Kram, 1985; Riley and Wrench, 1985; Fagenson, 1989).

Psychosocial dimensions are associated to support, counseling, friendship (Kram, 1983; Allen et al., 2004). According to Kram’ s mentor role theory, career functions help protégé “to learn the ropes” and mentor can facilitate his/her advance within organizational context.

In recent years, there are many initiatives to promote mentoring relationships in the lives of young people by becoming immensely popular; “programs with this aim now number well into the thousands and benefit from significant levels of governmental, corporate, and philanthropic support” (DuBois and Rhodes, 2006: 647).

Some authors consider mentoring as an effective instrument to support human resources management policies, in fact, mentoring is an innovative learning instrument (Boldizzoni and Nacamulli, 2004) or instrument for organizational socialization of the staff (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2004). According to this perspective, mentoring has a different role, operative within organizational context, for this reason we need to define programs of mentoring and we need sometimes to formalize the mentoring relationships. In this direction, some studies distinguish formal or informal mentoring programs in terms of formality and length of the relationship, and purpose of the relationship meant like specific goals (Kram, 1985; Zey, 1985; Ragins, 1989; Murray, 1991; Lankau and Scandura, 2002). According to Kram’s mentor role theory, career functions help protégé “to learn the ropes” and mentor can facilitate his/her advance within organizational context.

Regarding the mentoring functions, as already outlined, the career development support involves all actions aimed to promote protégés protecting and helping them to face any challenges, and supporting them in their advancement process at workplace. Furthermore, the mentors’ psychosocial roles include such functions as personal support, friendship, acceptance, counselling, and role modeling. As a consequence, most studies in sport field have evidenced that coaching plays a very important role in the mentoring relationships, allowing to associate coaching to mentoring (Young, 2009; Schweitzer, 1993; Bloom et al., 1998; Weaver and Chelladurai, 1999, 2002; Wright and Smith, 2000; Pastore, 2003); indeed, mentoring has been most investigated in the sport management, in order to provide some guidelines of good practice that could be applied to sports coaching (Jones et al., 2009). Some studies have examined the application of formalized mentoring as a learning strategy for volunteer sports coaches or, more specifically, to support the black-female student-athletes (Depauw, Bonace and Karwas, 1991; Weaver and Chelladurai, 1999; Lough, 2001). Others tend to investigate the role of mentoring in the sport management outlining its contribution in terms of support to the professional development process for the athletes in any sport disciplines, especially football, and all the individuals involved in this wide sector, such as referees or technicians, also focusing more on the spirit and nature of sport (Butki and Andersen, 1994; Hardy, 1994; Nash, 2003; Pastore, 2003; Bloom, 2013).

The main organizational areas evidenced in the literature on management for the application of mentoring programs are: learning and training processes; the main leadership theories; negative experiences; Work Life Conflict (WLF) management through mentoring; diversity management in terms of the composition of the relationship (gender, age, race, and so on) and the role of mentoring to manage diversity; the support of the technology defining e-mentoring relationships.

In the sport management, the main organizational areas regarding mentoring applications can be associated to diversity management, learning and training processes and also in the last years the attention is paid to the effects derived from the adoption of the new technologies in the sport field, especially in the mentoring programs introduced to support athletes, coaches, referees or any other professionals involved.
3 E-mentoring: main challenges and some experiences in the sport context

In the traditional learning and training process, many educators consider the physical contact with learners (students, employees, etc.) necessary. “To teach is to touch students”, the phrase appears on T-shirts and paperweights, in inspirational messages to teachers, and as a slogan designed to motivate those of us who are involved with students. This medium by which “educators touch and partner with students is changing dramatically with the Internet as a vehicle to deliver course content” (Brower, 2003: 22). Hence, with new technologies, all the individuals, academics and practitioners in each organizational setting, need to interact with e-learning and e-training processes, with different rules, instruments and procedures, and also with several effects.

In the last decades the use of the Internet and new technologies, especially for the sport industry, has increased, in fact, we can assist to the great evolution of the innovative instruments introduced to improve the athletes’ performance, the monitoring processes or also the new ways to communicate and make training courses in the sport management and educational.

Regarding the learning and training processes in any organizational settings, there is still a gap between the research on technology-mediated learning and e-learning and e-training practice (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Eastman and Swift, 2001; Arbaugh, 2005). Some scholars have introduced different models, frameworks of effective Web-based course and program design (Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995).

In this advanced scenario thanks to the adoption of new technologies, protégé can build their relationships with mentor with different systems thanks to channel internet/e-mail (Withing and de Janasz, 2004), consequently, there are innovative typologies of mentoring relationships, e-mentoring, that is electronic mentoring or mentoring online, or telementoring.

Single and Mueller (2001) defined e-mentoring as “a relationship that is established between a more senior individual (mentor) and a lesser skilled or experienced individual (protégé), primarily using electronic communications, and that is intended to develop and grow the skills, knowledge, confidence, and cultural understanding of the protégé to help him or her succeed, while also assisting in the development of the mentor” (Single and Mueller, 2001: 108).

Bierema and Merriam (2002) have defined e-mentoring as “a computer mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé which provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling, that is often boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different than face-to-face mentoring” (Bierema and Merriam, 2002: 212). In e-mentoring relationships, traditional mentoring scheme is over, because the relationship between mentor and protégé uses no traditional face-to-face scheme but considers distance communication ways, internet, email, chatrooms, etc., so it can be really useful also in the perspective of diversity management by overcoming typical stereotypes related to gender or disability.

We know still little about this new approach because prior studies consider above all traditional mentoring (t-mentoring) schemes. E-mentoring, considering distance communication ways, internet, email, chatrooms, etc., is not limited by organizational or geographical boundaries and can thus pair individuals or groups from organizations that may be totally dissimilar, so it can be really useful also in the perspective of diversity management by overcoming typical stereotypes related to gender or disability.

Many e-mentoring schemes involve the use of e-mail as the sole means of electronic communication (Harrington, 1999; Huang-Nissen et al., 1999; Milne, 2005). E-mentoring describes mentoring aided by CMC with a virtual mentor, who can cross organizational and geographical boundaries (Ensher et al., 2003).

Ensher and colleagues (2003) identify five clear advantages of online mentoring: greater access, reduced costs, equalization of status, decreased emphasis on demographics and a record of interactions. E-mentoring also allows flexibility with time and space since protégés and mentors do not have to be in the same place at the same time. The most important advantage is the cost effectiveness, in fact, after high start-up costs the operational costs are relatively low; otherwise, in e-
mentoring programs, because of the distance factor, the participants are able to express themselves more freely than in face-to-face communication (Headlam-Wells et al., 2005). By operating in a virtual environment without hierarchies, e-mentoring offers an organizational and personal means of minimising status barriers and of challenging the power relations evident in the physical world (Mueller, 2004). These benefits in terms of overcoming barriers of different typology, are more important for women; who receive an indirect benefit of e-mentoring as the development of skills and confidence in using information and communications technologies (ICT) (Headlam-Wells et al., 2005). In the sport industry, e-mentoring can better support women in their professional and psychosocial developmental process considering their limited presence and many obstacles they need to overcome (Depauw, Bonace and Karwas, 1991; Lough, 2001).

In addition, interactions needed to address complex problems can be facilitated more thoughtfully by the asynchronous nature of e-mentoring (Wade et al., 2001). Otherwise, considering the issues of personal contact, “protégés in any context learn from their mentors by directly or indirectly observing their behaviors, discussing professional challenges and receiving performance-related feedback (Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992; De Janasz, Ensher and Heun, 2008: 395). In a virtual context the observational component is difficult to replicate given the current constraints of technology and accessibility, for this reason protégés in e-mentoring programs are less likely to receive the role modeling available in face-to-face mentoring programs (traditional mentoring or t-mentoring) (De Janasz, Ensher and Heun, 2008); at the same time, in the sport field, the personal component, especially between the athlete and his/her mentor, is crucial, and mostly a physical contact is required because more effective. Paradoxically, this limited personal contact in e-mentoring can be advantageous, in fact, “because electronic communication lacks the visual cues that can lead to or reinforce bias or stereotypes based on demographic or status differences” (Turkle, 1995; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; De Janasz, Ensher and Heun, 2008: 395). E-mentoring, as opposed to t-mentoring, helps and supports considerably disadvantaged groups such as women and people of color and any minorities (Ensher, Heun and Blanchard, 2003; Hamilton and Scandura, 2003); “the use of electronic means to establish mentoring relationships reduce the salience of observable differences in favor of value similarity” (De Janasz, Ensher and Heun, 2008: 405). Otherwise, this peculiar function related to e-mentoring can reinforce the role of the sport as an important and recognized instrument to facilitate and support the social integration and inclusion, for example in the case of people with disabilities. While the mentor-protégé dyad is central to e-mentoring, CMC also offers opportunities to establish a community of practice (Wenger, 1997; Wenger et al., 2002). Hence, e-mentoring provides flexibility and easy access which is highly beneficial to those who would normally face barriers to being mentored because of their gender, ethnicity, disability or geographical location. Thanks to e-mentoring, especially for people with disabilities involved in the sport programs, it is easier to participate into the preliminary training process without facing any difficulties especially in terms of physical movements and so forth. The flexibility offered by its asynchronous communication methods also means that it does not have to interfere with other daily commitments or roles. In many cases, famous old athletes who could become mentors especially for the psychosocial support (how to manage the stress related to the external pressure, the performance anxiety, and so on) live very far from the young athletes, so e-mentoring programs can facilitate the training process. Developing online communities involves a blend of technical planning and social development (Rossignoli, 2009). Thanks to the technology, we can have a virtual mentor, who can cross organizational and geographical boundaries (Ensher, Heun and Blanchard, 2003). E-mentoring describes mentoring aided by CMC. Parsloe (interviewed by Milne, 2005) argues that mentoring is highly relevant to self-reliant global employees who have new responsibilities and take responsibility for e-learning. E-mentoring can support more effectively career process for individuals, especially for women (Wadia-Fascetti and Leventman, 2000; Mueller, 2004). Indeed, by operating in a virtual environment without hierarchies, e-mentoring offers an organizational and personal means of minimizing status barriers and of challenging the power relations evident in the physical world (Wadia-Fascetti and Leventman, 2000). These benefits in terms of overcoming barriers of different
Typology, are more important for women, who receive an indirect benefit of e-mentoring as the development of skills and confidence in using information and communications technologies (ICT) (Ensher, Heun and Blanchard, 2003). The authors Thompson, Jeffries and Topping (2010), have evidenced in their empirical study that “in lifelong learning provision, potential module creators are often very distant from potential mentors and asynchronously available, but e-mentoring might overcome these logistical constraints” (Thompson, Jeffries and Topping, 2010: 305). Their study explored the viability and effectiveness of e-mentoring for an e-learning module development within arts and humanities.

Some studies evidence that e-mentoring has a number of key challenges, such as the likelihood of miscommunication, a slower development of relationships online than F2F (face to face) relationships, possible computer malfunctions, and issues of privacy and confidentiality (Ensher et al., 2003). However, the main negative outcomes concern the lack of feedback, training and support for mentor.

E-mentoring is still relatively new and under-researched and, especially in the sport field, using the full range of online media, may become a transformative tool for individual development, especially in the training and learning process, or rather in e-training and e-learning process. Even if there are in the last two decades many experiences of e-mentoring “many educators and organizations (including the medical profession) remain suspect about the new and growing field of e-mentoring” (Griffiths and Miller, 2005: 389).

There is a big explosion of online mentoring websites (Ensher, Heun and Blanchard, 2003) especially in the educational settings but e-mentoring programs are still limited in the sport industry.

McLoughlin and colleagues (2007), in their study, created a peer-to-peer e-mentoring framework, facilitated by a Web 2.0-based technology model that is integrated with the university’s learning management system. This framework had to support students completing their practicum placements as part of a one-year Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education. They adopted a community of practice (CoP) approach to facilitate and support interactions among students with virtual mentors hence it could establish “an effective peer support system offering mentoring capacities such as emotional support, feedback and encouragement that can help mitigate issues related to professional isolation and anxiety” (McLoughlin et al., 2007: 1). Other scholars analyze online discussions in a course portal that supplemented class discussion in three continuing education courses; they emphasized the role of e-mentors in promoting and mediating the discussions among students (Wong and Looi, 2010). Mueller (2004) describes MentorNet (www.MentorNet.net), the e-mentoring network for women in engineering and related sciences; this is an actual electronic mentoring program that works effectively by creating a positive attitude towards lifelong learning opportunities that are beneficial to all students involved, thanks to many advantages related to e-mentoring such as the independence from geography and time constraints for connecting mentoring participants. Also Kasprisin, Single, Single and Mueller (2003) focused their study on MentorNet, a large-scale electronic mentoring program in order to investigate the benefits in terms of time and distance.

Many other e-mentoring programs were founded in public and private organizations in the last three decades (e.g. the Electronic Emissary Project in 1993 and the Telemertoring Young Women Project in 1994), mostly in the educational setting, with many important positive effects that support the interesting and numerous studies on this topic.

In the literature, Single and Single (2005) evidenced that e-mentoring “is not a panacea, neither is it an inexpensive alternative to face-to-face mentoring”. “E-mentoring is an alternative mode that facilitates the expansion of mentoring opportunities” such as “informational, psychosocial, and instrumental benefits,” … and “also the value of impartiality and inter-organizational connections, which were facilitated by the use of electronic communications” (Single and Single, 2005: 301).

As already evidenced, e-mentoring applications in the sport field are still limited, especially because the same mentoring programs do not find a wide development in this area, for this reason, there are still few studies on this topic in such specific organizational context.
Italian e-mentoring experiences in the sport field

We examine and compare two different mentoring experiences in the sport field: The UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) Mentor-Talent Project and the CONI Mentoring Project “Helping relationships in the competitive sport: From Coaching to Mentoring” (Le relazioni di aiuto nello sport agonistico: dal Coaching al Mentoring).

They are examples of traditional mentoring programs in which we assist to the adoption to the new technologies especially new ways to communicate. In fact, the individuals involved in these two programs can communicate also by email, chat, phone calls.

Each experience investigated can be conceptualized in terms of different level of formalization and type of mentoring relationship created and which specific organizational area of application is involved.

Both cases have been investigated through the archival data and in-depth interviews to the main actors involved, more specifically for the CONI Project 2 mentors and 2 protégés have been interviewed, and for the UEFA project 3 mentors and 3 mentors have been interviewed.

The first project introduced by UEFA aims to support the professional developmental process of young football referees through the experiences and competences transfer by the older and more experienced international football referees. This is a formalized multiple mentoring relationship that mainly considers the learning and training area providing a career developmental function. The protégés/young referees receive more professional support and the multiple relationship is always composed by male partners, more specifically 27 mentors/old referees; each mentor has 4 protégés/young referees conceived as talents. The partners, mentors and protégés, meet each other in person face-to-face in the classroom and on the pitch football. Otherwise, the mentors can communicate via email, chat rooms or using the planning activities program online.

The second project planned by CONI consists in one day seminar in which experts in the competitive sport transfer their knowledge, competences and experiences to the protégés, that is technicians, sport corporate managers, young and old athletes in order to support these individuals in their professional and psychosocial developmental process acquiring the main elements needed to manage the competitive sport in terms of level of performance and successful personality profile. This is an example of a multiple formalized relationship but it is planned most as a simple teaching activity (seminar formula) that can be more associated to coaching relationship. In this traditional training experience, the protégés can communicate and receive support afterwards via email, chartrooms and so on.

In both cases investigated, we evidence multiple formalized mentoring relationships in which the composition is male dominated showing that the sport field is still male oriented. Both experiences represent examples of e-mentoring schemes in which the use of email or other means of electronic communication is supplemental; consequently, we can define both experiences as CMC-supplemental mentoring schema (Ensher et al., 2003). Moreover, it is clear that both projects are successful and show that mentoring can effectively support sport field in many ways also thanks to the adoption of the new technologies.

4 Final considerations

According to the most literature, e-mentoring relationships play a key role in many organizational settings, especially because thanks to the new technologies can really facilitate the learning and training processes, providing an effective professional and psychosocial support. Although the technology plays a key role recording many important results, the success of mentoring relationships depends more on its scheme quality. In e-mentoring a community in which all the participants communicate easily and share information is created, even if mentoring keeps its personal nature also thanks to the technology. Both the participants, in the experiences investigated, are helped from e-
communication, overcoming the typical difficulties of t-mentoring, such as spatial and temporal and cultural barriers and so on.

This paper shows the validity of an innovative technique applied in the sport setting, more specifically, in national and international sporting organizations involved in the Olympics system. It is possible to evidence that IT together with mentoring scheme can create valued-added relationships between mentors (old and more experienced athletes or professionals or referees) and protégés involved (young and less experienced athletes, professionals or referees). Final considerations of the study evidence similarities and differences between the two experiences investigated. First, both projects use the same schema in terms of CMC-supplemental; second, both programs establish formal and multiple mentoring relationships.

Regarding the differences, CONI Program is more focused on learning process where IT, supporting mentoring programs, can affect the relationships after the F2F meeting, that is the day seminar. The UEFA Project, instead, is focused on specific area, that is the professional development of the referees’ involving young professional referees in order to develop their talent.

In summary, the two projects have different specific goals and targets: both of them lack of a clear awareness in the use of e-mentoring, the attention to the issues of peculiarities and criticisms of technology is very poor and the relationships created are not very effective, needing to focus primarily on training activity and share and disseminate knowledge on these issues.

Thanks to the use of IT, valued-added relationships between mentors and protégé can be established; the protégé have an innovative learning and training experience with multiple sets of resources and technology and the possibility to consider new skills and knowledge. As evidenced, this is a descriptive and exploratory study that can be considered as a research starting point in order to examine in the future perspective, through a quantitative method, the relationship between specific characteristics of the partners involved (mentors and protégés) in terms of personality traits, background, teaching and learning styles and consequently to improve the quality of mentoring programs through a more attention and application of the new technologies.

In the future, we aim to develop our study identifying and measuring the main variables in a wide research design on e-mentoring, starting from the detailed and personal characteristics of individuals involved (e.g. their learning and cognitive styles, not only gender or age as usual) if it is possible to match individuals in the best way according to their main characteristics, also considering contextual factors deriving from the specific sport context such as, for example, the different sport technical disciplines. Hence, this study has many limitations especially because of its exploratory nature considering only two case studies, and also because it needs to be enriched with details and clarifications about the application of the specific software tools for e-mentoring; in fact, in this work we did not investigate the e-mentoring systems evidencing their technical peculiarities and challenges in terms of software tools adopted and their effects on the development of e-mentoring relationships. Despite such limitations, this study can constitute an intriguing starting point of analysis opening an interesting future research area concerning the creation and development of e-mentoring programs, that can really meet the athletes and sport organizers needs, also analyzing deeply the technical aspects related to the software tools adopted in the e-mentoring systems.

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