

ASK QUESTIONS • MAKE BETTER DECISIONS •
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Ask BETTER Questions to Make GREAT Decisions: What you REALLY need

The principals of CMSI Mentoring Solutions have been in the mentoring field beginning in 1978 at the University of British Columbia. A fuller description of their respective mentoring-related careers can be found on www.mentoring-solutions.com.

Disclaimer

Every reasonable attempt has been made to fully research the information presented in the following pages. The pages in this Ask Better Questions white paper series are to the best of our knowledge correct, complete and accurate.

Information presented on these pages has been gathered over a number of years from a variety of primary and secondary sources (not just via the internet).

The aim is to highlight key issues clients ought to carefully consider before making decisions about mentoring software and associated services.

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ESSENTIAL questions to ask ... to decide next steps

1. What Design Process do you follow to ensure clients get a Program that works?
2. How many different kinds of mentoring programs has your firm developed (e.g., career development, leadership, diversity, breaking down silos, gender equity, new hires, knowledge sharing, etc.)?
3. Does your software currently support different types of activities (such as):

skill-coaching	Y N	Mentoring	Y N	knowledge transfer	Y N
Surveys	Y N	knowledge-sharing	Y N	Forums	Y N
Evaluation	Y N	Blogs	Y N	Wikis	Y N
2+ linked matching tools	Y N	Flexible Virtual Library	Y N	Training video	Y N

4. Under what software name and in what year did development of your current mentoring software start? Was it developed internally? How many lines of code currently? How many versions have there been? What major changes were made each time?

CHOOSERS vs PICKERS

**“Good decisions take time and attention.
Choosers are people who are able to reflect on what
makes a decision important.**

**It is choosers who create new opportunities for
themselves and everyone else.**

**However, when faced with [some] choices,
we become ‘pickers’ instead of choosers.**

~ The Paradox of Choice B. Schwartz

Read on to see the behind-the-scenes story.

Ask BETTER Questions to Make GREAT Decisions: What you REALLY need

A true story

Here is an actual (slightly disguised) forum thread showing how easy it is for someone new to the field to spend time searching in wrong directions and get bad advice. Don't let this be you. Ask better questions.



On the left are questions and forum replies. On the right are tips and caveats.



From the Forum

Tips & Caveats

<p>Q: Anyone know of a good mentoring software vendor? We're looking for something simple to help match our participants. We are a public university so price will be a factor.</p>	<p>Searcher: for better results, be more specific! Are participants staff? undergrads to be matched with alumni? Huge difference. Are they in engineering or all over the world as co-op students? Is the focus on diversity or career development or ...?</p>
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<p>Forum participant #1: Can you please explain mentoring software? I've not heard of this before.</p>	
<p>A; We're considering launching a campus wide mentoring program so employees can receive mentoring from one another. We are seeking software that would help match/pair mentors.</p>	
<p>Forum participant #1: Sounds like a good concept. I'm not aware of anything out of the box that would do this. Your idea sounds like a need for a skills matching type of software. I picture it having a defined set of skills/competencies. The software would need to sort by similarities and/or disparities to match people.</p>	

<p>Forum participant #2: Rather than installing Mentoring Software it may be better to consider installing a bulletin board/forum on your internal web pages (intranet). You could get mentors (and maybe learners) to place their personal profiles. This way the program may become more self selecting. One company that I know found that a general employee bulletin board acted as a good channel for employee communication and allowed their employees to share the problems that they had been facing. The bulletin board will need to be moderated or policed to filter out negative feedback.</p>	<p>Forum participant #2 (a) has no practical experience with how frustrating and inexact a bulletin board will be (b) does not understand that more than this is needed; on the surface it seems so simple (c) assumes a bulletin board will be more self selecting than with mentoring software. (d) equates mentoring with "sharing problems". In reality, problems may be with machinery so a need for privacy may be of no concern vs privacy needed in mentoring relationships.</p>
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<p>Thanks! This is a great idea, but, we don't have an intranet. I'm wondering, though, if our IT dept. may have something that could potentially work</p>	<p>Searcher has no idea what's involved with an internal solution for a complex concept such as mentoring. Searcher thinks "something" might be dug up by IT people -- who are not knowledgeable in this subject area.</p>
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<p>Forum participant #3: - I'm doing an article about companies that provide software solutions to establish and maintain mentoring programs. We've identified about six so far.</p>	
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<p>Forum participant #4- If you are still looking, XXX is a career management tool designed just for universities. They have customized versions. It is meant to be an "electronic mentoring and career management system"</p>	<p>Upon investigation, this product turned out to be a user pay site that career guidance newsletters and, possibly, over-the-phone generic advice from XXX staff. Definitely not a system and not mentoring.</p>
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<p>Forum participant #5 - Talk to YYY who has an online system that may meet your needs; it's an online coaching process YYY used with leadership and innovation tool so it's proven and goal setting, and follow up etc.</p>	<p>Forum participant #5 uses the words "innovation", coaching and leadership. This focus may not fit Searcher's needs which are actually very broad. Upon investigation, this product is strictly for people who want to develop or improve their creativity. Leadership is secondary facet.</p>
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Searcher needs Better Questions to ask...

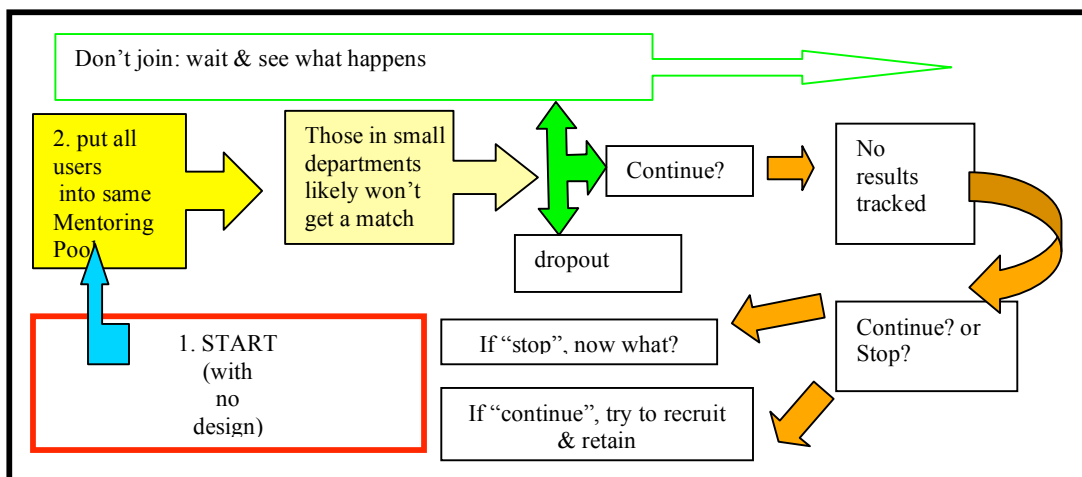
Ask BETTER Questions to Make GREAT Decisions: What you REALLY need

Better Design Questions to ask:

Think of it --without good design, a bridge collapses, courses won't educate, **mentoring partners won't connect**. At the end of the day, no one has mentioned upfront design to Searcher. Everyone is focused on the software and **missing the main point: programs that aim to get success and results don't design themselves**. Design expertise ensures good solutions are put into place rather than no solution or the wrong solution and that questions of the following sort (below) are posed and not overlooked or ignored.

Case in point: Searcher may be tempted, for instance, to put all employees into the same "bucket" (Mentoring Pool). This is known as "non-design." Non-design programs have a long history of not "connecting". Top flight skills of executives won't be honed via the same Pool along with new hires being brought up to speed along with departments trying to break down silos, along with technicians working on certification. Think this doesn't happen? It does. All too often those running the program are unaware of the failures or close their eyes to non-results. Later they wonder why it's so tough to recruit and retain those once-eager volunteers and participants.

Non-design means user needs will **not** get met – individually or organizationally. It's a pretty clear and logical result if you think about it. If needs aren't met, the dropout rate will be high and mount quickly. Word will spread via the OWM (organizational water-cooler meetings). Recruitment and retention (expensive and time-consuming) will be more difficult...the program could well wither and die. Lots do. And don't need to.



A few more questions of many Searcher (and the Task Force) must ask:

1. What's is the proposed program's purpose (out of many possible)?
2. Why start campus wide? What's the best target group? How do we know?
3. Will results be tracked and measured? Do we care? If not, what will happen when people sign up expecting to get results and they don't because we got the design wrong? If yes, have we pinpointed the various purpose(s) – certification, tenure, promote diversity, create a community of practice, etc.?
4. In small departments, where will the mentors come from? How will participants be recruited and retained?
5. Is our budget reality-based? Do we understand why there are different fees (e.g., hosting, configuration, etc.)?

Myth and fact

Another challenge: how can Searcher know if mentoring claims are true? Or not?

Here's our proof. In 2000, we registered OMS Online Mentoring System® in the Library of Congress for copyright ... January 2001 fifty pages of our source code plus a description of functions for **Colaboro** (our second web based application for mentoring).

SEARCHER FACT: Our **OMS** was the world's **first** mentoring web application /software, our **Colaboro** was the **second**. In 1999, potential clients could log in the internet to try a working demo of our product. These were not "mocked up" html pages of a proposed idea – there's a huge difference and it's vital to know the difference.



SEARCHER FACT:

Not until 2001 did another vendor **begin** the process of inventing online mentoring software. While they lay claim to their work as “*the first*” (saying it was fully developed in 1999), this vendor’s own newsletter from April 2001 tells a different story...

Without the benefit of mentoring experience, they turned 4 self-paced workbooks (Chaos Control, Commitment to Change, Performance Management and Mentoring) into “*NexTools a-learning*”, for a test-run on half day face-to-face workshops. They later changed the product name to its current label and dropped all but the mentoring.

What's the point?

If a vendor stretches the story about when the software was developed, its origins and their mentoring background, maybe they're also being “elastic” about their software capabilities. Take the professional approach on behalf of your people: ask better questions when investigating a mentoring product and mentoring services.

Your choices reflect who you are, what you are willing to accept on face value and what you believe to be important.

P.S.

Just registering code is never enough. We made certain **Colaboro** went through extensive refinement, and user trials over years via input from dozens of clients in many fields. Research tells us it takes at least 10 years of broad experience and specialization to become expert. If you're looking for expertise, we offer it.

Ask yourself this question... to get results you can **brag** about -- which is more likely to do the job: web-based software like **Colaboro** with a transparent history & expertise or software that raises questions?

CALL US. Ask us questions then do the same with other vendors.

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