



Insights into Online Mentoring & Matchmaking

MicroMentor Toolkit Series: Part One



MicroMentor
by Mercy Corps

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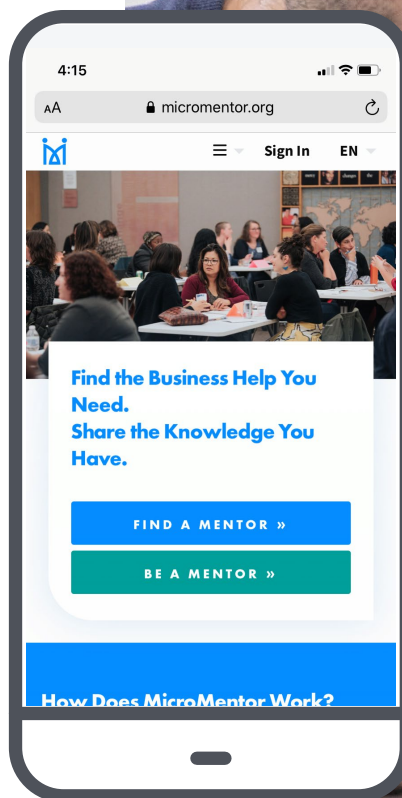
Introduction

Research on in-person mentoring, especially in academic and career settings, has helped to promote the importance of mentoring broadly. Yet in an increasingly digital world, knowledge about online mentoring is limited—specifically mentoring for aspiring entrepreneurs and small and growing businesses (SGBs).

MicroMentor's research team set out in 2018 to examine two questions about online business mentoring that could contribute to this gap in knowledge and demonstrate to policy makers and practitioners the impact and cost-effectiveness of this intervention.

Our first question, discussed in this toolkit, explores what factors lead aspiring entrepreneurs and SGBs to find an online mentoring match.

The second research question, a follow-on study still in progress, aims to validate the effect of online mentoring for SGBs on venture-level outcomes. We are examining MicroMentor's impact on self-efficacy, skill development, new business starts, jobs created, revenue increase, access to capital, and access to other business resources. The next installment of our toolkit series will share these findings.



What factors lead aspiring entrepreneurs and SGBs to find an online mentoring match?

How do we validate the effect of online mentoring for SGBs on venture-level outcomes?

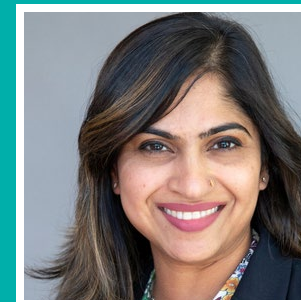
About MicroMentor

Entrepreneurs are the backbone of thriving communities.

According to the World Bank and the International Council for Small Businesses (ICSB), micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises account for more than 90% of businesses¹ and anywhere from half to two-thirds of jobs worldwide.^{2,3} Yet, for all their importance and potential, small business owners face significant challenges on their quest for success. They may operate in isolation, with limited or no access to formal support systems and vital business-building resources like financial capital, professional networks, business skills, and access to markets for their product or service. Traditional business development programs can provide pieces to this puzzle—offering microloans or business planning classes—but entrepreneurs often continue to struggle.

At MicroMentor, a program of Mercy Corps, we believe that mentoring is the missing key to entrepreneurial success. We are not alone in that.⁴ The benefits of having a business mentor has been hailed by countless successful entrepreneurs and cited in academic literature.

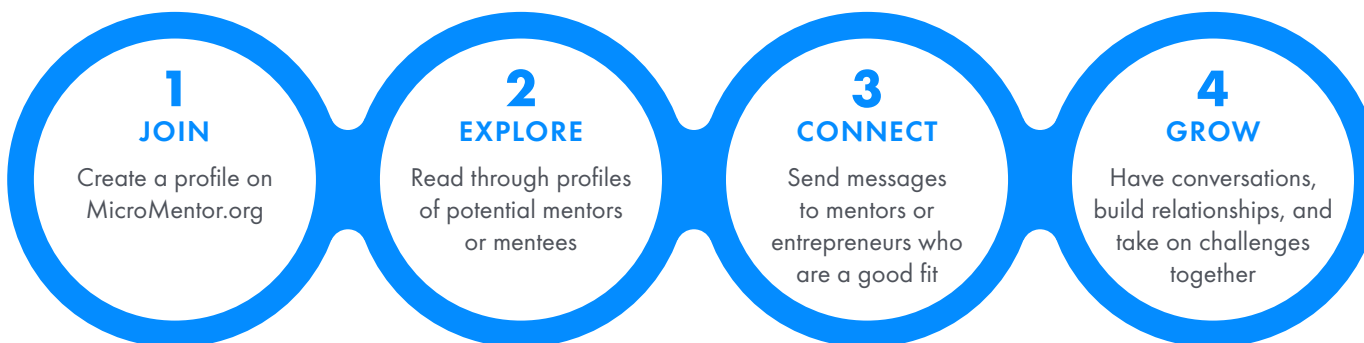
MicroMentor empowers entrepreneurs across the globe by acting as a bridge, connecting them to experienced mentors through our easy-to-use social platform—available at no cost to the entrepreneurs and mentors in our community. Available anytime, anywhere, the platform's online format allows members to form business mentoring relationships across geographical and cultural barriers, and democratizes access for entrepreneurs in search of guidance specific to their particular business challenges.



At MicroMentor, we don't try to force a rigid structure or rules on our mentors and entrepreneurs—we let them define their own relationships. This human-centered approach has helped MicroMentor reach a global scale. With members in almost 180 countries, we're the world's leader in virtual business mentoring.

Our focus on monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning comes from our desire to demonstrate the value of social capital. Mentoring doesn't just help entrepreneurs solve technical business challenges, it provides them with support, experience, and a community of shared human connection. Our research proves this point: just like financial capital or regulatory support, entrepreneurs need social capital. As the global leader in online mentoring, MicroMentor is the best way to get it to them.

—ANITA RAMACHANDRAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



1 Kumar, Ruchira. "Targeted SME Financing and Employment Effects." July 17, 2017. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/577091496733563036/pdf/115696REVISED-PUBLIC-SMEs-and-Jobs-final.pdf>

2 Tewari, et al; "Competitive Small and Medium Enterprises: A diagnostic to help design smart SME policy." May, 2019. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/16636/825160WP0P148100Box379861B00PUBLIC0.pdf;sequence=1>

3 <https://www.un.org/en/events/smallbusinessday/>

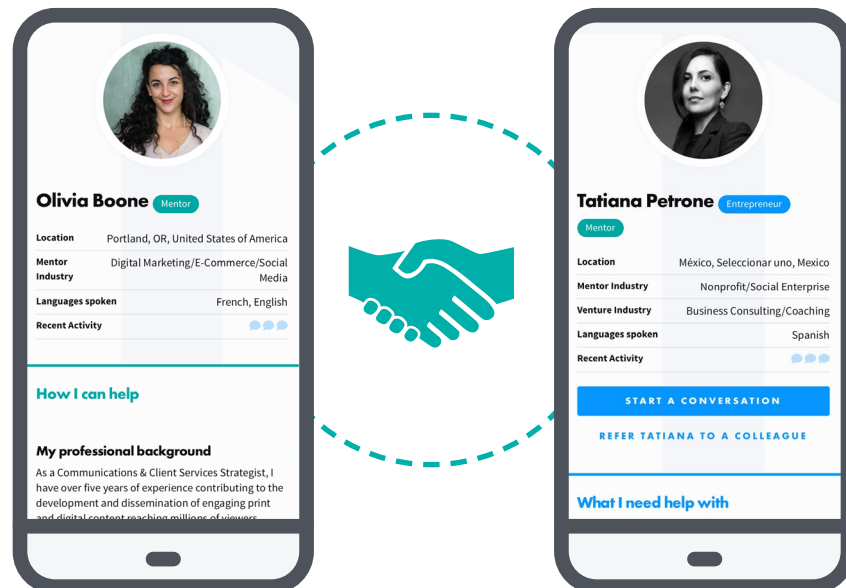
4 Forbes Nov 2017, "My Best Advice for Entrepreneurs: Find a Mentor. This is Why and How."

How Entrepreneurs Make Online Mentoring Matches

It is not always easy to find a mentor, even using curated online platforms like MicroMentor. It can take time, patience, and a great deal of effort. Entrepreneurs may struggle with identifying their business challenges or sharing the right kind of information to initiate a fruitful mentoring exchange.

As such, in the first stage phase of our research, we aimed to understand **what factors lead aspiring entrepreneurs and SGBs to find an online mentoring match**, utilizing a quasi-experimental design, including the analysis of past data and a randomized control trial (RCT) to test the influence of three distinct interventions on entrepreneur engagement within the MicroMentor platform.

Digging into three years of MicroMentor data containing information from 8,295 entrepreneurs and mentors we found profile characteristics and other factors that were significant in making an online mentoring connection. Together, these factors paint the picture of “mentor-ready entrepreneur;” one that comes prepared, has an idea of their business needs, and shows the initiative needed to solve their challenges with a mentor.



INSIGHTS

Entrepreneurs can prepare for a mentor. Mentors want entrepreneurs who are prepared. That means entrepreneurs with complete profiles, photos, and detailed descriptions of their ventures are more likely to find a connection. Finding ways to encourage entrepreneurs to come prepared is a crucial first step in helping them find online business mentors.

Mind the gap (in knowledge): Entrepreneurs who take a Self-Assessment that helps to visualize their current business needs are almost three times more likely to connect with a mentor.

The more information, the better. Entrepreneurs who finish their profile, provide a photo and a website, and have longer descriptions of their business and business challenges are more likely to find a mentoring connection.

Play the numbers game: Reaching out to more mentors improves an entrepreneur's chances of finding a mentor. While there is always tension between *quantity and quality*, our findings suggest that *quantity drives quality* when it comes to making mentoring connections.

How did we come to these conclusions? As a self-selecting online platform that enables mentors and entrepreneurs to take their correspondence off the platform in the way that works for them, it can be difficult to assess the exact start and duration of a mentoring engagement. To address this, we use “meaningful connections” as a proxy, which is a conversation on the MicroMentor platform comprised of four or more messages. This number of messages represents a significant exchange and the promise of continuation offline.

INSIGHTS IN PRACTICE:

Tools that Support Entrepreneurs

It is as true for aspiring entrepreneurs and SGBs as it is for everyone else: **you don't know what you don't know**. MicroMentor developed the newest iteration of our Entrepreneur Self-Assessment to walk entrepreneurs through a series of questions before they complete their public profiles to help them identify where their blind spots are and in what areas they are strongest.

By guiding entrepreneurs to ask for the help they *actually* need in their profiles, they are able to develop a more insightful request. The Self-Assessment results are visualized and displayed on an entrepreneur's profile page, allowing mentors to easily appraise an entrepreneur's skills and phase of business development. This research proved that the Self-Assessment was a key factor in making mentoring matches—so we optimized it using feedback from cognitive interviews and ensured that the placement in the profile completion process added value to the entrepreneur.

Market Research

How much confidence do you have in your knowledge in your chosen field or industry?

Not at all confident Not confident Neutral Confident **Very Confident**

How much confidence do you have in your ability to identify your target customer?

Not at all confident Not confident Neutral **Confident** Very Confident

My full assessment

Set up and Planning

What types of start up activities have you performed?

- Created a business plan
- Performed a competitive analysis
- Assessed the value of the market
- Interviewed potential customers
- Created a prototype
- Tried to sell to customers

How much confidence do you have in your ability to manage your time effectively?

Neutral

How much confidence do you have in your ability to plan and set goals for your venture?

Neutral

Market Research

How much confidence do you have in your knowledge in your chosen field or industry?

Neutral

How much confidence do you have in your ability to identify your target customer?

Neutral

How much confidence do you have in your ability to estimate customer demand for a product or service?

Neutral

Expertise requests

- Management: Business Strategy
- Management: Growth and Development
- Management: Leadership

Self assessment

Set up and Planning

Market Research

Finances

Sales

Operations

[See full assessment](#)

Encouraging Entrepreneurs to Take Action

After identifying the factors that lead to successful matchmaking, our next step was to understand how to influence entrepreneurs to act upon these findings. We delivered an RCT to 3,022 entrepreneurs as they were getting started on the MicroMentor platform, testing three distinct interventions against a control group.

We followed this cohort of entrepreneurs on the MicroMentor platform to understand the impact of the treatments on:

1. Sending first messages to mentors, and
2. Engaging in “meaningful connections” with mentors (conversations with 4+ messages).

RANDOMLY-ASSIGNED TREATMENT GROUPS

Group 1: Welcome Video

Received a short video that told the story of a successful mentoring pair and gave tips on how to use the site.

Group 2: Technical Message

Received a message on the MicroMentor platform that provided technical details on how to use the site and gave tips for actionable next steps.

Group 3: Personal Message

Received a message on the MicroMentor platform that provided personal encouragement, emphasized the human relationship aspect, and gave an example of a strong first message to a mentor.

Group 4: Comparison Group

Received no treatment and proceeded with the MicroMentor sign up process.

The results showed that **entrepreneurs who viewed the welcome video were 68% more likely to reach out to mentors, and the effect was strongest for women.** None of the treatments increased the likelihood of finding a connection, which illuminates an important caution when considering one-sided treatments for a two-person engagement. Focusing only on entrepreneurs in this instance, was not enough to increase connections among pairs.



INSIGHTS

Entrepreneurs learn from example. Entrepreneurs who are provided with a welcome video that shows an example of a mentoring relationship after they complete their profiles are more likely to reach out to potential mentors—especially female entrepreneurs.

Mentoring is a two-way street. Any intervention focused on just entrepreneurs or just mentors is only influencing half of the story.

Measuring the Motivation of Volunteer Mentors

In our analysis of past data, we were curious to understand the motivations of volunteer mentors. A natural experiment emerged in comparing the characteristics of volunteer mentors who join MicroMentor through different pretenses. MicroMentor operates a number of curated employee volunteering programs, which vary in the amount of structural support employees receive throughout their MicroMentor experience. Our mentors generally fit within these four categories:

HIGH-TOUCH SUPPORT

Programs that had full professional services, such as a formal discovery and design process with a stakeholder needs assessment, a custom landing page, custom mentor orientations, and follow up communications, (a combination of welcome calls, email follow up, etc.).

LOW-TOUCH SUPPORT

Programs that received minimal planning and professional services—limited to a training for internal program staff and a generic landing page. MicroMentor delivers little to no orientation or additional communications to the low-touch program mentors.

NO ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Organizations make the general MicroMentor platform available to their employees, but provide no resources or organizational support throughout the process.

UNAFFILIATED MENTORS

Mentors who came across MicroMentor in an organic way, such as word of mouth or while searching for online volunteering opportunities.

Our analysis found that **only the high-touch approach was correlated with a higher rate of success. Furthermore, the low-touch approach was generally less successful than no organizational support whatsoever.** Employees of high-touch programs demonstrated similar levels of motivation to unaffiliated mentors, whose high levels of motivation brought them to the platform on their own accord. This suggests that high-touch support is an effective way of creating a level of motivation in employee volunteers that is equal to mentors actively seeking out MicroMentor as a volunteering opportunity.

In the same study, sentiment analysis was conducted on mentor messages to measure their **subjectivity** and **positivity**, with the assumption that messages which are more positive and subjective in language are more supportive of the entrepreneur who receives them. Results of this analysis were similar to the findings above: unaffiliated mentors scored the highest in subjectivity and positivity, followed by high-touch organizations. Low-touch organizations exhibited the highest rates of negative and objective language, further suggesting that a high-touch approach is best for employee volunteer mentoring programs.

INSIGHTS

Mentors need preparation too, especially employee volunteers. Meaningful experiences are had by employees who receive the highest level of support. They are more likely to make mentoring connections and show higher levels of positive engagement. Low-touch support can actually do more harm than good.

INSIGHTS IN PRACTICE:

Tools that Support Mentors

Volunteer mentoring is an opportunity to give back as well as an avenue for professional development. Volunteer mentors on MicroMentor consistently report improvements in a range of skills, from communication to problem solving, yet employee volunteers may express hesitation at first in their ability to work with a global entrepreneur.

Informed by our findings on high-touch support, MicroMentor developed the Mentoring Masterclass®, a two-part webinar series designed to prepare volunteer mentors to successfully engage with aspiring entrepreneurs and SGBs on the MicroMentor platform. The Mentoring Masterclass emphasizes emotional intelligence while developing crucial skills like identifying strengths, giving feedback, and active listening. This allows mentors to start off informed, prepared, and feeling motivated to participate in fruitful mentoring relationships.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is one of employers' most sought-after skills. Mentors learn to leverage EI when working with entrepreneurs.

Sample topics covered in MicroMentor's Mentoring Masterclass®

CRAFTING A MENTORING ROADMAP

Navigating a mentoring relationship can be complicated. We share methods of working with a mentee to craft a roadmap to success.

IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS

Mentoring is not just about fixing problems. Here we teach new mentors how to showcase their own strengths to foster confidence and growth.

PROVIDING FEEDBACK

Giving criticism is a difficult necessity. We reach beyond the "feedback sandwich" to explore the latest research on delivering constructive feedback.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Virtual mentoring necessitates new ways of practicing active listening. We teach mentors how to listen and "read between the lines" to understand entrepreneurs' motivations and states of mind.



Mentoring Masterclass

The benefits of being a mentor

Olivia Boone, Partnerships & Services Officer
Paoa Wandke, MERL Officer



Conclusion

While there are many business development tools available to entrepreneurs and SGBs, few provide access to a global network of online business mentors. MicroMentor is excited to contribute to the body of research around entrepreneurship, mentoring, and volunteerism.

Our studies demonstrate that entrepreneurs and mentors can be primed at the beginning of their MicroMentor journeys to increase their chances of making a successful mentoring match. Some groups of entrepreneurs (women) and mentors (employee volunteers) respond more strongly to the types of support we have tested. MicroMentor's learning agenda will continue to explore member segmentation so that we might better understand our members' needs. By adequately responding to these needs we can facilitate more effective and impactful interactions for the diverse community we serve.

While these learnings are presented in the context of MicroMentor, we believe strongly that they can be applied to all business mentoring programs—be it online or in-person. Our next installment of the MicroMentor Toolkit Series will focus on the impact of online business mentoring for global entrepreneurs and SGBs.

Contact

We would love to talk to you about our research, opportunities for collaboration, and our available program offerings. If you're interested in learning more please send an email to: partnerships@micromentor.org



Acknowledgements

The insights in this report would not have been possible without the hard work of our exceptional research team supported by the Innovation Growth Lab, the Argidius Foundation, and the Kauffman Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge the thousands of entrepreneurs and volunteer business mentors from around the globe who have joined and contributed to the MicroMentor community. We dedicate the findings of this research to improving the experience and outcomes for MicroMentor members like you.



Saurabh Lall

Assistant Professor,
University of Oregon



Dyana Mason

Assistant Professor,
University of Oregon



Li-Wei Chen

Assistant Professor,
Old Dominion University



Emily Joy

Business Solutions and MERL
Manager, MicroMentor



Paoa Wandke

Business Solutions and
MERL Officer, MicroMentor