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No Time to Mentor? Do It Online

E-mail offers busy professionals a way to give back

Karlene Rogers wanted to volunteer her time to help kids. But the demands of her job as a litigator in New York made fitting it into her schedule impossible. Then, a year ago, she heard about icouldbe.org, an online mentoring program that matches high school students with adults working in careers of interest to them. Now, Rogers, 31, "talks" with her mentees via e-mail, squeezing in the time when she can. "Face-to-face obligations aren't always feasible," she says.

With e-mentoring, instead of getting together with someone in person, say, once a week, you meet electronically. Many companies participate in about 70 e-mentoring programs, says the National Mentoring Partnership (mentoring.org) in Alexandria, Va. If your employer doesn't have such an arrangement, you can hook up with a program on your own.

The approaches vary. Career advice is the mission of icouldbe.org. You fill out a personal profile on a Web page; students who want to find out more about what you do contact you with questions. The 10-year-old Electronic Emissary Project (emissary.ots.utexas.edu) asks mentors to indicate an area of expertise. Then, when teachers and students need help with a classroom project, they contact an expert. The relationship may last from a few weeks to three years. Cyber-Sisters.org, based in Eugene, Ore., matches middle-school girls with women professionals. Each pair works together for eight weeks on a science or technology project. Although most of their contact is via e-mail, many teams meet in the beginning and make a joint presentation at the end.

Because privacy and security are important, communications usually go through to a central site, where a staff member monitors messages or filtering software looks for telltale inappropriate phrases or words. Generally, you can't exchange last names or addresses. You also can expect each site to run a criminal background check when you sign up.

Most programs require you to respond within 48 hours of receiving an e-mail and to send at least one message a week to your mentee. "Kids will see you're really interested, and that encourages them," says Rogers. And that, after all, is what mentoring is all about.

By Anne Field

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