

**LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE MENTORING: HARNESSING THE  
INTERNET TO CREATE AND RETAIN INTANGIBLE ASSETS**

**RAMESH SAMBASIVAN**  
ITRADEFAIR.COM, INC.  
1414 S. SANGRE ROAD  
STILLWATER, OK 74074, U.S.A.  
Phone: (405) 372-6200  
Email: ramesh@itradefair.com

# **Learning Through Online Mentoring: Harnessing The Internet To Create And Retain Intangible Assets**

## **Abstract**

Organizations are dynamic groups of people in a constant state of change. The knowledge that accumulates in an organization as it grows and learns from its early experiences is an under-rated asset that has an indirect but very significant impact on the organization's competitive strength and its future growth.

The commercial availability of the Internet has made the task of sharing knowledge across an organization transcending barriers of time and space, not only possible but also affordable. Part of the learning within an organization is subjective and extremely dynamic rendering it impossible for being recorded as a document or a digital file. Such subjective knowledge is the core content of mentoring relationships. Mentoring, for the purpose of this paper has been interpreted as the knowledge share that occurs between members in any organization thus fostering personal growth, learning, individual motivation, and continuity in an organization through informal channels. Mentoring also fosters loyalty and bonding across an organization. The Internet has simplified the process of passing the baton of knowledge through mentoring within a growing organization.

In this paper, I introduce the concept of online mentoring, describe a technology framework to execute it, and identify a few real applications of the online mentoring and knowledge-share program.

## INTRODUCTION

The Internet a powerful tool for dissemination of information. It is also a powerful tool for multi-way communication. Sources of information can now be dispersed across geographical distances and consumers of that information can be dispersed as well. Every organization has access to internal and external sources of knowledge. The Internet now enables all these sources to be connected at negligible costs to create a powerful knowledge network, and any member in the network gains access to any other member in the same network, simply by virtue of being connected via the Internet. This is a medium that did not exist before the Internet was commercially available.

In ancient India, knowledge was spread through the system of schooling where there was the concept of *guru* and the *guru* had disciples. In modern management parlance the *gurus* have become mentors. Mentors may be formally appointed or may be informally identified. Whether it is an organized structure or not, the system of having mentors is a way for large organizations to retain the personal touch among its thousands of employees. Large global organizations in the United States call them coaches, and assign a coach to each new employee, who guides the employees through their career growth in the organization. With the global reach of the Internet, mentoring activity can be managed remotely across vast geographical distances at minimal cost. Organizations can not only retain the services or the expertise of retired managers, but also use them to train the newer employees through online means. Every experienced employee in a company is a repository of invaluable first-hand experiences. Instant and

inexpensive access to these repositories means flattened learning curves for future employees, greater competitiveness in a fierce market and the opportunity to build life long bonds among members of the organization or its employees regardless of their physical location or state of employment. The Internet allows an organization to keep in personal touch with all those who ever entered their workforce, using an invisible but powerful circuitry of coaching and mentoring done online. Individuals chart their family trees and trace their roots through online genealogy sites on the Internet. Similarly organizations are families in a constant state of flux that can now be connected through an Internet based network, thereby retaining the knowledge that otherwise is lost as experienced hands retire or leave the organization.

This paper explores the power of remote mentoring through the Internet giving organizations access to knowledge and bonding experiences hitherto unavailable. In May 2001, International Business Machines (IBM) held an internal online interactive forum, called *WorldJam*<sup>1</sup> to foster communication and cultivate ideas. The forum was also an attempt to use the Internet to bridge the huge cultural and related barriers that have long challenged multinational corporations. IBM has offices in 165 countries.

A variety of Internet based tools exist to help organizations stay connected with its members and alumni. Just as any program must be marketed effectively, an online mentoring program must also be internally branded and marketed effectively for generating support amongst its users. This paper presents a case study of how an Alumni Association of the Oklahoma State University's MBA program creates a strong

network for organizational bonding and alumni relations. The paper explores how it is marketed and sustained using live events with leaders from the world of business coming online to share their knowledge in direct one-on-one sessions via the Internet. This paper also recommends methods drawing on the principles from the case study of the school's alumni association to develop powerful corporate programs for individual companies in the world of business. Online mentoring and alumni forums are cost-effective methods to retain the knowledge gained in every organization over the years, create bonding across all departments, and thus develop a formidable and competitive edge over other organizations in the industry. The next section further defines an online mentoring program.

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<sup>1</sup> Mitch Wagner , "IBM Uses The Web To Listen To Its Employees", InternetWeek, page 9, June 4, 2001, [www.internetweek.com](http://www.internetweek.com)

## **DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING AN ONLINE PROGRAM FOR MENTORING**

Although the Internet is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in the businesses across the world, the users are not exploiting it to its maximum potential. Predominant uses of the Internet remain the electronic mail, creation of a corporate website to mark an organization's presence on the Internet, product catalogs and contact information. Corporations and organizations are just beginning to use the interactive powers of the Internet. Internet live communication tools are not yet popular in corporate environments for a variety of reasons, the primary ones being that of lack of awareness of their potential and that of poor usability of the tools, meaning that the tools are not user-friendly.

E-mails are now an indispensable form of communication in the wired world. However the efficiencies in terms of speed realized by email communication are limited by the speed at which the recipient of an email can respond and act upon an incoming email. Therefore, for our purpose of online mentoring there is a need for immediacy in response, and real time communication. Real time communication enables participants to focus on the proceedings and be productive during the assigned time. This is called an event-orientation. Repeated emails can be lost in an email box or may not grab the attention of the recipient. However, an online event between a mentor and a mentored will be time set aside for the purpose, using live communication tools via the medium of the Internet. When live communication through the Internet becomes as easily accessible as using the telephone, emails will take a secondary place as a form of communication. Instant communication capabilities via the Internet take the form of

Instant Messaging sessions that can be saved for future reference, file transfers, conferencing capabilities to get multiple users simultaneously online, and bandwidth permitting, even audio and video conferencing connecting multiple personal computers from around the world. In its current prolific form the usage of the Internet does not engage online visitors to a website, making websites similar to electronic brochures that are trendy but difficult to navigate. A case in point is the recent development of corporate websites using Flash animations that serve no purpose other than image building and enlivening an existing catalog or brochure. To sustain interest and generate value out of such uses of the Internet on a sustained basis is not only cumbersome but also prohibitively expensive for corporations and organizations that are managed keeping an eye on their returns on investment (ROI). Until the interactive communication tools' strengths are exploited to realize efficiencies in knowledge management, information exchange, internal and external customer support, and building corporate morale, the Internet is not being used to its fullest current potential.

How do organizations make the most of the potential of the Internet? The Internet allows for instant communication, instant gratification of any need for information and data, user-friendly interfaces that can be customized to suit any user's specific requirements, and an ability to send and receive broadcasts instantaneously. In order to harness these strengths of the Internet, organizations have to gain an understanding of the interactive power of the Internet and how it can be adapted to scale up to the needs of parts or whole of the organization. Introducing such new technologies across the board in an organization involves education from the grass roots

level so that when deployed the technologies are not unused or abused, but put to the desired uses to achieve the desired results for the particular organization.

Organizations in North America have started adopting the Internet for

- (a) Creating internal online communities through Intranets,
- (b) External online communities through Extranets and industry portals,
- (c) In-house training facilities through distance-learning courses being offered on the corporate Intranets or on the Internet for course-credits to employees or members,
- (d) Recruitment of employees through Online Career Centers or Online Career Fairs
- (e) Online product launches and
- (f) Online Tradeshows and Conferences to grow the markets through affordable inexpensive alternative marketing channels that either stand alone or complement physical tradeshows and product launch efforts.

An Online Mentoring Program results from a concerted effort on the part of an organization's leaders to use the latest in Internet technology to connect members or employees with one another on a one-on-one basis to foster informal learning channels. When managed systematically, Online Mentoring Programs are an excellent means of employee motivation, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, knowledge transfer, improvement of employee morale and maintaining corporate continuity. Developing and sustaining an online mentoring network requires dedicated efforts by interested parties and a good understanding of online behavioral patterns.

Creating an Online Mentoring Program requires the following:

- (a) Database of mentors and the potential mentored
- (b) An online scheduling facility
- (c) Match-making facility
- (d) A variety of online tools to create instant communication channels based on available time and comfort levels of users of the system
- (e) A champion in the organization who will steer the Online Mentoring Program towards its stated and evolving goals.

Creating the Online Mentoring Program involves certain preliminary steps as with any grass roots management program.

1. Make it a self-managed system to generate enthusiasm: Use the organizational grapevine to create enthusiasm about the program. Make it everyone's project so that they realize that without their participation the mentoring network will collapse. The individuals are the nodes that hold the network together in the case of the Online Mentoring Program. The management of the program may be left in the hands of a revolving committee consisting of employees and management.
2. Obtain official sanction: Without an official sanction, the Online Mentoring Program will have difficulty getting off the launch pad. The official sanction includes
  - Creation of a new line item in the organizational budget,
  - Amending the policies about Intranet and Internet access to employees,

- Amending policies on monitoring of Instant Messaging Channels to encourage effective mentoring, and
  - Obtaining the cooperation of the network administration personnel within the organization to develop a system that is in compliance with the organization's network security requirements.
3. Media coverage: Creating awareness and the 'hip-factor' that only internal and external media coverage can provide. Public Relations activities help participants' morale and make them feel proud of being part of an exciting new initiative.
  4. Using the word of mouth and word of mouse: Using all possible means to increase participation at minimal cost. Word of mouth is perhaps the most unobtrusive and effective method of making an Online Mentoring Program popular, and giving it the popular sanction as against merely official sanction. For instance, newer employees will prefer to hear about it from other colleagues than from impersonal printed brochures, and increase the level of trust on the system.

Technically, setting up an Online Mentoring Program is half the battle won.

The most important element in the success of this program is the Trust Factor.

Using organizational networks for personal communication has been the subject matter of litigation in the United States. Emails have been ruled to be the property of the management and prying into personal email accounts is considered legal where mail servers are corporate assets. An Online Mentoring

Program must be beyond these concerns. The Online Mentoring Program and the online community that forms around it is like the proverbial corporate water-cooler where the grapevine gathers and spreads information. It is a powerful tool to manage employee motivation. Some of the steps that may be taken to breathe life into the Online Mentoring Program are

- (a) Cultivating openness in the program. In one of the bigger Big Five consulting firms in the United States, the coach is the confidante and information shared with the coach is never used without the permission of the individual being coached. Similarly the Online Mentoring Program must have private access channels for communication of participants with their mentors.
- (b) Minimal monitoring. Monitoring of the system must be restricted to its functionality and not the content.
- (c) Creating events for the participants. These networks where entire organizations have access are perfect online forums to create educational online sessions and help their morale. Create online events to bring celebrity chats with live sessions from any part of the world. These events bring momentum to the online forum and give participants a reason to visit simultaneously, to communicate and bond.
- (d) The Online Mentoring Program is a distribution channel for distributing content to the participants in an unobtrusive manner. Use it to educate the participants about new corporate regulations, new tax laws that might impact

them, new investment opportunities, health care issues that they need to be aware of, among others.

- (e) Keeping communication lines open. The Online Mentoring Program is where the management of an organization can be assured to learn what programs work and what do not. If a change in a human resources policy is causing anxiety among employees, then keeping an open communication line with the mentors helps alleviate a potential source of employee distraction. In the Silicon Valley, companies consider that their most valuable corporate assets walk out the door at the end of the day, and hopefully will walk back in the next morning. It is these assets that the Online Mentoring Program will help enrich and generate loyalty for the organization.

Once an Online Mentoring Program is created and launched, it is important to manage the program well to ensure that it does not fade into oblivion. The Online Mentoring Program must be launched and announced in a grand fashion across the organization, but must follow baby steps in its implementation and expansion. This leaves scope for expansion and ensures that the program only grows to meet the changing and specific needs of the participants. An internal champion is required to move the Online Mentoring Program forward. This requires a persistent and motivated individual or team of individuals who have a grand vision and the patience to implement it one step at a time. The management of the program must keep using the media to sustain interest in the program. The reason for such proactive steps is that unlike a sales campaign,

which results in immediate and tangible revenue results, an Online Mentoring Program will generate results over a period of time with very intangible positive results. Outcomes such as improved employee satisfaction and increased productivity have measures, which are very subjective and vary from organization to organization. The management of the Online Mentoring Program must also make the most of technology. Otherwise it will become an expensive and cumbersome program. The focus must be on a point-and-click level of efficiency. The easier the access to these systems, the more popular they will be. What follows is a case study of a mentoring network created in a voluntary organization whose entire program is need-driven and not regulation-driven.

## **CASE STUDY: ONLINE ALUMNI REUNIONS OF THE MBA PROGRAM AT OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY.**

The Online Alumni Reunion of the MBA Program at Oklahoma State University is located on the Internet. Access is restricted by invitation only. The reunion has a variety of interactive tools to enable members communicate freely with one another with no central controlling hub. The tools presently available are

- (a) a common bulletin board, common chat room,
- (b) a basic online directory to identify and communicate with each member independently,
- (c) periodic alerts sent automatically by email to each participant every time there is a new message on the bulletin board
- (d) a photo album that each member can use to upload pictures for common viewing by all other members, and
- (e) administration tools that allow monitoring and cleaning the bulletin board, broadcasting email to all the members at a time

Alumni of the school receive online invitations from the administrator of the online reunion forum and are able to sign up. Each member is able to see on the screen other members who are signed up and available online at any point. Members online can communicate instantly with one another by clicking on their names on the computer screen for an Instant Private Messaging channel to open up. Chat sessions cannot be archived in the present state of the online forum, but can be custom-programmed to do so.

The online reunion for Oklahoma State University's MBA Program began as my experiment to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of creating and sustaining an online community. It was designed to gain insight into online behavior when visitors are anonymous, into creating events to generate and sustain interest in the forum, and into using the forum as an informal mentoring network. As soon as the site was set up, the MBA program authorities announced it to the current students and alumni of the previous graduating year.

Gauging by the enthusiastic response, the online forum filled a vacuum for networking instantaneously at no cost among former students who had gone their separate ways after graduation. The online bulletin board is used actively as a forum to exchange views and information that might be relevant to present students of the school as well as alumni. Members locate one another online despite not being aware of their geographical location until they communicate instantly and get updated on the latest whereabouts of their former classmates.

Once every 30 to 60 days, alumni of the school gather online in a common chat room to witness and participate in a live instant chat session. Leaders from the world of business come online to participate in the live chat sessions in unmoderated chat sessions. The online guests are celebrities who spare an hour of their time to share their thoughts and answer questions that the school alumni who are online may pose in the live session. Online celebrity guests have included well-known names such as

- (a) Ann Winblad, cofounder and partner in leading venture capital firm  
Hummer Winblad Venture Partners,

- (b) Dr. Mark Albion, best selling author of “Making a Life, Making a Living”,
- (c) Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, best-selling author of “e-Volve”,
- (d) Radha Basu, CEO and Chairman of Support.com, and
- (e) Todd Wagner, co-founder and CEO of Broadcast.com.

Alumni of the MBA program as well as students are able to communicate live with these celebrity guests in one-on-one chat sessions. Participants log on to the Internet and into the Online Reunion from a variety of geographical locations as far away as Malaysia, Turkey, Germany and Panama, as well as from all over North America to be together during the hour-long celebrity chat sessions.

The online forum is also used by alumni and students to find mentors for seeking career guidance and assistance in job-searches. The online mentoring takes place privately and directly without any administration from the creator of the online forum. The power of this online mentoring forum is that it was created as an experiment, but gained momentum and is being sustained by the need for the participants to interact with and learn from one another.

Technically this online mentoring forum is easy to operate and manage because it uses readily available tools from the Internet. Some of the pitfalls of using such commonly available tools are

- (a) Lack of flexibility: Celebrity chat sessions are not archived due to system limitations of the tools being used. Member directories are not a centerpiece of the online reunion, a flaw that limits the potential of the reunion.

- (b) Limited scope: The tools being used are limited in their scope, thus limiting the potential that such an online mentoring network can realize. For instance there are no schedulers available for members to schedule time and meet online.
- (c) Branding the site: Using commonly available Internet tools disallows branding for the alumni association. This will be a severe impediment for corporate uses.
- (d) Privacy: Maintaining such a forum on a public network does not allow privacy. Members are not encouraged to leave their phone numbers or addresses on the forum where it can be publicly viewed. This is a limitation in the case of a corporate user that will necessitate customization on a private site or network.
- (e) No continuity of email addresses: Members are not allowed continuity in the email addresses that they had when they were students of the school. This deficiency in the system is a limiting factor in retaining contact with students who graduate and go in pursuit of careers. Some schools such as Harvard Business School and the Thunderbird School of International Business give their alumni life-long permanent email addresses so that alumni of the school can be in contact with one another long after they graduate. Such a post-school support system is inexpensive to maintain and is essential in making the school a valuable part of ones career development.

The next section extrapolates the principles and lessons learned from this case study to explore its application in a non-academic, corporate or organizational environment.

## **ADAPTING THE PRINCIPLES OF AN ONLINE MENTORING FORUM IN AN ORGANIZATION**

There are several lessons to be learned from the case study of the online forum created by the MBA Alumni network of Oklahoma State University for making the concept applicable in a corporate or other organizational environment

- (a) The initiative needs a champion. Creating something new using new technologies means changing the status quo. This requires infusion of new energy into the initiative and support from the top management including minimum or no interference. The online initiative must evolve based on the needs of the users rather be imposed upon them from top management.
- (b) Use of technology is a must to ensure that the online forum can scale up as acceptance and demand for additional interactive features grow. For example, when users of the forum are ready to import their schedules on to their hand-held wireless devices, the technology must be scalable and robust enough to support those needs.
- (c) Aggressive launch and gradual progression is a must in introducing new technologies. It is imperative that one does not overwhelm users with new terminology and new technology. The focus has to be on making it user-friendly and releasing the technology features in small digestible doses.
- (d) Market aggressively so that the online forum has a brand image.

The online mentoring initiative for corporate use would ideally be custom-designed.

Features that might find appeal among corporate and organizational users would include

- (a) Online mentor match making facility, which can be dynamically generated with databases and search engines.
- (b) Online instant communication, which can be facilitated through online interactive venues designed specifically for the use of the corporation
- (c) Online community building features that can be custom-designed to serve the specific needs of an organization. For instance, there are corporate intranets that offer special discounts on vacation travel to their employees through their online employee forums and these are customized to meet the demands of the specific population that is being serviced.

There are generic tools available in the market as well as customized solutions that can be developed by specialized providers. Yahoo, Inc. provides generic solutions for community building. Similarly companies such as Placeware and Webex provide virtual meeting rooms. All generic solutions suffer from the requirements of either external software to be downloaded as plug-ins, or are inflexible and often deny the power of branding and choice of adding modular features that are demanded as the online forum evolves and grows in popularity.

An alternative is to seek a developer or software-integration provider that builds customized solutions such as Online Interactive Venues for creating such networking forums, mentoring programs and live online events. Using customized solutions also takes care of the caveats of security issues, corporate firewalls, and corporate godfathering where the systems being developed must adhere to certain corporate guidelines to ensure future integration with back-end systems where necessary.

In the current state of technology, the tools and the infrastructure available limit Online Mentoring Programs. Chat sessions are asynchronous and not really fluent. Voice chat sessions are limiting in large online forums, while Internet telephony is still to become a reliable form of communication. Video conferencing, which works well in high bandwidth networks, is not commonly used. The problem of language translation still exists for large forums that span across continents that communicate in multiple languages. However, despite these limitations, the Internet offers a method that was not available to use in such a user-friendly fashion just a decade ago.

To implement an online interactive forum, an organization or a corporation needs to

- (a) Identify a single internal champion
- (b) The champion must understand the size and scope of this project, something that will determine the kind of solution that the organization will need
- (c) Evaluate solutions that are available either off the shelf, off the web or customized by providers of Online Interactive Venues
- (d) Start swiftly by in small steps so that the initiative grows to meet demand and not vice versa
- (e) Understand and educate the management about the metrics that will need to be monitored and manage the expectations of the management about the returns on this investment (ROI).

Measuring the ROI takes two forms:

- (a) Subjective measures include soft areas such as employee satisfaction that can be measured through instant online polls and surveys
- (b) Objective measures that are long term metrics such as
  - Employee turnover rate
  - Work productivity measures
  - Problem resolution using the help of online forums and online mentors

Initiating an Online Mentoring Program also requires the champion to understand and gain congruence with the management regarding their expectations, and gain the trust of the users of the program. Some of the objectives of such a program could include

- (a) Encouraging the flow of new breakthrough ideas
- (b) Grooming the next level of management through informal education
- (c) Fostering cross-cultural understanding across global offices just as IBM is attempting through WorldJam
- (d) Keeping employees satisfied and motivated
- (e) Sharing knowledge across the organization through instant channels disregarding organizational bureaucracy.

The next section describes the process and technology views of developing an Online Mentoring Program using an Online Interactive Venue.

## **DEVELOPING AN ONLINE MENTORING NETWORK**

### **Process View**

Typically, a client organization requests a technology provider to provide the technology for an Online Interactive Venue. The client organization has to promote the online forum internally. The technology provider will ensure branding in all online marketing collateral and electronic messages being broadcast to the targeted audience. The client organization will deliver electronic databases of potential members that the technology provider can utilize to pre-populate the Online Mentoring Forum and thus prepare a searchable database available online for all individuals desiring to be mentored. The technology provider will identify the interactive tools desired by the client organization, and deploy them in the order desired by the client organization. A proof-of-concept pilot is highly recommended before a launch of the program to understand the issues involved in deploying the system through corporate firewalls and internal data security systems. The technology provider will also facilitate the creation of online events beginning from promotion of the event to delivery, and post-event surveys that will provide the client organization with instantaneous online access to participant-feedback. This promotion would involve print, mail, and/or e-mail advertising to build attendee traffic. A virtual event may include keynote speeches and other presentations. These may be archived from a physical meeting or produced specifically for the Online Mentoring Forum. These may take the form of web-casts streamed live or on-demand from an archive. Technology providers will be also able to host the forum at remote facilities eliminating the need for client organizations to invest

in technology infrastructure thus enabling a cost effective access to a complete state of the art solution.

### **Content Creation**

Participants in an Online Mentoring Forum will be given the flexibility to fill their own content reflecting their individual personalities. Bulletin Boards will be an open forum with administrative capabilities to remove objectionable messages. Participants will be able to initiate their personal online conferences. Events produced by the client organization in the Online Mentoring Forum can be obtained from content providers such as syndicated columnists writing on various topics that may be of interest to the organization's members or employees. Content and events can also be custom-created by authors, experts and celebrities using text, audio and video channels of communication. The next page depicts graphically the process overview for creating an Online Mentoring Program.

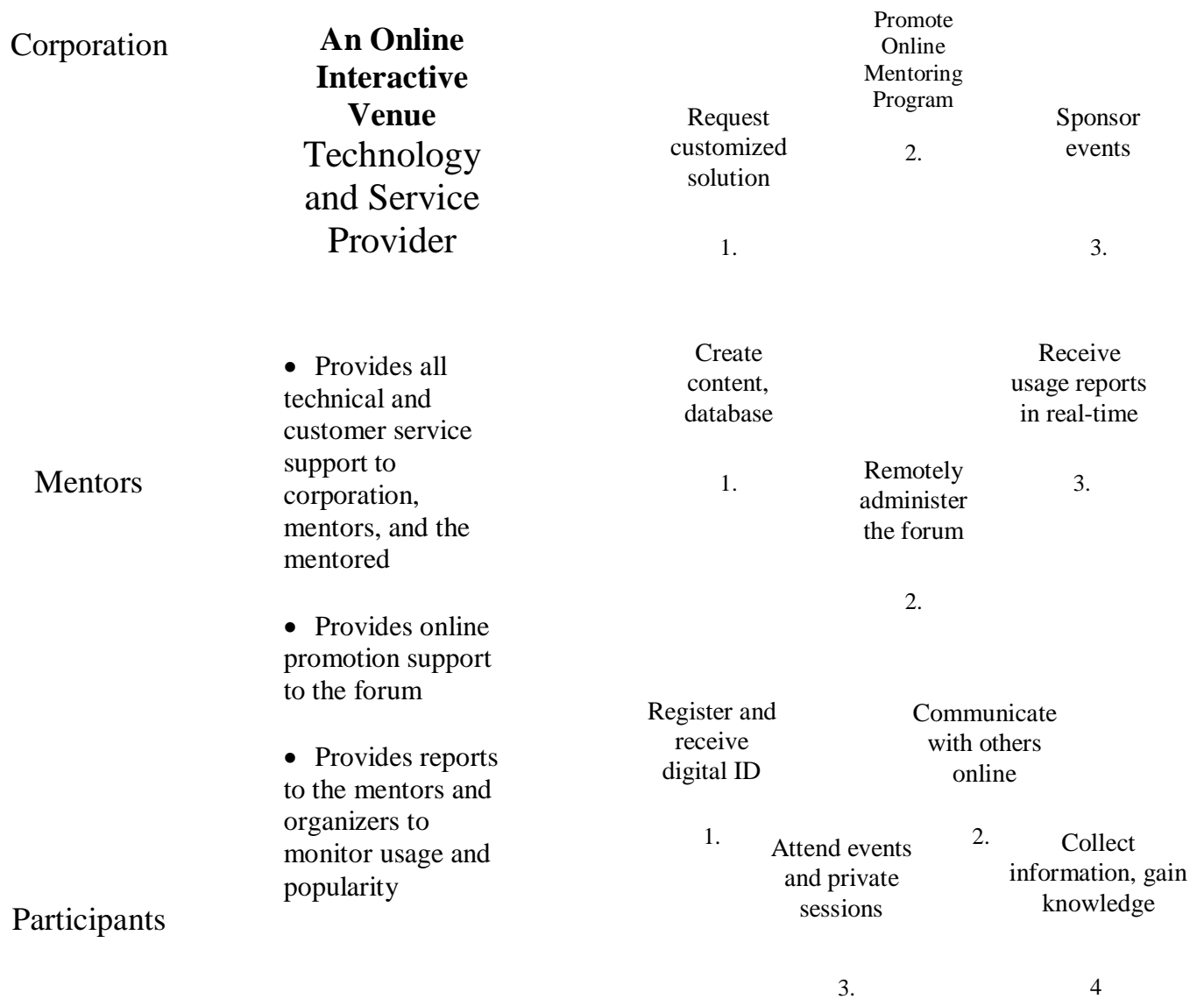


Figure 2: Process Overview of Online Mentoring Program Generation<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Graphic inspired by Sharda R and Sambasivan R (2001), Virtual Trade Fairs: An Emerging Internet Application in "Handbook of Electronic Commerce, CRC Press, 2001.