Nadine, a sixth grader at the Piitoayis Family School, an Aboriginal school in Calgary, Canada wrote the above email to her online mentor, a human resource professional at Nokia working thousands of miles away. Nadine was one of more than twenty sixth-graders to take part in an e-mentoring pilot project undertaken by Thrive! The Canadian Center for Positive Youth Development, a partner of the International Youth Foundation (IYF).

Since October 2002, Thrive! has worked to address the needs of Aboriginal children and youth as part of a global youth development initiative of Nokia and IYF. Thrive’s efforts through the program focus on empowering up to 15,000 Aboriginal young people with life skills such as improved communication, conflict resolution, respect for self and others, and community involvement.

In discussions between Thrive! and Nokia staff, e-mentoring emerged as a potentially valuable means of facilitating employee engagement in the program, while strengthening participants’ life skills. The “e-buddy” program paired Nokia employees who had undergone training with Aboriginal youth, ages 11-13. Piloted in 2004-05, the initiative offers insights for other youth development projects interested in involving mentors.
The Benefits of E-mentoring

E-mentoring differs from traditional mentoring in that communication between mentors and protégés takes place via the Internet. E-mentoring has the advantage that mentors and protégés may live in geographically diverse locations. In the case of the Nokia-funded project in Canada, Aboriginal beneficiaries live hundreds of miles from Nokia’s three country offices, located in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa. E-mentoring offers the additional advantage of enabling mentors to carry out their service from their workplace during the day. Similarly, protégés can be supervised and encouraged aged by teachers or program practitioners within a set environment (e.g., a school computer lab). For young people who are reserved or reluctant to discuss sensitive issues face-to-face, e-mentoring offers a less-intimidating alternative.

When carried out effectively, e-mentoring programs can achieve many of the benefits of traditional mentoring. Research demonstrates that young people who have engaged in trusting, supportive relationships with mentors often develop greater self-confidence and faith in their abilities. Mentoring programs can also contribute to young people getting better grades, enjoying healthier relationships with parents and peers, and choosing not to engage in negative behaviors (e.g., drug or alcohol use).  

Getting Started

A critical first step in launching an e-mentoring initiative is generating a strong level of interest and enthusiasm among potential mentors and protégés. The Canadian pilot was the brainchild of Thrive! and Nokia representatives. While promoting the program to Nokia staff was relatively easy, the real challenge lay in convincing the program’s Aboriginal beneficiaries of its value to them. Most of the young people liked the concept in theory, yet their level of commitment varied considerably over the duration of the program, according to Thrive! Executive Director Joanne McQuiggan. Some students were simply unsure what they could learn from “people in offices,” she explains.

In preparing for the program, Thrive! developed a training manual for Nokia employees that described the benefits of mentoring, offered tips for becoming an effective e-mentor, and provided information on appropriate behaviors. Also featured were weekly “conversation starters” designed to engage mentors and protégés in a progressively richer dialogue over the course of the 20-week program. For the first several weeks, for example, mentors were urged to concentrate on building trust, e.g.:  

- **Week 1**—Introduce yourself and why you became a mentor. Ask your protégé where he/she is from, about their family, and who they spend their time with.
- **Week 2**—Share some of your hobbies and other interests, particularly those you had as an adolescent. Ask your protégé to share theirs.
- **Week 3**—Describe one of the best/worst days of your life. Elaborate on what you like to do, the places you’ve lived, or what you like to eat. Encourage your protégé to share similar experiences.

In subsequent weeks, the guide suggested more substantial discussion topics. For example, by Week 8, mentors were encouraged to write about the boundaries and expectations they experienced when they were young, while encouraging their protégés to share similar reflections. Week 11’s discussion starter involved setting goals for the future.

The process of recruiting mentors was carried out by designated Nokia staff, who publicized the program at the company’s three Canadian offices. Each of those who expressed a desire to participate filled out a questionnaire and agreed to undergo a background check. Following, participating mentors took part in a teleconferenced training session facilitated by Thrive! staff. The matching of students to mentors was carried out by a lead teacher at the Piitoayis Family School, who based such pairings primarily on gender.

Technological Considerations

One of the most time-consuming aspects of launching the e-mentorship initiative was identifying, installing, and testing the software needed to facilitate an online dialogue in a secure, private environment. “There are huge concerns with student access to the Internet,” cautions Thrive’s McQuiggan. “Understandably, school administrators don’t want students getting anything inappropriate through a school-based computer.” To address such concerns, a password protected dialogue section was incorporated within Thrive’s website. The dialogue platform, which included a feature that would delete offensive words, enabled Thrive! staff to monitor the discussion threads and the program’s overall effectiveness.

Launching the Pilot Phase

At the school level, the program was coordinated by a trained teacher and introduced to students as part of an existing computer lab class. Students who expressed an interest in participating in the program filled out a simple sign up sheet, stipulating their name, age, level of Internet proficiency, and what they hoped to get out of the program.

Twenty-three students in all signed up for the program, which ran from March to June, 2005, with mentors encouraged to dialogue
with their protégés at least once a week. While initially slated to last 20 weeks, the pilot was reduced to 10 weeks as a result of delays in installing the necessary technology.

The level of dialogue between mentors and protégés varied considerably, with the majority of conversation limited to the sharing of hobbies, interests, and family life. McQuiggan attributes this to the relatively young age of participants (11 to 12 years), the abbreviated time frame of the program, and the cultural divide that exists between Aboriginal youth and middle class professionals. “There’s a lot of skepticism about what the white man’s agenda is,” she says. “There’s a suspicion underlying the Aboriginal culture that it takes a long time for people to trust you.”

**Lessons Learned**

Anecdotal evidence collected through the email discussion threads suggests that those students who were active in the program benefited from developing a relationship with a caring adult mentor. In addition, they were able to exercise their communication skills and develop their cultural understanding through connecting in a meaningful way with someone with a distinct background and set of experiences.

Among those challenges Thrive! experienced is the tendency among Aboriginal youth to exhibit shyness, and the fact that many program participants missed school on a regular basis where they had access to the Internet. The program would have also benefitted from more in-depth teacher training and creating an opportunity for the mentors to visit the school and interact with students prior to the email exchange component. “If the kids could have met a real Nokia office worker—since we wear jeans, are usually open and friendly, and could demonstrate with body language that we are genuinely interested in them as people—then perhaps we could have gained the trust of the students and the online communications from them may have been richer,” said Anita Caspo, Communications Specialist, Nokia Canada.

**Questions to Consider**

In determining whether an e-mentoring component is appropriate for achieving your project’s goals, consider:

- Whether the inherently impersonal nature of e-mentoring works within your project’s overall framework.
- How email exchanges might help foster enhanced communications skills—or other life skills targeted by your project.
- The most logical stage in your project design to introduce e-mentoring.
- How you can create a mutually beneficial match between the developmental needs and interests of protégés and what a given mentor population has to offer.
- How you can best monitor and evaluate email exchanges to ensure that the desired goals are achieved.
• Ensure adequate time for your initiative—As a result of technical problems and school delays, Thrive’s planned twenty-week program was reduced to ten. This limited the time available for developing the mentor relationship and entering into a richer exchange.

• If pursuing a school-based program, make sure teachers allocate a designated time period for students to engage in dialogue with mentors—In the Thrive! pilot program, students were asked to write their mentors during their computer lab time, when they frequently had competing assignments.

Endnotes

1 Names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.
2 In this context, the term protégé refers to a young person who receives care and support from a mentor.
3 E-mentoring programs can incorporate a face-to-face component. The Internet was used, as opposed to direct email, for security purposes.

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Joanne McQuiggan, Thrive! Executive Director