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MENTORING ALTERNATIVES: THE ROLE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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Little is known about work relationships, other than mentoring relationships, that contribute to adult and career growth. A biographical interview study of 25 relationship pairs indicated that relationships with peers offer important alternatives to those with conventionally defined mentors. This study identifies types of peer relationships, highlights various enhancing functions these relationships provide, and shows the unique manner in which these relationships can support psychosocial and career development at every career stage.

Both adult development and career theorists have described the mentoring relationship as having great potential to enhance the development of individuals in both early and middle career stages (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Hall, 1976; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Studies of this relationship suggest that it can be instrumental in supporting both career advancement and personal growth (Clawson, 1979; Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978; Phillips-Jones, 1982). The purpose of this paper is to consider how other adult relationships in work settings—relationships with peers—can offer both similar and unique opportunities for personal and professional growth. A brief review of recent research highlights the advantages and the limitations of the conventional mentoring relationship, and indicates why it is essential to begin investigation of other developmental relationships in organizations.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTORS

Levinson et al. (1978) state that relationships with mentors enable young adults to successfully enter the adult world and the world of work by simultaneously assisting in career growth and the establishment of separate identities. Studies of mentoring have further delineated specific developmental func-

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tions provided by these relationships (Clawson, 1979; Kram, 1985; Phillips, 1977). Mentors provide young adults with career-enhancing functions,[1] such as sponsorship, coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility, and offering challenging work or protection, all of which help the younger person to establish a role in the organization, learn the ropes, and prepare for advancement. In the psychosocial sphere, the mentor offers role modeling, counseling, confirmation, and friendship, which help the young adult to develop a sense of professional identity and competence. In providing these functions, an experienced mentor gains technical and psychological support, finds internal satisfaction in enabling a younger colleague to learn how to navigate in the organizational world, and gains respect from colleagues for successfully developing younger talent for the organization.

The fact that both individuals benefit from the relationship makes it vital and significant. Complementarity of needs solidifies a mentor relationship during the initiation phase, and propels it forward to the cultivation phase when the range of functions provided by the relationship expands to its maximum (Kram, 1983). Eventually, changes in organizational circumstances or in the individuals' needs cause the relationship to move to a new phase. For example, organizational changes like transfers, promotions, and demotions, as well as individual changes like a sense of increased confidence or a growing need for independence, have been found to alter the context of the mentoring relationship. The outcome is often feelings of anger, loss, or anxiety as the pair of individuals enters the separation phase of the relationship. As a mentoring relationship moves into the separation and redefinition phases, it ceases to provide many of the central functions that previously gave it such importance. The predictability of the phases of a mentoring relationship demonstrates that inevitably this special kind of valued support ends (Kram, 1983; Levinson et al., 1978; Phillips-Jones, 1982).

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

This paper assumes that a wider range of developmental relationships that should be investigated exists. The premise that many relationships are important to development has a long and rich history (Neugarten, 1975; Storr, 1963; Sullivan, 1953). Over the years, social psychologists have enriched the idea that the self or personality develops within a social nexus of relationships, at the center of which there is a core group from which the individual learns new behaviors and gains a positive sense of self (Ziller, 1963). Most recently, Levinson et al. (1978) developed a concept of the life structure, which effectively describes an individual's relationship with different parts of the world. They also state that individuals selectively use and are used by their worlds through evolving relationships. Each of these social scientists has maintained the importance of relationships in enabling individual development and growth throughout successive life and career stages.

[1]Career-enhancing functions in this paper are the same as the Career Functions discussed in earlier work (Kram, 1980, 1983, 1985).

Yet, while we know the general importance of relationships, we know little about adult relationships other than the mentoring relationship that directly encourage, support, and contribute to progress in life and career. In work settings, it appears that there are many relationships that could meet developmental needs. Relationships with bosses, subordinates, and peers offer alternatives to the mentoring relationship, a relationship that is relatively unavailable to many individuals in organizations (Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978).

A first step in the investigation of other developmental relationships in organizations is a systematic study of the nature of relationships with peers. A previous study of mentoring relationships strongly suggested the potential significance of peer relationships (Kram, 1980). In that intensive interview study of 18 pairs of junior and senior managers involved in mentoring relationships with each other, many individuals referred to the importance of relationships with peers when a mentoring relationship was changing or ending, or when a particular relationship failed to meet critical developmental needs.

Peer relationships appear to have the potential to serve some of the same critical functions as mentoring, and also appear more likely to be available to individuals. By definition, in a hierachical organization the individual is likely to have more peers than bosses or mentors. Furthermore, the lack of the hierarchical dimension in a peer relationship might make it easier to achieve communication, mutual support, and collaboration than it would be in a mentoring relationship.

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, was to understand the nature of peer relationships among managers and other professionals in one organizational setting. The research design was guided by three primary questions:

1. *For what purposes do individuals form and maintain peer relationships?*
2. *Can distinctive kinds of peer relationships be identified?*
3. *What are the functions of peer relationships at different career stages?*

RESEARCH METHODS

This exploratory study was designed to examine the nature of supportive and significant peer relationships at early, middle, and late career stages. Three researchers, two women and one man, composed the research team. The research was conducted in a large, northeastern manufacturing company. Members of the human resource staff facilitated our introduction into the organization. This staff provided an initial list of potential research participants, selected according to four criteria established in advance by the research team.

Participants

The first criterion for selection of participants was age. Extant literature suggested that individuals work on different developmental tasks at different ages and career stages in the context of their relationships (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Levinson et al., 1978). Therefore, it seemed important that we allow such differences to be manifested, lest what we discover about peer relationships represent only one age or career-stage group. Three age groups of 25–35, 36–45, and 46–65 were identified as most likely to represent individuals in early, middle, and late career stages. While career stage and adult life stage are not always synonymous, as when, for instance, an individual at midlife launches a new career, our sample consisted of managers for whom life stage and career stage were highly correlated.

Gender of participant was the second criterion for participation in the study. Since our research was to focus on expanding our knowledge of adult relationships with peers at work, we believed it was important to have as many female participants as male. While this balance may not reflect the demographics of the organization, we decided that we could make the most valuable contribution to an understanding of adult relationships if both male and female perspectives were equally represented.

The final two criteria involved tenure in the organization and willingness to participate. The human resources staff saw all individuals who appeared on our initial list as genuinely interested in sharing their perspectives and as comfortable with doing so in interviews. In addition, three years tenure in the organization was required. We felt that this period was sufficient to give an opportunity for a peer relationship to develop.

From the original list, the research team randomly selected five people from each age category. We sent letters to these individuals inviting them to participate in the study and then called them on the phone to answer questions they might have and to formally request their participation. Two individuals from the original sample declined, both because of current time pressures, and were replaced by contacting others on the original list. In all, the final sample consisted of six people in early-career (25–35), five in middle-career (36–45), and four from late-career (46–65) stages (see Table 1).

The research strategy was to let the 15 focal people select up to two individuals with whom they had supportive relationships and to then interview those significant others. Because the research itself encouraged the discussion of "special" important relationships, it was imperative to build in a chance for "less special" relationships to emerge. Allowing up to two relationships to be explored for each focal person increased the possibility that different types of relationships would be discussed. This sampling strategy resulted in 25 pairs. Eleven focal people wished to talk about two relationships, three people cited one relationship, and one individual named no significant peer relationship.

TABLE 1
Research Participants

Focal Person			Significant Others		
Organizational Status[a]	**Age**	**Gender**	**Gender**	**Age**	**Organizational Status[a]**
Early career:					
Subsection manager	32	F	F	35	Subsection manager
			M	55	Unit manager
Unit manager	32	M	M	36	Individual contributor
			M	32	Individual contributor
Unit manager	32	M	M	32	Subsection manager
			M	40	Section manager
Individual contributor	31	F	M	38	Individual contributor
Individual contributor	29	F	F	34	Subunit manager
			M	29	Individual contributor
Individual contributor	27	M	M	36	Individual contributor
			M	32	Individual contributor
Middle career:					
Section manager	45	M	M	48	Subsection manager
			M	52	Section manager
Section manager	43	M	M	38	Section manager
			M	39	Section manager
Unit manager	43	F			None
Unit manager	36	M	M	42	Subsection manager
			M	34	Unit manager
Individual contributor	42	F	F	55	Unit manager
Late career:					
Section manager	58	F	F	42	Subsection manager
			M	53	Subsection manager
Subsection manager	61	M	M	59	Subsection manager
Unit manager	63	M	M	63	Individual contributor
			M	57	Unit manager
Individual contributor	55	F	F	57	Individual contributor
			M	63	Individual contributor

[a]The organizational hierarchy progresses from individual contributor to unit manager to subsection manager to section manager.

Interviews

The interviewing sequence with the 15 focal people consisted of two 1½ to 2 hour sessions. During the first session, the primary task was to establish rapport with the focal person and to review the individual's career history. By the end of that first interview each focal person was asked to identify "those two relationships with colleagues which you feel support your personal or professional growth." During the second interview, the significant relationships were explored at length by focusing on reconstructing the history of the relationship, the participant's emergent thoughts and feelings at different times about the relationship, and the role that the relationship was perceived to have in career growth. At the end of the second interview, we obtained permission to contact the significant other(s). We

subsequently invited each significant other to participate in a similar interview sequence; all of them agreed to participate.

The interviewing methods were similar to the biographical interviewing method that Levinson et al. (1978) used in their study of adult development. The method combines elements of a structured research interview, a clinical interview, and a conversation between friends. Such an interview is both sufficiently structured to insure that certain topics are covered and sufficiently flexible to allow the interviewee to focus on what is of special and particular importance. Because the study involved interviews with pairs of managers or professionals, both individuals were assured complete confidentiality; that is, no information from either's interview was shared with the other.

Each interview was guided by a detailed set of interview questions formulated by the research team. While each researcher had the flexibility to ask any one question in a number of different ways, depending upon the emerging tone of the interview and the style of the interviewer, the research team agreed in advance to cover broad topic areas in generally the same order. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed so that the raw data could be systematically analyzed.

Prior to beginning the data collection, the research team met on several occasions to discuss and articulate the particular ideas and concepts which each had formed in regard to peer relationships. This articulation of our *a priori* assumptions (Post & Andrews, 1982) was a critical process in the research. It insured that we understood the biases we brought to the research as individuals and as a team. We could, therefore, take care to minimize the impact of our biases on the data collected.

The research team also met weekly during the interviewing phase to talk about any difficulties or concerns any interviewer had experienced. These meetings helped keep individual interviews as free of interviewer bias as possible and provided an awareness of the effects of each interviewer on the data collected. A second function of these conferences was to double-check that the relationships which were emerging were, in fact, peer relationships and not conventional mentoring relationships. From previous research, we knew that mentors tended to be much older and several organizational levels higher, and that the mentoring relationship was characterized as a one-way helping relationship. We used these criteria to evaluate the emerging peer relationships; none of the emerging relationships met the mentoring criteria.

Data Analysis

Our analysis of peer relationships followed the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) as described by Post and Andrews (1982). We reviewed the transcripts for concepts and themes that might illuminate the nature of peer relationships and their role in career development. Throughout the data collection process, researchers were developing their own emergent hypotheses, which were constantly shared and compared with the ideas of the others. Once all the data were collected, we met for several full day

sessions at which we jointly analyzed the data, paying special attention to similarities and differences across relationships.

The process of data analysis, conducted in the manner described by Post and Andrews (1982) and Sanders (1982), involved searching the data for initial categories that seemed to reflect similarities across cases (e.g., intensity of relationship, level of commitment, age-organizational level combination, issues worked on, needs satisfied). We derived these preliminary categories from the hypotheses that emerged throughout the data collection. Cases which appeared to fit the category under examination were grouped together. This process served to verify the usefulness of each category, to establish its basic properties, and to delineate when and to what extent the category existed (Post & Andrews, 1982). When even one particular relationship did not effectively illustrate a concept, we concluded that the concept was inadequate.

While placement into initial categories maximized similarities and minimized differences, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) requires that differences be maximized as well. According to Post and Andrews (1982), diversity is sought to stretch a concept to its limits and its depths, an effort that insures that the categories and theory developed are well integrated. The final concepts and themes developed were those that revealed both the similarities and the differences across cases, accounted for all relationships studied, and were accepted as doing so by all members of the research team. While achieving such a consensus was not easy, it insured that the resultant conceptualization of peer relationships would be both comprehensive and compelling (Isabella, 1983).

CHARACTERISTICS OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS

The results of this study suggest that peer relationships offer an important alternative to conventional mentoring relationships by providing a range of developmental supports for personal and professional growth at each career stage. Through systematic analysis of the 25 relationship pairs, we identified a range of career-enhancing functions similar to those found in mentoring relationships (Kram, 1980). In addition, the analysis indicated that some peer relationships only provide one career-enhancing function, while others provide a wide range of career-enhancing and psychosocial functions. As a consequence, we defined a continuum of relationships that highlights several different types of peer relationships. Finally, interviews with individuals at different career stages suggested that not only are there different types of peer relationships, but that these types may be modified and shaped by the age and career concerns of both individuals. Therefore, we present speculations about how age and career stages shape different peer relationships.

Developmental Functions

Peer relationships function so as to provide a variety of developmental benefits. Many of these are similar to the career-enhancing functions and

psychosocial functions that are observed in conventional mentoring relationships (Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978; Phillips, 1977). Table 2 displays the developmental functions of peer relationships that were derived from analysis of the interview data, and compares them with the developmental functions found in mentoring relationships.

TABLE 2
Developmental Functions—Comparison of Mentoring and Peer Relationships

Mentoring Relationships	Peer Relationships
Career-enhancing functions	Career-enhancing functions
• sponsorship	• information sharing
• coaching	• career strategizing
• exposure and visibility	• job-related feedback
• protection	
• challenging work assignments	
Psychosocial functions	Psychosocial functions
• acceptance and confirmation	• confirmation
• counseling	• emotional support
• role modeling	• personal feedback
• friendship	• friendship
Special attribute	Special attribute
• complementarity	• mutuality

In providing career-enchancing functions, a peer relationship can aid in organizational advancement:

> Basically, it was the type of relationship, I think, I was always ahead of her one assignment. I would feed back to her about the other assignments that I've heard of and how the assignments were. Mainly, what I was trying to do was have her benefit from my experience and recommend jobs that I thought were better or worse for her to go after. I think we developed a career counseling relationship.

Within the context of a relationship of this kind, information sharing gives both individuals technical knowledge and perspective on the organization that better enable them to get their work done. In addition, through career strategizing, individuals can discuss their career options and dilemmas, finding in a peer a medium for exploring their own careers. Finally, peers give and receive feedback concerning work-related matters that lets them evaluate their own experiences.

In providing psychosocial functions, a peer relationship can support an individual's sense of competence and confidence in a professional role. Psychosocial functions are more frequently observed in peer relationships that are more intimate, of longer duration, and characterized by higher self-disclosure and trust:

> He is one of my closer friends right now . . . . I'll just walk into his office and bounce off gripes that I have or things that I am doing

> or ask advice that I need and he'll do the same thing. I think a lot of sounding board stuff.
>
> Our careers are kind of parallel in that we're about the same age, we're both single, we both like to go out and party a lot and are a little less serious about work than some other people. And we're doing similar types of jobs at work.

Within the contexts of these relationships, peers are able to provide confirmation to each other through sharing perceptions, values, and beliefs related to their lives at work and through discovering important commonalities in their viewpoints. Secondly, peers can provide emotional support by listening and counseling each other during periods of transition and stress. Third, in discussing areas that extend beyond the specific job-related concerns addressed by career functions, peers offer each other a personal level of feedback that can be an invaluable aid to their (a) learning about their own leadership style, (b) learning how they affect others in the organization, (c) seeing how they are managing work and family commitments. Finally, peer relationships can provide friendship, encompassing concern for each other that extends beyond work itself to the total human being.

While many of these functions are similar to those characteristic of mentoring relationships (see Table 2), one special attribute makes them unique. Peer relationships offer a degree of mutuality that enables both individuals to experience being the giver as well as the receiver of these functions. In contrast to a mentoring relationship, where one individual specializes in the role of guide or sponsor (Kram, 1980; Levinson et al., 1978), in a peer relationship both assume both kinds of roles. This mutuality appears to be critical in helping individuals during their careers to develop a continuing sense of competence, responsibility, and identity as experts. In fact, peer relationships can endure far longer than relationships with mentors. Whereas a mentoring relationship generally lasts between three and six years (Kram, 1983), some peer relationships seen in our study began in early career and continued through late career, lasting as long as 20 or 30 years.

A Continuum of Peer Relationships

In the research sample of 25 relationships, there was considerable variation in the combinations of the developmental functions described above. We identified three types of peer relationships, each type characterized by a particular set of developmental functions, a unique level of trust and self-disclosure, and a particular context in which the relationship had evolved.

We will describe the primary functions, tone, and context of the peer relationship we observed as three distinct points on a continuum (Figure 1), since these best illuminate the three major types of relationships in our sample. However, we offer them as points of reference rather than the only variations that may exist. Criteria used for placement along the continuum, and how these are related to initial organizing concepts used in the data analysis, are illustrated in Table 3.

FIGURE 1
A Continuum of Peer Relationships

Information Peer	Collegial Peer	Special Peer
Primary Function	Primary Functions	Primary Functions
Information-sharing	Career strategizing Job-related feedback Friendship	Confirmation Emotional support Personal feedback Friendship

Information peer. The information peer is so called because individuals in this kind of relationship benefit most from the exchange of information about their work and about the organization. This peer relationship is characterized by low levels of self-disclosure and trust. As a result of the focus on information exchange and infrequent contact, individuals receive only occasional confirmation or emotional support. While an information peer might receive a small amount of job-related feedback, there is insufficient trust or commitment to allow for personal feedback:

> I think it's just a friendly exchange, very little giving back and forth. It's primarily informational . . . . That's probably what he gives to me and I think that's what he would say I give to him. I don't think he would look at me as giving him any insight into how he's running his business — we don't get into shop in that regard.

From the career histories of the participants, we learned that the information peer relationship appears to be a common one in organizations. Preliminary evidence suggests that individuals are likely to maintain large numbers of these relationships. Such relationships demand little, and appear to offer a number of benefits derived from the information shared. While this kind of peer relationship may serve a limited social function in providing some degree of familiarity or friendship, it offers little of the ongoing career or psychosocial support characteristic of the other two types. Exhibit 1 displays how individuals in information peer relationships characterized those relationships.

Collegial peer. The collegial peer relationship is typified by a moderate level of trust and self-disclosure and is distinguished from the information peer relationship by increasingly complex individual roles and by widening boundaries (see Exhibit 1). In this kind of relationship, the information sharing function is joined by increasing levels of emotional support, feedback, and confirmation. Individuals are likely to participate in more intimate discussions of work and family concerns. With greater self-expression in the

TABLE 3
Criteria for Placement Along Continuum of Peer Relationships

Initial Organizing Categories	Information Peer	Collegial Peer	Special Peer
Level of commitment	Demands little, but offers many benefits.	Information sharing joined by increasing levels of self-disclosure and trust.	Equivalent of best friend.
Intensity of relationship	Social but limited in sharing of personal experience.	Allows for greater self-expression.	Strong sense of bonding.
Issues worked on	Increases individual's eyes and ears to organization (work only).	Limited support for exploration of family and work issues.	Wide range of support for family and work issues.
Needs satisfied	Source of information regarding career opportunities.	Provides direct honest feedback.	Offers chance to express one's personal and professional dilemmas, vulnerabilities, and individuality.

context of the relationship, there is greater opportunity for confirmation and validation of self-worth:

> Nathan and I, oh, he's ten feet away. I see him many times. When one of us has a tough thing we'll wander over to the other's office and bitch a little bit and commiserate.

> There's a lot of give and take — on a professional basis and on a social basis. Professionally we're both learning at the same time. He's a manager a little less than a year more than me. So he had a bit of an advantage, but I think we're growing and experiencing things simultaneously. There's a lot of sharing about experiences with our people and about different situations arising. So we reinforce one another in that respect.

Our career histories of participants indicate that individuals may have a limited number (2–4) of such relationships. These tend to be with people who at one time worked within the same department where ongoing work contact encouraged the formation of a relationship. The primary functions provided by the collegial peer relationship are career strategizing, job-related feedback, and friendship, as well as some information sharing, confirmation, and emotional support. These distinctions are best highlighted when set against the unique offerings of the special peer relationship (see Exhibit 1).

Special peer. The point farthest right on the continuum represents the special peer, the most intimate form of peer relationship. Becoming a special peer often involves revealing central ambivalences and personal dilemmas in work and family realms. Pretense and formal roles are replaced by greater self-disclosure and self-expression. Through the widest range of career-enhancing and psychosocial support, individuals find support, confirmation and an essential emotional connection that enables profound work on salient developmental tasks:

> I can say anything to Art and he will be understanding. I am able to get frustration and anger out in a more constructive fashion talking to him. We do that for each other.

> It's relatively intangible . . . . I think we enjoy one another's company . . . . It is nice to have somebody to talk to about certain things that you might not be able to talk about, perhaps, with the person next to you.

> We are genuinely happy for each other's successes, and we try to help each other with major decisions . . . . The thought that would be depressing is if either one of us leaves. Friends of different levels come and go, but we've had much more of a sustained relationship. I generally always have one close friend, and this has been the longest.

The career histories suggested that the special peer relationship is rare. Individuals in this sample typically mentioned a small number (1–3), or none at all. Special peer relationships generally take several years to develop and tend to endure through periods of change and transition. Thus, they offer not only intimacy and confirmation, but continuity and stability as well. In addition to the advantages that information peers and collegial peers gain in their relationships, special peers often have a sense of bonding with

EXHIBIT 1
Examples of Participants' Descriptions of Three Types of Peer Relationships

Information Peer	Collegial Peer	Special Peer
"Most important of our relationship is the interchange or discussions about work. We talk about what management and budget problems mean to us, to the organization, and to the people we work with."	"I consider him a friend, I'll call if I have a question, whether business or personal, when I need to compare what would be the right thing to do. He's one of the first people I call."	"She's the one person that I can open up with and know I'll be accepted, that she isn't going to be shocked with things I say and that a lot of them she'll understand because she shares similar values."
"It's a relationship in which we look to each other to provide certain kinds of information."	"He's just the kind of person who always comes in and says: Hi, how are you doing, how was your weekend or your evening? How are you doing today? He's just a good, supportive, open, wonderful person and I really look forward to seeing him every day."	"We're pretty open and trustful of one another and we'll give a valued judgment even if it's wrong. I think the other is willing to accept that."
"We exchange technical ideas. We talk about work and technical problems. His problems and mine. I contribute ideas to him and he contributes to me."	"We talk about all sorts of things . . . from business to personal. It is always helpful to talk about those with someone you can trust."	"I do see our relationship as a need that each of us have for someone and making the best of things that are similar and liking each other and recognizing that there are differences."

EXHIBIT 1 (continued)

Information Peer	Collegial Peer	Special Peer
"He calls me periodically during work to talk about some technical issue, if he's looking for some information and I would do the same. We look to each other to provide certain kinds of information on technical issues."	"It's a working relationship. We do very little socializing outside of work. We might go grab a couple of beers once a month or go to the Mexican restaurant and see if we can run the marguerita bill as high as the food bill . . . . We just chum around at work."	"Our relationship is mostly friendship and trust and confidence, but that is the underlying thing we feed on. It's much more than just work."
"He's someone I've done things with, like take breaks, and I enjoy that. On the other hand, I would assume that other people fill that role too."	"He helps me out, particularly on administrative stuff. We share experiences. We do that several times a day when we walk back and forth to each other's offices."	"She's the one person in my life with whom I can talk about anything. She knows much more about me, my thinking, and my life than most people do."
"I've seen him a couple of times when I've gone across the street to lunch. It's easy to sit down and talk with him. That's probably three times a year."	"The organization was new to her, people were new to her, and I knew she would have a period of time until she got to know the organization. I helped her along by just being there when she needed help."	"We have no family responsibilities. We've gone on vacations together, gone away for weekends together, party together. He's my closest friend."

one another, which can provide both with a strong sense of security, comfort, and belongingness on the job. The special peer relationship provides reliable and candid personal feedback, emotional support, career strategizing, and ongoing confirmation of each individual's competence and potential (see Exhibit 1).

While the information peer, collegial peer and special peer relationships reflect different combinations of developmental functions, each also seemed to encompass what the individual brought to the relationship in terms of expectations and developmental tasks. We clarified how individuals' expectations and developmental tasks may have shaped each type of peer relationship by examining dominant themes of these relationships at different career stages, and by speculating beyond the limits of our sample of 25 relationships. The following discussion of peer relationships at different career stages, therefore, while grounded in our data, also represents an extension of that data.

Relationships at Different Career Stages

The three types of peer relationships on the continuum seem to be perceived somewhat differently by individuals at different career stages. These variations appear to be related to the particular developmental tasks that each person brings to the relationship. Since developmental tasks involve salient concerns about self, career, and family that characterize each career stage, it is not surprising that these tasks might shape what is brought to a peer relationship (Dalton et al., 1977; Levinson et al., 1978; Schein, 1978). Thus, while the primary functions of each type of relationship do not change, the content of what is discussed and the process through which that content is shared are different at successive career stages.

These differences in the content of peer relationships at successive career stages are captured in the dominant themes of each type of relationship at each major career stage (see Table 4). Differences that seemed to be related to individuals' developmental tasks clustered roughly around early, middle, and late career stages, with one exception. In order to adequately account for the spread of developmental tasks in early career, we have separated early career into establishment and advancement. The establishment stage is comprised of people in their 20s, the advancement stage of people in their 30s, middle career of people in their 40s to early 50s, and late career with people in their mid-50s and beyond.

Dominant themes in the establishment stage. Concerns about competence and professional identity often characterize the developmental needs of a person in the establishment phase of early career (Hall, 1976; Levinson et al., 1978; Schein, 1978; Super, 1957). Two themes seemed to be common to all people in their 20s in our sample: (1) concern for their professional identity—for defining who they were as managers and professionals—and (2) desire to feel self-confident and competent as they went about learning the ropes of organizational life.

TABLE 4
Dominant Themes of Peer Relationships at Successive Career Stages

Stages	Information Peer	Collegial Peer	Special Peer
Late Career	Maintaining knowledge	Assuming consultive role Seeing others as experts	Preparing for retirement Reviewing the past Assessing one's career and life
Middle Career	Networking Maintaining visibility	Developing subordinates Passing on wisdom	Threats of obsolescence Reassessment and redirection Work/family conflicts
Advancement	Preparing for advancement Gaining visibility	Gaining recognition Identifying advancement opportunities	Sense of competence and potential Commitment Conformity vs. individuality Work/family conflicts
Establishment	Learning the ropes Getting the job done	Demonstrating performance Defining a professional role	Sense of competence Commitment Work/family conflicts

Dominant themes for each type of peer relationship in the establishment stage reflect these developmental concerns (see Table 4). The information peer relationship—in providing information sharing—is characterized by the exchange of information that helps the novice learn the ropes of the organization and get the job done. The collegial peer relationship—through career strategizing, job-related feedback, and friendship—is characterized by conversations about evolving professional roles and job performance. The special peer relationship—in providing confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship—is characterized by intimate discussions about making a commitment to the new career, managing the stresses of work and family, and anxieties about competence.

The process of a peer relationship in the establishment stage seems to be similar to that which might characterize a mentoring relationship. By this we mean that the other is viewed as having more wisdom or experience and is described as a model and as a career guide, even though a peer:

> Terry struck me to be very intelligent, career oriented, knowing where she wanted to go. Those were all the kinds of things that I need to look up to . . . . Terry was really leading me around. It was virgin territory we were getting into. Terry was really a good one to get in there and plow and pioneer it.

> I think Terry has a better way of dealing with some situations than I do. She says she is going to do something and she does it. Whereas I tend to procrastinate a little more, not so willing to take a risk that she will take. She has guided me in that sense.

Thus, this special peer relationship in the establishment stage, by providing confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship, helped the individual to define a professional role and to acquire competence and confidence. To the extent that these relationships, especially the collegial peer and the special peer, involve a sense of "looking up to" peers for guidance, they offer an alternative to conventional mentoring.

Dominant themes in the advancement stage. As individuals become established in their chosen professions and begin to internalize feelings of competence and mastery, needs and concerns associated with advancement in the organization and in a profession take on new importance (Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978; Super, 1957). No longer burgeoning novices, individuals in the career advancement stage in our sample seemed to want to dig in, get ahead as they defined it, work through conflicts arising between work and family commitments, and most of all "settle down" (Levinson et al., 1978) into their lives and build specialized career niches.

Dominant themes for peer relationships in this career stage appear to be shaped by these developmental tasks (see Table 4). Thus, the information peer relationship can provide information than enables individuals to create opportunities for future advancement through increased knowledge of the organization as well as through increased visibility to those who make promotional decisions. Similarly, the collegial peer relationship, in providing career strategizing or feedback, can further the individuals' attempts to gain recognition and to identify realistic advancement options. Finally, ongoing haring with special peers can help individuals to grapple with work/family conflicts and with concerns about their potential and the extent to which they are willing to make commitments and conform to the demands of the organization.

The elevation of one member to a superior plane no longer characterizes relationships at this time. All persons in their 30s tended to perceive themselves as equal to the other, even if that other person was older or at a different career stage or organizational level, and even if the other person did not share this perception. There seemed to be a real *need* among people in the advancement stage to perceive and experience this sense of equality:

> I don't consider him like a boss. It's more like a peer relationship. I don't feel equal in responsibility, but I feel equal in ability to influence his thought. I mean I will go and deal with him more on an equal basis than I did with other supervisors. In fact, it's the first time that I've felt this way. I've always felt really subservient to the people that I worked for, whether it was true or not . . . . Maybe it's just getting older and maturing that had done that.

Several other individuals, who formerly saw themselves as novices taking advice, spoke of this equality as a matter of being able to influence the other person in work-related or technical matters. Others describe a flexibility of roles; they say they can be the giver of advice at one time and the recipient another time; at one moment, the supporter and at another moment, the

person in need of professional or personal support. Peer relationships at this stage seemed especially malleable and the individuals especially receptive to differences in day-to-day needs.

Dominant themes in middle career. During the 40s and early 50s, people in our sample appeared to be concerned with reworking old issues or learning new ways to approach situations in life and career through their relationships (Hall, 1976; Hall & Kram, 1981; Levinson et al., 1978). Individuals in middle career have substantial histories established, histories shaped by the choices made and passed up, situations dealt with effectively or ineffectively. Midcareer is known to be a time for re-evaluation and rethinking of those choices and events. Midcareer is also a time when individuals increasingly depend on others to help them accomplish the tasks of the organization.

These developmental tasks appear to shape the dominant themes for peer relationships in this career stage (see Table 4). Thus, a collegial peer relationship, by providing career strategizing and job-related feedback can help individuals learn how to develop subordinates and how to effectively depend on, as well as to coach, junior colleagues. Similarly, a special peer relationship, in providing several psychosocial functions, might offer a way to manage fears of obsolescence and processes of reassessment and redirection that tend to occur at some time during this period.

The social processes in the relationships in middle career years, particularly in collegial peer and special peer relationships, seemed somewhat reminiscent of mentors' views of mentoring relationships (Kram, 1983). In our research sample, peer relationships for individuals in this career stage were generally with younger people. Individuals in their 40's and early 50's seemed to get a chance to see a younger peer dealing with the issues and choices they themselves had experienced at earlier stages in development. The other peers seemed to live out vicariously alternative ways of confronting and solving those issues and concerns:

> I think I envy a lot of . . . some of her characteristics. She, I think, is more dedicated to her job, and to things than I am. The job, people, and principles. I could fluctuate. My interests can change. I would tend to do the thing that appeals to me more, and let something else slide. She's more organized, more on top of things . . . . I think maybe too that she probably felt that she had seen my growth as a manager, and maybe she liked that and tried to follow through in those footsteps.

While the difference in age creates some of the dynamics reminiscent of a mentoring relationship, the similarity in level creates more of a two-way exchange and the mutuality characteristic of a peer relationship.

Dominant themes in late career. As individuals progress through life and enter late adulthood and career, peer relationships may take on a unique role, aiding the gradual movement into retirement. Individuals in late career begin to acquire an understanding and appreciation for the selves that have accomplished so much in life and in their careers (Levinson et al., 1978). In

terms of career development especially, most individuals are facing the reality of moving out of the work force and into new endeavors through retirement (Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978). The individual's own fallibility and vulnerability take on greater significance.

Dominant themes for peer relationships at this stage in our sample seemed to reflect the impending move out of the organization (see Table 4). Thus, information peers, in providing information, may do so with the implicit benefit of enabling an individual to stay connected enough with the organization to continue to work effectively. The collegial peer relationship and the special peer relationship, through the various functions that they provide, may become mechanisms that enable the individual to assume a more consultative role, to pass on major responsibilities to younger colleagues, and to prepare psychologically for retirement.

The special peer relationship in late career stood out in this reseach sample as both rare and very valuable. Few individuals can provide emotional support and confirmation to an individual in late career without their having had similarly long career histories. Thus, peers of the same age with similar organizational histories may offer unique opportunities for intimate sharing about immediate developmental tasks:

> During the conversation, a lot of times it will come up, where do you think we can go from here, at our age . . . ? I think probably I could feel more comfortable with Ted talking about things that have happened, and making an analysis of it, and being able to both understand what's happened. I think that's pretty important because we can relate to each other much better than I could relate to Sara [who is a much younger peer]. First of all, she wouldn't know what the hell I'm talking about because unless you've experienced it, you really can't talk about it.

While participants relished and appreciated differences as sources of learning at this career stage, they appeared to find similarities to be great sources of security as they experienced the loneliness of anticipating movement out of their organizations and careers. Collegial peer and special peer relationships in late career provide, in some instances, a home away from home—a chance to be understood and liked by someone who has been through it all too.

IMPLICATIONS

As a result of this study, we have delineated a continuum of peer relationships and outlined the developmental functions provided by those relationships. Furthermore, we have suggested the manner in which those relationships may fulfill different individual needs at different career stages. This exploratory research has implications for individuals and for the direction of future research on adult relationships at work.

This study suggests that there are a variety of peer relationships — information peer, collegial peer, and special peer — that can support individual development of successive career stages. Each type of relationship offers a range of opportunities for growth through the distinctive functions it provides.

Some of these functions resemble those seen in mentoring relationships; at the same time, however, they tend to involve greater reciprocity and mutuality. The combination of various functions and types of relationships would seem to offer almost all individuals some means for growth and support at any time in their careers. This potential for meeting the needs of many people at every career stage truly makes peer relationships more universally available than conventional mentoring relationships and an exciting alternative to them.

Peers as Mentors

This study, in conjunction with previous studies of mentoring, indicates that mentoring and peer relationships have several common attributes. They both have the potential to support development at successive career stages. In addition, they both provide a range of career-enhancing and psychosocial functions, some of which are found in both kinds of relationships (see Table 2).

There are, however, several important differences between these two types of relationships. First, in conventional mentoring relationships there are significant differences in age and in hierarchical levels, while in peer relationships one of these attributes is usually the same for both individuals. Second, the clearest distinctions between mentoring and peer relationships are found in the functions provided and the quality of the exchange. While a few of the developmental functions of the two types of relationships overlap, mentoring relationships involve a one-way helping dynamic while peer relationships involve a two-way exchange. A comparison of the complementarity found in a mentoring relationship with the mutuality found in a peer relationship best summarizes this difference (see Table 2).

Previous research on managerial and professional careers has urged individuals to seek mentors (Halcomb, 1980; Missirian, 1982; Phillips-Jones, 1982; Roche, 1979; Schein, 1978). The current study suggests that peer relationships may offer unique developmental opportunities that should not be overlooked or underestimated. They provide a forum for mutual exchange in which an individual can achieve a sense of expertise, equality, and empathy that is frequently absent from traditional mentoring relationships. In addition, peer relationships appear to have a longevity that exceeds that of most mentoring relationships. Several of the peer relationships we studied had lasted almost 30 years. Thus, these relationships can provide continuity over the course of a career, seeing individuals through change and transition, as well as through the day-to-day tasks of work life.

For individuals who do not have or want mentors, peers seem essential (Shapiro, Hazeltine & Rowe, 1978). They can coach and counsel; they can provide critical information; and they can provide support in handling personal problems and attaining professional growth. Even those who have mentors may want to consider the unique possibilities found in relationships with peers. There may be times during an unfolding career, when it makes more sense to consult with a peer instead of a mentor. Indeed, the results of

this study and previous research on mentoring (Kram, 1980, 1983) suggest that the relative importance of relationships with mentors and peers may change over the course of a career. While conventional mentors are most important in early career, peers seem to be important at all stages. Further research is needed in order to identify the unique constellations of relationships that may exist at each career stage to support individuals' development.

Questions for Future Research

This research, taken in conjunction with research on mentoring, suggests a number of intriguing questions for further exploration. In reconstructing the histories of peer relationships, it became obvious that there were considerable shifts in some relationships over time and little change in others. Some of our relationships actually seemed to progress from left to right on the continuum; others did not. It seems important, therefore, to ask why one relationship grows into a special peer relationship, while another remains constant. A better grasp of the psychological and organizational factors which encourage or inhibit progress needs to be developed. Such insights would provide individuals with an increased understanding of their own peer relationships, and would enable organizations to create conditions that encourage the formation of supportive peer relationships among its members.

It will also be necessary to delineate how individual differences in developmental tasks, self concepts, and attitudes toward intimacy and authority, as well as other individual attributes, shape the nature of relationships that are needed and maintained. For example, individuals with a particular posture toward authority may well be more inclined to develop relationships with peers, and to find these kinds of relationships of greater value than hierarchical relationships. Or, individuals who feel in competition with peers for jobs or resources may be inhibited from forming a more intimate type of peer relationship. Increased understanding of how individual attributes shape the nature of peer relationships and relationship constellations will significantly add to our understanding of adult relationships at work.

Since we studied relationships in one organization, we forfeited the opportunity to examine how variations in the organizational setting affect the nature of peer relationships. Interview data, however, suggests that certain characteristics of the work environment, such as the number of years in the company, differences in the culture of the work group, nature of the reward system, nature of task design, and availability of training programs, may have affected the relationships that were studied. For example, a number of the relationships we studied began in job-orientation programs. Systematic research across organizations is needed to determine the extent to which relationships are affected by such features of an organization. We wonder especially about the effects companies quite different from this particular research site—for instance, fast growing, highly competitive firms with rapid turnover of technical professionals—might have on relationships. It would be useful to investigate how these vastly different conditions facilitate or inhibit the opportunities to develop supportive peer relationships.

This study has expanded our insights into the nature of peer relationships, and it has identified several new, potentially fruitful lines of research. The field of adult relationships is one that deserves greater attention. Investigation of relationships with peers, mentors, and subordinates at different career stages and in diverse organizational settings are preliminary steps toward a better understanding of adult relationships at work.

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