Professionals’ Use of Different Mentor Sources at Various Career Stages: Implications for Career Success

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ABSTRACT. The authors investigated the various sources of mentors used by professionals, how these sources influenced both objective and subjective career success, and whether the participants used different sources of mentors at different stages of their careers. According to data from 430 faculty members at 2 U.S. research institutions, assistant professors with mentors in their professions, associate professors with mentors outside the work place, and professors with mentors within their organizations had the highest levels of objective career success. Assistant professors with multiple sources of mentors yielded significantly higher levels of both objective and subjective career success than did those with single sources or no mentor. If one links professorial rank to career stage, the results suggest that the participants used different sources of mentors at different stages of their careers.

Key words: career stage, career success, mentors

MENTORING has received considerable attention in organizational literature in the United States over the past two decades, primarily because of its linkage to both job and career success. Initial research by Kram (1983, 1985) focused on the development and phases of the mentor relationship, whereas other researchers addressed the career-enhancing and psychosocial functions served by mentors (Burke, 1984; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Olian, Giannantonio, & Carroll, 1986; Phillips-Jones, 1982). Since the time of those studies, research on mentoring has

An earlier draft of this article was presented at the 1996 Academy of Management meeting in Cincinnati, OH.

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branched into a number of different directions. Some academicians have examined the outcomes of mentoring (Bahniuk, Dobos, & Hill, 1990; Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Dreher & Ash, 1990; Fagenson, 1989; Scandura, 1992; Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991) and the organizational benefits of mentoring (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Hunt & Michael, 1983; Zaleznik, 1977), whereas others have studied the perceived barriers to gaining a mentor (Ragins & Cotton, 1991) and the nature of such relationships for women and minorities (Carden, 1990; Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Noe, 1988; Ragins, 1997; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990; Thomas, 1990). More recent research has focused on the roles of the mentor and protégé in the initial formation of mentoring relationships (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Allen, Poteet, Russell, & Dobbins, 1997; Allen, Russell, & Maetzke, 1997; Aryee, Chay, & Chew, 1996; Turban & Dougherty, 1994) and on gender differences in the expected outcomes of such relationships (Baugh, Lankau, & Scandura, 1997; Burke & McKeen, 1997; Ragins & Scandura, 1994). Although such studies have laid the groundwork for what is known about the mentoring process, reviews of career literature (Ornstein & Isabella, 1993; Russell & Adams, 1997) indicate that some limitations continue to exist in the research.

One limitation has been a failure to examine thoroughly the various sources that an individual might use in seeking out a mentor. Although the traditional definition of a mentoring relationship views the mentor as someone from within the same organization as the protégé, a number of researchers have argued that not all employees seek mentors from the same source (Eby, 1997; Kram, 1986; McManus & Russell, 1997; Phillips-Jones, 1982; Raelin, 1985; Zey, 1984). This observation may be particularly true for professionals, who, it has been argued (Gouldner, 1957; Raelin, 1985), often struggle with a dual loyalty to both their employing organization and their profession. The paucity of empirical research of this issue raises important questions. Do individuals seek mentors from different sources (i.e., from their organizations, from their professions, outside the workplace)? How does the use of a particular or a single source affect one’s career success? Because mentoring needs may change over the course of both life stages and career stages (Carden, 1990; Orstein & Isabella, 1993), it is also important to examine the various mentor sources with regard to both career stage and career success.

Another limitation in mentoring research has been the tendency for researchers to focus primarily on “objective” outcome measures of success (Bahniuk et al., 1990; Chao et al., 1992). Scandura (1992) used managers’ salary levels and promotion rates as outcome measures, as did Whitely, Dougherty, and Dreher (1991). However, career success is two-dimensional and the “feelings of success,” or subjective criteria, are equally important measures of outcome (Collin & Young, 1986; Cox & Harquail, 1991; Hill, Bahniuk, & Dobos, 1989; Bahniuk et al., 1990; Turban & Dougherty, 1994).

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the various sources of mentors used by U.S. professionals and the significance of the relationship
between the mentor source and career success (both objective and subjective) and at various career stages.

Theoretical Framework

A mentor is usually thought of as an older, or senior, individual who is willing to give time, interest, and emotional support over an extended period to further the career of a junior person, or protégé (Collins, 1983; Wickman, 1997). Traditionally, mentoring has been seen as an informal, intense, and personal relationship between two individuals who are generally within the confines of the same organization (Klaus, 1981; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & Mckee, 1978). Although that definition accurately reflects the characteristics of mentors and protégés in many mentoring relationships, more recent researchers have argued that mentoring may stem from a variety of sources. For example, Kram (1986) referred to mentoring as a constellation of relationships from a variety of sources, both within the organization (e.g., superiors and peers) and outside the work place (e.g., family and friends). This redefinition of mentoring suggests not only that multiple mentoring relationships may occur simultaneously but also that these relationships may come from different sources and have different impacts on career success. Likewise, McManus and Russell (1997) have argued that, depending upon the research perspective (e.g., leader–member exchange, organizational citizenship, social support, or socialization), a mentor may not be from within the same organization as the protégé. Eby (1997) made a similar claim in her discussion of alternate forms of mentoring from sources both internal and external to the organization.

The need to seek out mentors from a variety of sources may be particularly relevant for professionals who, in order to be successful, face the need to show allegiance to both their employing organizations and their professions (Gouldner, 1957; Raelin, 1985). Besides undergoing intensive and narrowly focused academic training, professionals are heavily socialized by their professional discipline—whether it be accounting, law, education, or engineering—to carry out certain responsibilities and maintain professional standards of excellence. To ensure their continued employment, professionals must demonstrate loyalty to their organization but must also align themselves very closely with their professional colleagues and associations outside the organization for the purposes of recognition, evaluation, and, in some cases, career mobility (Raelin). However, the relative emphasis placed on either of these loyalties may change over the course of the professional’s career.

Mentor Source and Career Stage

Although there is evidence to suggest that needs for mentoring change over the course of the career, this issue has been largely overlooked in mentoring
research (Ornstein & Isabella, 1993). Given the career and life stages of professionals, the sources of mentoring may change accordingly. As professionals in the United States begin their careers, they typically expect to have both the freedom and resources to do the jobs for which they were hired. Initially, most organizations respond by granting professionals considerable individual freedom but place them under the supervision of senior professionals (Raelin, 1985). Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977), therefore, argued that it is critical that beginning professionals seek mentors within the organization. However, because professionals are also highly mobile at the early career stage and have been socialized so strongly toward their profession (Raelin), it is equally important that they cultivate mentoring relationships outside their organizations—in their professions. Because many professionals enter their career with mentors already established during their “apprentice” training, they maintain many of these relationships with mentors in their profession. Those entering their career without established mentors in the profession may attempt to cultivate such relationships in an effort to gain recognition and mobility at this early point of their career.

At the midcareer stage, when professionals are often in their 30s and mid-40s, the expectations of both the organization and the individual change. Organizations may begin to place increasing pressure on the professional to participate in activities that directly benefit the organization instead of the profession (Raelin, 1985). At the same time, both age and tenure may influence the professional’s response to such pressure. Older professionals may adjust their aspirations and learn to accept the realities of their bureaucratic organizations (Dalton et al., 1977). Although there are mixed findings in examinations of age—career stage and work outcomes (Cleveland & Shore, 1992), some professionals may experience a gradual deterioration of their skills that, combined with a more sedentary lifestyle, may lower their interest in mobility and relocation (Raelin). Because of this shift from a dual loyalty to a greater focus on their organizations, professionals in the midcareer stage are likely to look for mentors within their organizations.

At the late career stage, most professionals are relatively stable in their careers and are likely no longer to seek mentors but actually to become mentors themselves (Kram, 1985). However, those wishing to cultivate such relationships for career progression purposes tend to seek mentors from within their organizations, because of the strong commitment they are likely to have developed by this point in their careers (Raelin, 1985). Their life stage would also be characterized by greater stability and less interest in relocation.

On the basis of the foregoing literature review and the exploratory nature of the present study, we proposed the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** A positive and significant relationship exists between objective and subjective career success for early and middle career professionals with mentors.
Hypothesis 2: A negative and significant relationship exists between objective and subjective career success for early and middle career professionals without mentors.

Hypothesis 3: Significant differences exist in objective and subjective career success among early career professionals with mentors in the organization, in the profession, or outside the workplace; those with multiple sources of mentors; and those with no mentors.

Hypothesis 4: Significant differences exist in the objective and subjective career success among middle career professionals with mentors in the organization, in the profession, or outside the workplace; those with multiple sources of mentors; and those with no mentors.

Hypothesis 5: No significant differences exist in the objective and subjective career success among late career professionals with mentors in the organization, in the profession, or outside the workplace; those with multiple sources of mentors; and those with no mentors.

Method

Sample

The population for this study comprised full-time faculty members at two state universities—one in the midwestern region and one in the western region of the United States. We selected approximately 60% of the population for the sample—530 at the midwestern institution and 350 at the western university. With lists obtained from the human resources departments at both institutions, we drew a systematic sample from those faculty members holding tenure-track positions. The sample, representing all disciplines on both campuses, was stratified by rank within departments in the colleges of agriculture, business, fine arts, engineering, natural sciences, mathematics, education, liberal arts, medicine, pharmacy, and technology.

We coded the surveys to ensure that the sample was representative of all disciplines; only the discipline of medicine suffered a low return rate. The sample was also representative of all academic ranks in the population. There was some concern, however, about the representativeness by gender. Consequently, an oversampling of women ensured that the sample would be representative of women in the population. Given the unexpectedly high response rate, the proportion of women who responded (28%) was slightly higher than the proportion of women in the population (20%).

Of the 880 questionnaires mailed, 436 were returned, producing a response rate of 49%. Because 6 of the surveys contained missing data, we submitted only 430 of the questionnaires for data analysis. Of the 430 participants (28% women, 72% men; age range = 41–50 years), 40% held the rank of assistant professor, 28% were associate professors, and 32% were professors. The mean number of
years at the current university was 11.7 (SD = 9.09); 64% were tenured. Most participants were married (77%) and had children over the age of 12.

**Measures**

We obtained the demographic variables of age, gender, marital status, family size, rank, tenure status, and length of time at current university through direct, single questions.

**Subjective career success.** We tapped perceptions of how successful the participant felt in his or her career by using Gattiker and Larwood’s (1986) measure, adapted for the faculty sample. The 11-item instrument measured five facets of subjective career success (work role, interpersonal, financial, hierarchical, and life) on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). A sample item is “I am earning as much as I think I am worth.” We then combined the standardized responses to the five facets to derive an overall subjective career success score, with a reliability estimate of .78.

**Objective career success.** Because we selected U.S. faculty members as our sample, we based objective career success on a measure of research productivity developed by Peluchette (1991). Although teaching and service to the community and profession are expected of faculty, academic administrators tend to weigh research productivity more heavily in making tenure and promotion decisions, especially at research-oriented institutions (Clark & Centra, 1985; Lawrence & Blackburn, 1985). Advancement, therefore, depends more on the number of publications one is able to produce.

We tapped research productivity with a measure developed by Landino and Owen (1988). The respondents indicated the number of books (texts or research-oriented books), instructors’ manuals, book chapters, refereed and nonrefereed journal articles, conference proceedings, and conference presentations completed over the course of their academic careers. Because disciplines such as art, music, theater, and engineering measure productivity in terms of creative activities, we also included items such as exhibitions, performances, designs, and patents in the questionnaire.

Because the various items of scholarly research and creative work do not carry equal weight in tenure and promotion decisions, we developed weights for each of the items after extensive discussions with deans and department chairpersons from various colleges on both campuses. We then multiplied the number of each of the scholarly or creative works by the weight assigned to the respective items. By summing these values, we obtained a composite score, which we then divided by the number of years since receipt of the terminal degree. This index represented the participant’s average yearly research or creative productivity.
Mentor sources. Adapting a single-item measure of Colarelli and Bishop (1990), we developed a measure for mentor sources. Instead of Colarelli and Bishop’s broad question—"Do you recognize someone who is a mentor or sponsor with regard to your career?"—we included 3 items: (a) "Do you have a mentor within your university?" (b) "Do you have a mentor within your profession but outside your university?" and (c) "Do you have a mentor outside your professional setting (e.g., spouse, parent, friend)?" Each question required a yes–no response.

Career stage. We determined career stage by using the rank of the individual faculty member. Although career stages are not always correlated with life stages, we assumed that most assistant professors were in the early career stage; most associate professors, in the middle career stage; and most professors, in the final career stage.

Results

Table 1 contains the mean scores and standard deviations for ratings of both objective and subjective career success. Professionals in the early career stage (assistant professors) who had mentors from multiple sources experienced the highest levels of objective ($M = 37.33, SD = 33.33$) and subjective ($M = 3.74, SD = .43$) career success. However, ratings for objective career success were also rather high for those with mentors from within the profession ($M = 33.33, SD = 27.57$). Middle career professionals (associate professors) who had mentors from multiple sources also had the highest ratings for objective ($M = 31.54, SD = 27.01$) and subjective ($M = 3.79, SD = .49$) career success. Ratings for both objective ($M = 27.54, SD = 17.49$) and subjective ($M = 3.63, SD = .58$) career success were also high for middle career professionals with mentors from outside the work place. Professionals in the late career stage (professors) who had mentors within their organizations had the highest ratings for objective ($M = 42.69, SD = 32.59$) and subjective ($M = 4.11, SD = .45$) career success. These findings provide empirical support for Raelin’s (1985) view that professionals use various sources of mentors at different levels of career success and at different stages of their careers, depending on the source of the mentor.

As can be seen by the results of the Spearman rank correlations in Table 2, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. For early career professionals (assistant professors), a positive and significant relationship existed between ratings of objective career success and both the use of a mentor in the profession, $r_s = .17, p < .05$, and the use of multiple sources of mentors, $r_s = .26, p < .0001$. For middle career professionals (associate professors), we found a positive and significant relationship between ratings of objective career success and both the use of a mentor outside the work place, $r_s = .18, p < .05$, and the use of multiple sources of mentors, $r_s = .15, p < .05$. With regard to ratings of subjective career


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<th>Career success/Stage</th>
<th>Organization M</th>
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<th>Profession M</th>
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<th>Outside work place M</th>
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<th>Multiple M</th>
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<th>No mentor M</th>
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<td>Early</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>19.44</td>
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<td>Late</td>
<td>42.69</td>
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<td>Subjective</td>
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<td>Late</td>
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Note. Numbers in parentheses below means = number of respondents.
success, a significant and positive relationship existed only for those early career professionals with multiple sources of mentors, \( r_s = .19, p < .01 \). There was also support for Hypothesis 2 (Table 2). For early and middle career professionals, we found significant and negative relationships, \( r_s = -.24, p < .001 \), and \( r_s = -.19, p < .05 \), respectively, between ratings of objective career success and having no mentors. However, such a relationship between ratings of subjective career success and having no mentors existed only for early career professionals, \( r_s = -.21, p < .01 \).

The results of the analyses of variance indicated a significant difference in objective career success among the five groups of sources for early career professionals, \( F(4, 169) = 4.747, p < .001 \). The post hoc comparisons revealed that early career professionals with mentors from multiple sources performed significantly better than (a) those without mentors and (b) those with mentors only outside the workplace. Significant differences in subjective career success also existed among early career professionals with mentors from different sources. The feelings of success among those with mentors from multiple sources were significantly greater than among those without mentors, \( F(1, 108) = 3.0132, p < .02 \), providing partial support for Hypothesis 3. The results did not support Hypothesis 4—that there are differences in objective and subjective career success for middle and late career professionals with different sources of mentors. The results fully supported Hypothesis 5: No significant differences in objective and subjective career success were evident among the sources of mentors for late career professionals.

**Discussion**

The results of the present U.S. study provide evidence that the use of mentors had a positive impact on both objective and subjective career success for the

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<td>Spearman Rank Correlations Between Scores for Career Success and Mentor Source, by Career Stage</td>
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\* \( p < .05 \). \** \( p < .01 \). \*** \( p < .001 \). \**** \( p < .0001 \).
early career professionals but only on objective career success for the middle career professionals. There was also evidence that significant differences in objective and subjective career success existed with the professionals' use of different mentoring sources at different career stages.

**Mentoring Sources and Career Stages**

*Early career stage.* Early career professionals (assistant professors) with mentors from multiple sources were the most successful with regard to research and scholarly productivity. It appears that those individuals recognized the type of assistance that each mentor source can offer and sought to take advantage of them all. Early career professionals using a single source of mentoring were most successful with regard to research and scholarly productivity with a mentor in the profession. Such mentors were critical at the early career stage in providing the kind of support necessary to be successful in scholarly productivity. One source of mentoring that proved detrimental to research productivity for assistant professors was the use of a mentor from outside the work place. It is likely that such a mentor lacks both the organizational and professional expertise to provide early career professionals with the assistance crucial to their objective career success.

The early career professionals with mentors from multiple sources also experienced the highest subjective career success; those without mentors had significantly lower levels of subjective career success when compared with the other early career professionals. In the early stage of their careers, the assistant professors appeared to seek mentors from multiple sources to gain emotional support in adjusting to the demands of both their employing organizations and their professions.

*Middle career stage.* According to the mean scores, associate professors with mentors from multiple sources were clearly the most productive when compared with those with mentors from other single sources or those with no mentors at all. As expected, the presence of a mentor was critical to objective career success for those in the middle career stage and, like the early career professionals, these individuals recognized the advantage of mentoring assistance from multiple sources. An examination of single sources of mentoring for middle career professionals revealed that the use of a mentor from outside the work place was significantly related to scholarly output. Although we expected that these individuals would be more likely to seek mentors from within their organizations, most would already have received tenure in conjunction with their promotion to the rank associate professor and may no longer have felt the need for mentors within the profession or the organization. Support from others outside the work place proved important to objective career success among the middle career professionals, who defined such relationships as spouses and friends as mentoring, and
may be linked to the correspondence between life-stage needs for emotional support and needs of the middle career stage.

Although the associate professors also experienced the greatest feelings of success with mentors from multiple sources, this finding did not prove to be significant. The associate professors with mentors from the profession demonstrated the lowest level of subjective career success—lower than for those with no mentor at all. Very likely to have been tenured with their promotion to the rank of associate professor, they appeared to be “cutting their ties” with some of the professional mentor relationships established earlier in their careers and were less dependent on such relationships for their feelings of success.

Late career stage. Consistent with expectations, there were no significant differences in the performance outcomes for those in the late career stage, with respect to the mentoring source alternatives. When we examined the mean ratings for objective career success, however, the professors with mentors from within the university were certainly the most productive. According to the results, these professionals may have been more likely to desire opportunities within their organizations (e.g., administrative) at this later point in their careers and, thus, to have used a university source for mentoring. Otherwise, performance levels did not differ much with regard to the various mentoring sources and, as expected, the majority of professors did not have mentors. Those professors with mentors from within the university also indicated the highest subjective career success, followed by those with mentors from within the profession. Apparently, the presence of a mentor was still important to faculty members’ feelings of success, even at this late point in their careers.

Career Success

From the results, it is clear that there were some distinct differences in both objective and subjective career success for professionals at early, middle, and late career stages. With regard to the mean ratings for objective career success, the professionals with mentors were relatively productive in the early career stage, declined slightly in productivity during the middle career stage, but then rebounded, in some cases to an even higher level of productivity, in the late career stage. The trend for subjective career success was somewhat different. The professionals with mentors began their careers with rather positive feelings of success, and, in general, these feelings continued through the rest of their careers.

It is also important to point out that, in some instances, there appeared to be a direct relationship between both objective and subjective career success: Where productivity was high, feelings of success were also proportionally higher. However, there were other results in which this was not the case. For example, the assistant professors with mentors outside the work place had the lowest productivity, but their feelings of success proved to be no different from the feelings of
their more productive colleagues with mentors from the profession. Why was this so? Obviously, different sets of variables influenced each dimension of career success. The present findings demonstrate the importance of viewing career success as a two-dimensional concept.

A large number of professionals in this sample had no mentors. In an examination of the mean ratings for objective and subjective career success for the three career stages, it is clear that having a mentor had important implications for both productivity level and mental well-being. The participants without mentors were likely to be at a disadvantage with regard to career success.

Implications for Professionals and Organizations

For professionals, the results provide important information about the implications of different mentoring sources for their success at various stages of their career. Such information allows professionals to maximize both their objective and subjective career success by cultivating the most appropriate mentoring relationships at given points in their careers. The findings indicate, for professionals, the value of establishing close relationships with respected individuals outside the boundaries of the organization—both in the profession and outside the work place.

As more organizations design formal mentoring programs, the present findings provide information as to how resources can be allocated to best meet the mentoring needs of professional employees. Organizations in the United States must recognize the importance of the profession as a source of mentoring and provide the necessary resources to aid in the development of such relationships, particularly for professionals in the early stage of their career. Participation in professional conferences and activities allows for contact with others in their field and provides opportunities for both information exchange and networking. For professionals in the middle career stage, organizations should provide opportunities for the development of mentoring relationships outside the work place through release time or, possibly, sabbatical leaves. In the late career stage, opportunities need to be provided within the organization to enable professionals to cultivate such relationships for purposes of career advancement.

Limitations

One drawback of the present study was the use of self-report data, always a disadvantage in questionnaires. However, such a method was necessary for data collection, given the size of the sample. It is also important to note that members of one discipline (medicine) had a low response rate, so the findings may not apply to faculty in that discipline. In addition, because the present study was not longitudinal, we were unable to identify mentor sources for those tenure-track professionals who had been unsuccessful at other institutions. Also, the study
was confined to faculty at two U.S. semiurban research institutions of higher education; therefore, the generalizability of the results to other groups of professionals within or outside the United States or to faculty at other types of universities may also be limited.

Suggestions for Future Research

Given the void that exists in the literature with regard to mentoring sources, this study may provide a basis on which future research efforts can be built. As a starting point, researchers should continue to expand their definitions of mentoring to include a variety of possible sources and combinations of mentors. Future researchers should also investigate the variables influencing some professionals to use just one source, as opposed to multiple sources, for mentoring. Is that tendency due to a perceived lack of availability of mentors or to a preference for a particular source? Given our rather weak findings for subjective career success, future researchers should examine more closely this dimension of career success, especially among a faculty sample. It appears that the existence of a mentor, regardless of the source, has greater implications for faculty members' feelings of success than does their use of a particular source. The relationship between objective and subjective career success also demands further research attention to determine why less productive professionals can feel just as successful as their more productive colleagues.

With regard to sampling, we also recommend investigations of career success and sources of mentoring for other types of professionals to increase the generalizability of the present findings. We also suggest that future studies of mentoring and career stages be longitudinal, although they are difficult to implement. Finally, because of differences between men and women as to how relationships are viewed, gender differences may exist in the various mentoring sources and the success experienced with the different sources. Because the present sample's limitations in regard to the number of women at each career stage made it impossible to examine gender differences, future researchers should investigate gender differences.

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*Received March 19, 1998*
*Accepted April 5, 1999*