

One-on-One Mentoring Program: Status and Thoughts

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Since our start Dec 2019, we have had 55 mentees and 33 mentors. About 20 of the matches ended without successful closure, especially during COVID. Six matches ended successfully: some in 3 months, one after 8 months, one after a full year. Today, we have 29 matches in progress, spread among 15 mentors. Some of the mentors have a single mentee, several have two, and Ivan Taylor (our standout mentor) maintains 9 mentees simultaneously.

If I focus on those 15 active mentors as being my reliable/responsive line-up, I would say that most of them are at their limit for hours of mentoring or number of mentees. I probably have a little spare capacity among some of those 15, but not a lot; I'd estimate I could squeeze another 5 matches in there, meaning the max capacity is realistically about 34 for the 15 mentors.

So, capacity is a potential problem, though there has been no shortage to date. How can we prevent a shortage from occurring?

You might think we need to find more quality mentors, but that is hard to do, and it means facing more failures along the way. We have already seen a 50% dropout of those who signed up originally, and I don't like the idea of pumping more unreliability into what is now a nice, stable volunteer workforce. It exposes new mentees to a risk – which could lead to the program getting a bad reputation. I'm fighting hard to keep this a high-quality, reliable service.

But mentor headcount is just one component of capacity. Other obvious ones are number of mentees per mentor, or number of weekly hours per mentee. I'm not sure these are very flexible, though. I could give guidelines, but this is a matter of what the volunteer mentors are willing and happy to do, and I really prefer not to lay heavy guidelines on them that could make the experience less enjoyable.

I'd rather focus on another component of capacity as my candidate for key leverage point: Number of months per engagement. I would like to see the engagements be less open-ended in their duration.

Just this week, I sent an email out to all of the mentors to find out how things are going with each mentee. I was able to get Ivan to acknowledge failure on two of his mentees (reducing his true load from 11 to 9) and Pascal Gambardella to acknowledge failure on his one recent mentee (he had previously had a success). This instantly creates more capacity for Ivan (perhaps) and definitely for Pascal.

Note that INFORMS has a fixed 6-month time period for their mentorship matches. I'm not proposing we do the same, but I do think that matches of one year and longer may be too much.

I suppose I could keep asking every few months "how are things going?", but that's a lot of work for me, and I would rather figure out a way for mentors to do more of their own weeding and setting of limits. This will be the secret to maintaining spare capacity for the foreseeable future, I think.

By "weeding", I mean that if a mentee commits to multiple meetings and keeps missing them, they should be gently advised that their time is up, because the mentoring program needs the mentor to be freed up from matches that are stuck in neutral. There have been a number of "on hold" situations that

can stretch on for several months. I think that just shouldn't be allowed, and I'm willing to be the bad guy who reels my mentor back in to make them available again.

By "setting of limits", I think every match should come with an expected duration, and while that duration can be negotiated, it should never be more than 1 year; and maybe no more than 9 or 10 months. (I'm thinking of the 9 or 10 months of a school year as a guide.)