

## THE SOURCES TO ACQUIRE INFORMAL MENTOR ON THE GRADUATE AGRICULTURAL ENTREPRENEURS IN MALAYSIA

**Norhasni Zainal Abiddin**

Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education

Faculty of Educational Studies

[nonie@putra.upm.edu.my](mailto:nonie@putra.upm.edu.my)

### **Abstract:**

Traditionally, the roles and responsibilities of mentors and the mentoring process are practiced in a face-to-face encounter. In today's globalization era, people are experiencing the process of evolution in various aspects. Eventually, the mentoring program is experiencing the same evolution. The evolution of internet technology has significant impact on users in general and specifically on the mentor-mentee process. A mentor is someone who guides, counsels and coaches others. In the context of this study, which is guiding entrepreneurs, the main function of a mentor is to assist novice entrepreneurs to become successful entrepreneurs. Many organizations have admitted on the importance and benefits of informal mentoring. In addition, previous studies found that informal relationship between a mentor and his mentee is more effective than formal mentoring. This article discusses the sources for the young graduates to get global information on informal mentors to help those becoming agricultural entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Samples of this research are young graduates who are now agricultural entrepreneurs managing commercial agricultural projects. They are selected based on certain criteria. This is a qualitative study, where respondents are involved in in-depth interviews to explore information and to answer the research questions. Results of the study showed that informal mentoring attracting more youth especially the graduates to venture into commercial agriculture and websites on the world of agriculture are the places to get informal mentors.

**Key words:** *youth, mentor, mentoring, agriculture, graduate, entrepreneur*

### **Introduction:**

Mentoring can be established everywhere when an adult needs to be trained or advised by a trusted friend who is usually a more experienced person. Mentors are the role models who provide expertise to the less experienced individuals to help them advance or developed themselves. Young farmers of commercial agriculture are free to get direct information from their informal mentors, who then assist and guide the newbies in the field of agriculture. Informal mentoring is a partnership between two people, which is established based on mutual understanding and suitability of the relationship. And such, information that is gained via the internet can be used to enhance business knowledge and to develop commercial agriculture.

Finding an informal mentor will not be a problem for the young graduates as they are information and communication technology (ICT) literates and well-versed with the internet.

The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia had conducted a survey on employment among university graduates and the results showed that of 22,016 working graduates under reviewed, only 2.8 percent is self-employed. Similarly, only 1.4 percent of 11,313 of diploma holders are self-employed (FAMA, 2007). In the efforts to promote entrepreneurship in higher education, entrepreneurship courses are offered by all universities, polytechnics and community colleges in Malaysia. The courses are aimed to cultivate business theories and good entrepreneurship values in students, as well as to develop knowledgeable and capable graduates in terms of technology.

According to the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Malaysia (1995) and based on a number of reasons made by the Malaysian Youth Council, 'youth' refers to the people at the age range between 15 and 40 years old. They are deemed to have matured and able to think positively. Entrepreneurs are defined as those who take risks, opportunities and above all, are innovative. Agriculture is a very broad field which includes efforts of farming, planting, fisheries and downstream agro-based or agro-processing industries. Commercial agriculture refers to farming activities which are undertaken in the form of large scales plantation productivities, the total cultivated land area is large, viable and developed with potential crops for sale which ensure profitable income and value added to the land used for commercial returns. It is a visionary hope of the government to attract many young people into the agricultural sector, and to produce full-time young farmers and successful agricultural entrepreneurs. At present, there are successful young agricultural entrepreneurs, to prove that agriculture is a profitable business, but the number or percentage involved in this area is still too small (Aidit & Husnizam, 2005).

A mentor can assist his mentee to find the right direction of business advancement through guidance and encouragement. The young people who decided to venture into agriculture are in dire need of guidance from those who are qualified in this area. This is consistent with the fact that learning involves two parties, known as the trainers (teachers, supervisors, mentors) and students (also known as a trainee, protégé, mentee). A stable relationship of the two parties is very important to achieve a specific goal. Many studies have emphasized the importance of relationships played by the mentor and his mentee (Brown & Krager, 1985; Kirkham, 1993; Stones, 1984). Like a teacher who is an important person in implementing something new, and thus, a young agricultural entrepreneur is like a new student who is a novice in the commercial farming. Advisory services are needed in which the mentor is referred to in many ways.

Many new entrepreneurs who were nurtured in the field of commercial agriculture, failed to advance and to make it worst, the related agencies could only provide a formal mentor who would guide the new entrepreneurs in a temporary basis. Unfortunately, young entrepreneurs are new to the agricultural world; they require experienced individuals who are willing to provide direct and honest guidance in an informal mentor-mentee relationship. In this context of study,

formal mentoring is referred to a program introduced by a particular agency for the mentee, whereas informal mentoring is informally established which lead to an ongoing relationship and a mentor is sought by the mentee personally.

The informal mentoring or mentor-mentee system is considered as a very good method to be applied to the graduates who want to venture into commercial farming. Mentoring is generally interpreted as a relationship between a mentor and his mentee that occurs in a particular situation to achieve a specific purpose (Irving, Moore & Hamilton 2003; McIntyre & Hagger, 1993; Megginson, 2000). An informal mentoring is more focused on interpersonal compatibility and comfort (Allen, Poteet & Burroughs, 1997; Cramps, 1983; Olian, Carroll & Giannantonio, 1988).

In the context of a business, a mentor is seen to play a significant role in helping new entrepreneurs to become successful entrepreneurs. This is because the functions of mentoring are commonly related to the aspects of career advancement, psychosocial, coaching, protection, role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling and friendship. Many organizations recognize the importance and benefits of informal mentoring. Recent studies found that the informal mentor-mentee relationship contributes high efficiency and more effective compared to formal mentoring (Irving et al., 2003). Thus, this study identifies the sources used to acquire or establish the informal mentoring.

### **Research Methodology:**

Samples of this study are five young graduates who are entrepreneurs managing different agricultural projects commercially. The entrepreneurs were selected based on the following criterias: (1) respondents are youth at the age range of 15 to 40 years old (as defined by the Malaysian Ministry of Youth and Sports); (2) successful in the field of agriculture, and in setting up downstream agro-based industries as well as those who gained net income more than RM3000 (USD975) per individual; (3) posses business assets, for example have more than 10 acres of land; (4) university graduates; (5) previously worked in the public or private sectors. All selected respondents are graduates youth with different farming activities. The respondents are HO (landscaping and ornamental plants), KA (vegetables fertilization), FZ (mango planting), SY (planting lemon grass, bananas, coconuts and goat livestock) and HK (mushroom cultivation).

The actual research uses qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, for this article, the researcher only presented the qualitative data only which is relevent to the objective of the article. The purpose of in-depth interview is to elicit depth of information as opposed to surveys and questionnaire. In-depth interview also allows the interviewer to deeply explore respondent's feelings and perspectives on a subject. The data of the interviews were then transcribed and translated manually based on pre-determined themes. Secondary data was also gathered from various sources of the internet. *Purposive samples are the most commonly used form of*

nonprobabilistic sampling, and their size typically relies on the concept of “saturation,” or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data.

**Findings:**

**Sources of getting informal mentors**

The respondents of this study are ICT literate. They are familiar with internet and social networks particularly in chatting and blogging. And such, they did not have any problem in finding certain resources and even in seeking for online mentors. The respondents are armed with the information and communication technology skills, and able to utilize the skills in developing their own career by getting their own informal mentors via the internet to get new information, guidance and assistance.

Table 1 is a list of popular sources to get informal mentors. The following sources are the websites commonly visited by young people who interested in venturing into agriculture business. The websites are the sources of information, ideas and advice.

**Table 1: Sources of getting informal mentors**

	Informal mentors
<b>Sources</b>	<p>Websites or Portals of agricultural entrepreneurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portal Jutawan Tani</li> <li>• GM Peladang</li> <li>• Persatuan Pedagang dan Pengusaha Melayu Malaysia (PERDASAMA)</li> <li>• Dewan Peniagaan Melayu Malaysia (DPMM)</li> <li>• Pusat Iklan UsahawanTani</li> <li>• Dewan Perniagaan Islam Malaysia (DPIM)</li> <li>• Gabungan Pengusaha Makanan Bumiputera Malaysia (GPMM)</li> <li>• Kelab Usahawan Tani Malaysia (KUAT)</li> </ul> <p>Blogs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are more than 300 blogs of the Malaysian websites to be referred to for guidance. The bloggers are active entrepreneurs of various agricultural projects</li> </ul> <p>Business forums:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portal BicaraJutawan.com</li> <li>• JomBerniaga</li> <li>• Forum Usahawantani</li> <li>• PakarTani</li> </ul>


### 1. Websites or portals of agricultural entrepreneurs

Interested youth can get direct information on various types of agricultural projects. Lots of individuals visit the websites to share ideas, to advertise and promote their products. And thus, it is not surprising that information technology has helped the respondents of this study in getting their informal mentors. All of the five respondents agreed that knowledge is accessible and those portals had somehow helped them in problem solving. For example, the *Portal of Jutawan Tani* (agricultural millionaire) has attracted a lot of new young farmers to venture into commercial agriculture and to become agricultural entrepreneurs.

*Kelab Usahawan Tani (KUAT)* is one of the websites which committed on strengthening and uniting agricultural entrepreneurs with the hope to revolutionize the agricultural sector. One of the programs organized by KUAT is Clinics for Agricultural Entrepreneurs with the objectives : (1) to attract more young entrepreneurs to venture into agricultural sector and agro-based industries; (2) to provide various opportunities in the agricultural sector and agro-based industries; (3) to provide advisory services and supports; (4) to promote funding programs provided by the Bank Pertanian Malaysia; (5) to strengthen the bond and relationship among agricultural entrepreneurs; (6) to promote the mentor-mentee programs; (7) to widen business networking. The respondents reported that their involvement in this kind of clubs has indeed helped them in expanding their business and establishing a networking. The clubs are also the platform for the active members to work together in certain projects, and they also help each other as mentors for those who need assistance and guidance.

### 2. Blogs

Blogs are other platforms of getting new ideas and information regarding agricultural projects. As active members or followers of certain blogs, bloggers share information and create a sense of kinship with other bloggers and some of them end up venturing into the same agricultural projects. Most bloggers are young people who are actively searching and seeking for information. They also share with the world their own activities or businesses. And thus, blogging is one of the ways to get informal mentors. The respondents also agreed that they kept themselves updated on the latest agricultural projects through communication and interaction with other fellow bloggers.

### 3. Business forums

Some individuals prefer to seek help or provide assistance through online forums where questions and answer sessions are conducted. Participants of the forum are active young agricultural entrepreneurs and also successful farmers. There are various business portals and forums for individuals to get various ideas and information. *BicaraJutawan.com* is one

of such portals browsed and visited by the respondents in order to get information and linked them to various relevant websites. This portal also helped them to create a networking with other agricultural entrepreneurs who are working on similar agricultural projects, to gain valuable knowledge, to get business funding, to promote and to share lots of common things.

Websites on the world of agriculture are the places to become and to get informal mentors. Respondents of this study had referred to other individuals who are more experienced in conducting similar business. The information and communication technology (ICT) has also played a significant role and young graduates who venture into agricultural entrepreneurship have gained lots of benefits (Wah, 2000) through accessing websites on mentoring and timeless e-mailing. Information transfer is technologically cross-borders and borderless. Participated mentees get various feedbacks on their posted questions. In the context of this study, accessibility, uniqueness and diversity of resources and information have encouraged the young entrepreneurs in their ventures. They are the mentees who use the ICT for their own good. The capacity of information is magnificent and can be accessed within a short period of time with minimal costs. This is another simple way to get informal mentors. Muller (2000) stated that from the perspective of organizations, online mentoring is more cost effective and economical.

### **Conclusion:**

Informal mentoring of guidance, exposure and role modeling would encourage more youth to venture into agriculture. An informal mentoring is established based on mutual respect and compatibility between a mentor and his mentee. Finding a mentor is normally an informal affair, as those interested can simply contact any individual who is in the similar business without formal written agreement. The platforms of getting informal mentors are discussed in the earlier part of this article. Hence, novice farmers of commercial agriculture are free to get information from informal mentors, who can directly become their guidance in establishing new agricultural ventures.

Abundance of information from the internet can be applied by the young entrepreneurs in starting up their business. Getting current information from the internet is not a problem for the graduates, as they are familiar and well adept with the information technology. Internet is also the primary source of getting online informal mentors. However, mentors are not fairy godmothers, and thus online mentoring will only work with determination, efforts and strong mentoring culture. Once a mentee has indentified a potential mentor, he needs to establish a connection which can be done via e-mail, phone or face-to-face communication. To be effective, the mentor's willingness to share knowledge with the younger ones is significant and both the mentor and his mentee need to establish their mentoring medium via the internet technology. Once the online relationship is established, both parties may meet each other personally for further discussion, which is more effective.

This study has laid down valuable information on the sources of informal mentors. Conclusion can be made that informal mentors are significant contributors and they have huge impacts on the young graduates who are novice agricultural entrepreneurs. Internet is one of the primary sources which help the graduates to find online informal mentor who then coaches and counsels the young farmers to succeed in commercial agriculture.

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