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These days everyone knows that [finding a mentor is valuable](#). But it's increasingly rare that we actually have one. In an [in-depth study](#) of professional service firms, Harvard Business School professor Thomas DeLong and his colleagues discovered: "Everyone we spoke with over age 40 could name a mentor in his or her professional life, but younger people often could not." They note, "Junior professionals joining a firm 20 years ago could count on the partners treating them like protégés." Today job turnover, layoffs, and increased bottom-line pressures have taken a hatchet to that "implicit agreement." The answer isn't to give up on finding a mentor, however — it's to broaden our search.

Many professionals have had success with [creating mastermind groups](#), which are a curated mix of peers who meet regularly to discuss professional challenges and hold one another accountable. But less formal arrangements — sometimes called a mentor board of directors, a [personal board of directors](#), or a kitchen cabinet — can also be effective.

The chief distinction between finding “a mentor” and creating “a mentor board of directors” is that there is less pressure to find one person who represents your ideal future self. You can diversify your search criteria and learn from a variety of people. This also allows you to look beyond the classic notion of a mentor as someone who is older and wiser than you.

Mentors can even be our juniors — by decades. Take [Hank Phillippi Ryan](#), an Emmy-winning investigative reporter I profiled in my book *Reinventing You*. She launched an award-winning side career as a mystery author after being inspired by a former intern of hers who had penned a novel. “It was percolating in my head,” she told me. “If she can write a book, I can write a book.” In order to form your own mentor board of directors — stocked with an assortment of talented peers, senior professionals, and junior colleagues — keep these questions in mind.

What, specifically, do you want to learn? The first step in developing your board is a rigorous self-assessment. Where are you headed professionally, and what skills do you need to get there? If you’re planning to shift functional roles — from sales to HR, for instance — you may want to seek out a mentor with HR experience. Similarly, if you intend to move up the management ranks, finding a mentor with great delegation skills or the ability to build relationships with difficult employees could be valuable. And don’t forget about personal qualities in addition to tactical skills. The biggest game changer for you professionally may be cultivating more patience or more humility; you can seek out role models in these areas as well.

Whom do you respect most? Once you’ve developed your list of skills, write down the people you know and respect who possess them. Think broadly — they could be peers, senior leaders, or even (like Phillippi Ryan’s mentor) interns or junior employees. Once, when I was giving a talk on mentorship at a prominent law firm, a partner shared that early in her career, her secretary was her mentor, because the secretary, who had been at the firm for decades, understood the firm’s office politics and taught her to stand up for herself. It’s also useful to cast a wide net outside the office. At another mentorship workshop I conducted, one leader said that her yoga teacher was a mentor because the woman helped remind her about work-life balance.

How can you arrange to spend more time with them? Identifying your mentor board of directors is great, but it’s all hypothetical unless you actually make an effort to spend more time learning from them. For each person, think through how and when you’ll create time to connect. With some of the mentors, like work colleagues, the opportunities may be plentiful. For others — a grad school professor or a former coworker who’s moved to another company — you may need to think creatively. Could you invite them for a monthly lunch? Call them periodically to check in during your

drive home? Arrange to meet up at a conference you'll both be attending? For each person, the opportunities (and what feels appropriate) will differ. Make a list and write down specific strategies.

How can you make the relationship reciprocal? As with any mentor or sponsor relationship, you need to [make yourself valuable in return](#). For each person on your list, think about what skills or qualities *you* bring to the table and may be able to offer them. For instance, if you're adept at social media, you could offer to help a senior professional tune up his LinkedIn profile (if he's expressed a desire to do so). Or you may have skills outside of work that your mentors value — anything from restaurant recommendations to fitness tips. For these relationships to endure, it's important to make sure they're reciprocal. That way, you're learning from each other rather than imposing on one another's time (or worrying that you're doing so).

Professional success requires a myriad of skills, knowledge, and abilities, more than we could ever hope to learn on our own. That's why mentors who can help us improve are so critical. Archetypal mentors — beneficent, all-knowing senior professionals — are in short supply these days. By updating our notions of mentorship and building a mentor board of directors, we can benefit from the knowledge of talented colleagues all around us.

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