# Mentoring Practices in a Top-Performing Company: Implications for SMES

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This article poses the question: how are mentoring practices implemented within an SME organisation that has received an SME national award in Thailand? A number of qualitative methods were utilised in this study, including document analysis, observation and in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling was employed to identify eleven key informants. The data generated during the field work was analysed by template analysis. Three key outcomes of mentoring practices are presented: the background of mentoring, the six steps to build and implement mentoring systems, and the four success factors for mentoring. The results have implications for taking a strategic approach to improve the performance of SMEs through mentoring.

**Key words:** *Mentoring, Human Resource Development, SMEs, Thailand.*

## Introduction

From a worldwide perspective, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been recognised as an economy's backbone, as they make a positive and substantial contribution to economic growth (Ates et al., 2013; Bocconcelli et al., 2018; Jasra et al., 2011; Nakwa et al., 2012), are a primary source of employment creation, and lead to innovation and sustainable growth (Anuar & Mohd Yusuff, 2011). This paper draws upon case-study research into mentoring within a top-performing SME organisation based in Thailand, where SMEs play an important role in economic development and growth. Thai SMEs constitute a large portion of the national economy as they account for the majority of the number of units and employment. According to the SME white paper (OSMEP, 2019), in 2018, the total number of SMEs in Thailand was 3,077,822 enterprises, or 99.79 per cent of all establishments. Within this, Thai SMEs employed more than 12 million people, accounting for 85.47% of overall employment, and contributing 43.0% of Thailand's gross domestic product (GDP).

Thai SMEs are therefore perceived as the major driving force behind the expanding economy, as in many other countries.

Most SMEs have invariably faced a wide range of issues, encountering both internal and external barriers (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016). Especially, in the era of industry 4.0: 'the introduction of new technologies and practices is always risky in SMEs' (Moeuf et al., 2018, p.2), and it is a difficult task for SMEs to use technology due to a lack of resources and other market problems (Syazali et al., 2019). Two of the major constraints faced by SMEs are time limitations and financial problems related to human resource development (HRD) (Akterujjaman, 2010). Human resource development has been accepted as a key factor in the survival and growth of SMEs (Ahmad et al., 2010). In the context of SMEs, making even small gestures in favour of employees can reap benefits, including reducing absenteeism and employee turnover, increasing the level of satisfaction of employees, and thereby increasing productivity and performance (Cantele, 2018). There is a positive link between SME performance and employee skill development (Verreynne et al., 2013).

Consequently, SMEs have tried to seek strategies to improve their performance in the highly competitive business world. This includes employing information technology systems (Jermsittiparsert & Wajeetongratana), and HRD is recognised as a key strategy in the survival and growth of an SME (Ahmad et al., 2010). There are several broad methods of HRD. Mentoring is perceived as a core development intervention (CIPD, 2015), a means of facilitating collaboration (Brien & Hamburg, 2014) and a positive benefit regarding newcomers' innovation (Uen et al., 2018). Mentoring offers professional skills, attitudes and competencies for employees across a wide variety of organisations. It has also shown a positive influence on employee performance and has a number of benefits for SMEs by supporting employees to drive the organisation's growth and sustainability (Brien & Hamburg, 2014).

Despite the importance of individual development, the volume of research on human resource management (HRM) focuses on large organisations. In SMEs, the number of employees may not warrant appointing responsibility for HRM, or even charging someone with the task of searching for useful learning resources. Furthermore, research on mentoring in SMEs remains relatively low, particularly as SMEs often lack the knowledge and expertise to assist with the transition to sustainability (Brien & Hamburg, 2014). The volume of academic research on mentoring in SMEs remains relatively low (Jones, 2017), particularly when compared with that undertaken in large companies (Eesley & Wang, 2014). This is even though mentoring is reported to achieve higher quality management. Including, the development of creativity, interaction and communication (Uen et al., 2018), as well as boosting the transfer of knowledge from more experienced colleagues to younger ones in order to foster personal development and create well-being in an organisation (Jones, 2017).

The researcher conducted a case study with a top-performing SME organisation that had started to adopt a formal mentoring project. This paper reports the findings about why and when they adopted mentoring, how ready they were for mentoring, and how their adoption of mentoring progressed. Consequently, based on the theoretical analysis of the mentoring phenomenon and its appearance in the Thai context, two further research questions were formulated within the top-performing case study organisation: (1) when and why was the mentoring project implemented? and (2) how were mentoring practices implemented in part of this company? In the subsequent sections, the aim and research methodology used in the study are provided, followed by a review of the literature. The key findings are presented and finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings. Recommendations and concluding remarks are made.

**Mentoring in the SME Context**

It is a globally acknowledged fact that SMEs play a crucial role in employment and the economy. For example, by creating new jobs, economic growth and innovation. Moreover, SMEs have unique characteristics, differing from larger organisations. The typical characteristics of HRD activities in SMEs are that they are informal, reactive and short-term in outlook (Saru, 2007) with a high proportion of unplanned activities (Stewart & Beaver, 2004). They often rely on informal and incidental learning (Marsick, 2009; Steven Tam & David E Gray, 2016). According to Matlay (2000), the majority of learning that occurs in small businesses is incidental rather than planned, occurring irregularly as a result of routine tasks. For example, SMEs prefer informal training (Patton & Marlow, 2002) and informal HRD activities that lead to development while working (Steven Tam & David E Gray, 2016). In general, SMEs are flexible and they are fast adaptors to external changes (Hoque & Bacon, 2006). However, most SMEs fail within the first five years of business operations (De Kok et al., 2011; Schoenherr et al., 2014). One of the areas where they face challenges is HRM, which has been identified as an essential key success factor for SME businesses meeting their needs and achieving high-level business performance (Noe et al., 2017), and 'HR practices strategically influence environmental performance' (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2019, p.64). Therefore, this paper focuses on HR practices related to mentoring, which is one key HRD activity that is perceived as a core development intervention, being connected to both individual and organisational success (Whybrow & Lancaster, 2012).

Mentoring is a relationship between a more experienced colleague (mentor), who acts as an adviser, counsellor, guide or teacher, and a less experienced colleague (mentee), often perceived as being a 'high-flyer' (Clutterbuck et al., 2016). This relationship concerns the transfer of knowledge to advance employees' achievements and career progression (Hicks & McCracken, 2009). Mentoring is a social learning process, which is a powerful strategy that

assists employees to merge into the company more quickly (Uen et al., 2018). It is a HRD activity that is perceived as being an experiential method for informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2015). Around 70 per cent of all workplace learning occurs in informal contexts (Cross, 2011). The owners of small business therefore have a strong preference for informal learning (Sharafizad, 2018), and much of the learning in SMEs is informal, occurring through HRD activities such as mentoring (Saunders et al., 2014).

There are now several reviews of the literature on HRM and HRD, and an increasing number of papers on mentoring, representing the continuing interest in this concept from both academics and practitioners. There are therefore suggestions that organisations and HR managers should pay attention to the implementation of HR development programmes, including mentoring, for organisational innovation enhancement (Berber & Lekovic, 2018). There is a direct relationship between mentoring and the management's ability to drive sustainability within the business; this is true for SMEs (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016; Hamburg & Marian, 2012), start-ups (St-Jean & Tremblay, 2011) and family businesses (Utrilla & Grande Torraleja, 2013). However, it is evident that 'due to the size and lack of resources of SMEs, many do not have formal HR departments or professionals' (Bhatti et al., 2012, p.5), and they regard employee learning as an investment (Saunders et al., 2014).

As this paper is set within the context of Thailand, where human development is the key to the success of the future economy in terms of industry 4.0 (Chinachoti, 2018), and industry 4.0 is a key to promote sustainable business performance among Thai SMEs (Haseeb et al., 2019; Sae-Lim & Jermsittiparsert, 2019), the Thai definition of SMEs is relevant for providing an explanation of the research context. SMEs in Thailand can be divided into three broad categories: manufacturing, trading and services (OECD, 2016). An enterprise is identified as an SME based on the value of its assets or the number of full-time employees. An enterprise is categorised as an SME when it has less than two hundred employees and/or its fixed assets are less than 200 million baht.

In order to address the issues surrounding the development of people in SMEs, a rich and deep understanding of the mentoring practices in a top-performing SME company needed to be gained. This allowed the researcher to propose a model for other SMEs for developing their employees' skills. Accordingly, in order to complete this research, it is vital to choose appropriate research methodologies; these will be presented in the next section.

## Methods

### Research Design

As recommended in the case-study methods literature, 'A single case could be called the classic form of the case study', and it is used when the researcher intends to study the characteristics that give some interest (Thomas, 2016, p.138). The organisation of the case study needs to specialise by placing particular emphasis on a specific area (Berg & Lune, 2012). This research was an exploratory qualitative research; this was deemed to be appropriate to gain a deeper understanding of the mentoring practices in an SME organisation. The research was supported by gathering information on the organisation's perceived level of good practices, evidenced through an SME national award. To ensure the quality of this research, a variety of qualitative methods were employed, including in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis.

### Selecting the single SME organisation

The first selection criterion for the company was that it was an SME. The second criterion was that the company had received an SME national award, which selects the best SMEs in accordance with a set of criteria from the Thailand Quality Award (TQA) — considered a world-class award. The fundamentals of the technical and decision-making processes are identical to the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) of the United States of America, for which SMEs are judged against a set of criteria consisting of seven categories (OSMEP, 2019). The SME chosen for the study was selected because of its high score for one of the seven criteria, which was human resource focus. Thus, selecting the case study from the companies that received this award, is a key selection criterion and it guarantees the quality of this case study.

A shortlist of four SMEs that had won an SME national award was created. Then, the researcher collected the data from four cases to study HRD on the whole and found that one of them had outstanding mentoring practices. This company will be known as 'Company A' in order to ensure anonymity. It was selected in order to gain insight into effective HRD practices and to explore the depth, richness and complexity inherent in the mentoring process. The company's particular focus on developing their employees by using mentoring serves as an exemplary case for other SMEs. Therefore, this SME organisation was considered to be a critical case that was important for the study design (Flyvbjerg, 2006, Yin, 2014), and it was considered to be a key case (Thomas, 2016).

'Company A' has one hundred and twenty employees; it offers IT services and is located in Bangkok, Thailand. The company was started more than 30 years ago and it has grown steadily. The owner-manager, who was the Managing Director (MD), recognised that HRD

was a factor in the company's ability to sustain a competitive advantage. A lot of money was invested in the employees in 'Company A' through many HRD projects. Even though the company is an SME, it has an HR department to develop its employees. The mentoring programme was one of the effective HRD projects and it was established as a formal programme.

## *Participant Selection*

A purposeful sampling technique was used to select eleven key informants within the organisation; this is common in qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011), and this number was considered sufficient to reach data saturation, which is when little new or additional data can be found. The aim of recruiting was to provide valid data that produced meaningful insights into the company's mentoring practices and to generate rich data. Patton (1990) suggests that in qualitative enquiry, richness of information is a greater concern than the sample size, and the researcher should select the most productive sample to answer the research question (Silverman, 2013). Therefore, these processes and criteria were carefully considered:

(1) The owner-manager was the first interviewed and he was also the gatekeeper, meaning that he selected subordinates to participate in the interview process
(2) Four mentors who had participated in the mentoring programme in this company for more than five years were identified by the owner-manager
(3) Four mentees who had participated in the mentoring programme were identified by their mentors
(4) Two participants, the HR Manager and the Senior Quality Manager, were additional key informants

## *Data Collection*

The case study was carried out over a period of three months (28 August – 27 November 2018). There were three methods for the collection of data, including face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and document analysis; the interview was the primary means of data collection. The data collection process was as follows:

(1) After the study had gained ethical approval, the researcher contacted the HR Department to gain access to *'Company A'*
(2) The owner-manager was interviewed as the first key informant and a shortlist of seven mentors who had participated in the mentoring programme for more than five years was provided by the owner-manager for the next interview process
(3) Four of them were contacted in order to interview them as mentors

(4) Interviews were also carried out with four mentees

(5) Interviews were conducted with the HR Manager and the Senior Quality Manager to add essential data

(6) To gain greater understanding and to supplement the interview method, document analysis and non-participant observation were used

All interviews were face-to-face and they each lasted 30-60 minutes. Notes were taken and the interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent. After the transcription process, all of the transcripts were returned to the participants for accuracy checking before data analysis.

## Data Analysis

Each transcript was analysed using Template Analysis (TA). The researcher followed a TA process, which is a form of qualitative data analysis, to develop the template. This template was the coding structure (Brooks & King, 2017). To ensure the quality of the research, trustworthiness was the key quality criterion. Creswell (2012) recommends that the qualitative researcher employs at least two of the eight strategies that form the trustworthiness approach. The researcher used two strategies: triangulation and member checking. For triangulation, data was triangulated from four different data sources in the organisation. Furthermore, three methods of data collection were used to check the consistency of the findings. For member checking, all of the verbatim transcriptions were sent to each participant to verify the accuracy of the data and feedback was returned to the researcher.

## Findings

This section reports the three major findings:

### 1) The background of mentoring

The mentoring programme in 'Company A' was first implemented in 2011; it was proposed by the HR Department and it was approved and supported by the owner-manager. The HR team invited a guest speaker, who was a specialist in mentoring in a big company in Thailand, to teach and share the mentoring system to selected employees. The first group of employees was selected from 'Company A' into this project. Then four employees who were ready to be mentors were formally selected as the mentoring team of cohort 1. They had many vital roles and responsibilities: they were role models and they shared information about their own career paths, as well as providing guidance, motivation and emotional

support. They helped their mentees (new employees) to adapt to the new environment. After this cohort was successful, the next cohorts were formally chosen and pronounced every year. In order to identify the reasons why this company had implemented the mentoring system, the researcher analysed the mentoring guidelines document and the interview data. This analysis revealed two points. First, as 'Company A' grew, it was vital to have an effective HRD method. The number of full-time employees in 'Company A' nearly doubled and it required a method for building skills and sharing experiences across the company. The mentoring programme was therefore implemented as a critical part of HRD interventions in order to help employees develop knowledge, essential skills and abilities. Secondly, as the company does not have a big training centre like large companies do, it needs an effective method for continuously training and developing their employees. Thus, mentoring was introduced as the company believed that mentoring was an effective way to achieve this aim – it was low cost, saved time, provided quick learning and was suited to the SME situation.

Having explained why the mentoring programme was implemented in 'Company A', the process of mentoring is explained in the next section to understand how mentoring was implemented.

### 2) The six steps to building and implementing a mentoring system

'Company A' hired a guest speaker, who had been a mentoring specialist practitioner in a big Thai company for more than 20 years, to establish formal mentoring in 'Company A'. She suggested six phases for building and implementing a mentoring system in organisations, and the results of the field work found that 'Company A' followed her guidelines. The HR team adapted some practices to suit the context of their staff and their own styles. They launched the mentoring system, which included mentoring documents to describe essential information for mentors and mentees, such as the rationale, benefits, qualifications, roles, responsibilities, the process of mentoring, and recruitment and appraisal for those selected as mentors. Moreover, the mentoring project was pronounced in several channels. For example, it was published in the organisation's journal in order to share and promote it to all employees, who were offered both a hard copy and online version.

The six steps to implementing the mentoring programme were reported as follows:

### Step One: Defining roles of mentors

The mentors' roles were outlined clearly in the mentoring document provided by the HR department. They were required to act as good representatives of the company, and to provide good role models. Each mentor provided a warm welcome, conveyed company information, introduced the company's rules and tools to help the mentee (new employee) adapt to the organisation's culture and built a good relationship with them from their first day of working.

In the guidelines of 'Company A' about the scope of mentors' responsibilities, it was determined that each mentor should be assigned no more than two new employees (mentees) per year. The time required to form an ongoing relationship and to take care of a mentee is at least one year. However, the interviews found that the practice was for each mentor to take around one to three months to work closely with a mentee and these relationships often continued for a long time through informal communication. As the mentors possessed a variety of roles in 'Company A', the company considered many aspects when they chose them.

### Step Two: Selection of mentors

This process was an essential component for success as each mentor can transfer bad or good things to their mentees, and the chemistry between them (mentor and mentee) was considered by HR in order to find a match between the mentor's experience and the mentee's developmental needs. Therefore, the company focused on selecting the right mentor. The following criteria were employed:

- An employee, who is required to be at least senior level, who has a minimum of three years' experience, and a good level in the employee performance review
- Positive attitude and well-behaved and can therefore be a role-model for new employees
- Having EQ, readiness and good human relationships, as well as being service-orientated
- Being the star of a team that has a plan to be promoted to management level

These criteria of a mentor were formally evaluated from the company's core competencies. However, additional evidence gathered from the interviews found that, in practice, the HR Department had some rules for mentorship that were not contained in the document. These were as follows:

- Mentor should not be the mentee's direct line manager
- Mentors and mentees should be gender matched

The HR Department considered these rules in order to guarantee that each new employee would have a direct manager to teach them about their work, and also a mentor who would be the same gender and come from a different department. The mentor could therefore support other elements of the mentee's work, and provide informal guidance on learning and better understanding of specific issues. This means that employees have two choices when they need to consult with someone - their manager or mentor.

After the criteria were carefully established, the mentoring scheme was announced to all of the employees, so that those who were interested could apply. After a mentor has passed the

mentor selection criteria set by the HR team, the committee of 'Company A' will consider the selection again to double check and confirm that the right mentors are chosen.

### Step Three: Assignment of responsibility to mentors

One week before the new employees' first day, the HR department provided the mentee's curriculum vitae (CV) which contained the mentee's basic information such as name, their starting date, and their interests and hobbies. This allowed the mentors to know the background of their mentees, which helps to build a good relationship. All mentors were expected to fulfil their responsibilities and achieve the mentoring goals.

### Step Four: Development and training of mentors

Training was provided to teach how to be a good mentor; it ensured the success of the mentoring programme, and made sure that each mentor understood the value and objectives of the project. For the initial stages, a full-day training session was completed where the HR department invited an expert guest speaker from outside the company to teach and share their experiences with the HR team and the selected mentors (Cohort 1). Then, the HR team and some representative mentors who had passed the training session had the duty of training other mentors (Cohorts 2, 3 etc.), instead of the outside speaker.

In the process of training, the selected senior employees were trained to be mentors, and this was essential training for all mentors. From the data collection, the researcher found that the well-trained mentors in 'Company A' were an invaluable asset as they had one or two mentees each year. For example, one mentor who had helped many mentees to pass through the mentoring programme, had helped them in many ways. He received good feedback from his mentees, listing elements he had helped them with, such as learning quickly, reducing anxiety, having a warm feeling, being happy and being helped to solve problems.

Also, each mentor was tested and had to pass the test before becoming a mentor. As 'Company A' was an SME, its number of new employees was small, so only a few mentors were required for each cohort. For example, cohorts 1, 2 and 3 had 4, 7 and 3 mentors respectively.

### Step Five: Promotion, support and motivation

Top management's support, especially the role of the owner-manager, was one of the critical success factors. Employees were motivated to volunteer to be a mentor in three ways. The first was paying 500-2,000 baht per mentee; this money enabled the mentor to pay for welcome gifts, lunch or dinner, and it therefore allowed the mentors to take care of the new

mentees and build a good relationship. The second way was a bonus five per cent in the performance management plan (PMP), which was added to the performance appraisal form at the year-end performance review. Finally, there was a gift and certificate for the best mentor. For example, the winner of the mentoring award each year received a cash prize and a winner's certificate.

### Step Six: Evaluation

After the one-year mentoring process was completed, each mentee evaluated her or his mentor, and the scores were passed to the HR department to rank the mentors and assess them for the award. The feedback was passed on to each mentor in order to motivate them to perform better with the next new mentee. Moreover, mentors can share and exchange their experiences in staff meetings and mentoring training.

### 3) The four success factors for mentoring

The results (see Figure 1) revealed that the mentoring practices in 'Company A' were influenced by four factors as follows:

First, it is apparent that the strong role of the owner-manager was a key factor in developing employees in many ways, including the implementation of the mentoring programme in 'Company A'. The HR policy, i.e. the mentoring programme, is one key method used to develop the company's employees under the owner's policy. The following quotation was from the owner-manager:

"I believe that people make the positive difference in an organisation, not machine or others. The opportunity of an organisation depends on the quality of people, so we had tried to invest in people. I want to develop my employees through several programmes of people developing such as the training centre and management school, and mentoring is one of them. I look that mentoring programme can help our employees into their work-life balance."

One mentor supported this:

"MD talked with the HR officers and all mentors about objectives, the things he wanted to achieve, and the success he expected from the mentoring project."

In 'Company A' the owner-manager is recognised by all the participants as a key supporter of employee development as well as the mentoring programme. Thus, in the framework, the

owner-manager was considered as a decision-maker with a high level of interest in investing in developing the employees.

Second, the HR department was a driving factor that supported many HRD projects following the owner-manager's policy. Although 'Company A' operated as a SME, the HR department was established several years ago to manage and develop the employees. As it was necessary to have an effective method for continuously training and developing their employees, mentoring was introduced by the HRD team, and the owner-manager agreed and supported this project. It seemed like a good idea, as the HR department received good feedback from their employees, so it was important for 'Company A' to have a HR department capable of running several HR projects. In the framework, the HR department was considered to be a driving force assigned to run several HRD projects, as exemplified in the quote below from a mentee.

"The company should have an intermediary to manage, recruit and select which we have HR department to do."

Third, the employees were an important factor in the support of many HRD projects as they were ready and willing to attend. In this paper, the employees were considered to be good followers who paid attention and were willing to make an effort to learn, including mentoring. For example, one mentee mentioned:

"To be the mentor have to start before the mentee and do not make the mentee feel that they have to face the problems before talking with you. Mentors should start to talk about the personal issues which are not relevant their work in order to make them want to talk much more."

Another mentor pointed out:

"All mentors are proud of themselves that the company selects us, gives an opportunity. It means that the company considered carefully that we have ability and value."

Lastly, there was a good relationship between the mentors and mentees called 'friendly and family work environment'. The mentoring project was offered in order to build long-lasting relationships and make them part of the company's culture. In this paper, the environment was considered as supportive of learning in 'Company A'. One mentor said:

"we are really family business; for example, executive board have a lunch in the same table with us. We live and work together like we are sibling working relationships."

Figure 1 shows the four factors of effective mentoring in 'Company A'. The framework presented represents a synthesis of the literature and findings. It was perceived as a square that has four equal sides and each corner represents each factor. The circle represents the six steps of mentoring, which is positioned at the centre of the square. The proposed framework is shown below.

**Figure 1.** A framework for understanding the four success factors for developing employees through the six steps of mentoring
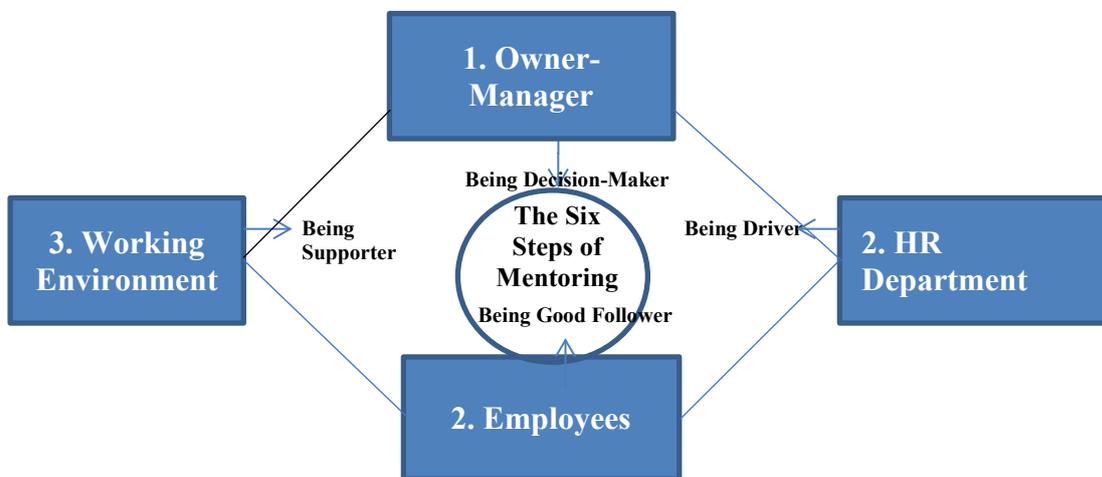


## Discussion and Implications

Based on the literature review, it can be seen that most SMEs preferred to adopt informal activities, incidental learning, and a high degree of unplanned and short-term development of their employees (Marsick, 2009; Steven Tam & David E Gray, 2016). It is therefore surprising that among three million SMEs in Thailand, at least one of them employs different practices to those described in the literature review. 'Company A' has established employee development as a formal system like larger companies do. In particular, this case study is an outstanding example of employee development, using a systematic process to develop its employees. The company established an HR department and HRD functions several years ago. This differs from the evidence gathered in the literature review, which revealed that small businesses characteristically tend to adopt informal HRM practices, or 'do not do HRD' (Hill & Stewart, 2000, p.8), and that SMEs are not likely to hire HRM specialists. The owner-manager of 'Company A' thinks highly of human resources, dedicating many resources to developing employees in several different ways. Thus, SMEs should consider the HR factor

as an element that can add to the competitiveness of SMEs. This is consistent with the finding that where HR is strong, it plays a critical role in organisational performance and development (Ulrich et al., 2012).

It is generally accepted that big companies are theoretically great for the environment and that they have resources that support mentoring practices. SMEs experience greater limitations with regard to applying new systems, as revealed in the literature review. In particular, cultural adaptation, assessment impact and social relationships were suggested for the implementation of new HRM practices in organisations. For the context of 'Company A', it is clear that they make an effort and invest a great deal in developing their employees through many HRD projects. Mentoring can be an exemplary practice for other SMEs to apply with their own styles, as each SME organisation has a different environment and methods, and the same pattern for all organisations.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

To conclude, in contributing to a dearth of qualitative studies on mentoring practices within SMEs, this paper, on mentoring practices within an SME top-performing organisation, confirmed the view that drive and direction were encapsulated in the owner-manager and mentoring was supported by the HR department. The owner-manager was the key success factor to improving the employees through many HRD activities, including mentoring. In comparison with a big company, this SME company has a high level of awareness and interest in mentoring. They learnt and applied advice from an expert practitioner in a big company, who suggested the six steps of mentoring in 'Company A'.

The limitation of this one-case study has been considered. Because it deals with only one case SME organisation, it is not certain that the results from this particular case study can be applied elsewhere. It is recommended that future research should expand to other SME groups and other new strategic HRD tools that have not yet been tested or implemented, in order to obtain a clearer picture and perspectives of the way to develop employees in the different context of SMEs.

The researcher recommends enlarging knowledge by conducting empirical research that focuses on mentoring in other SMEs and compares the results with those from this company. Given these conclusions, a key implication for theory and practice within HRD is the need to engage with mentoring, particularly at an organisational level of analysis. A mentoring programme is an effective way to develop the mentee and mentor relationship.

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