

## EXPLORING PRINCIPLES ASSOCIATED WITH MENTORING IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

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### **Abstract:**

Entrepreneurs of small- and medium-sized enterprises targeting international markets need to overcome a learning gap in order to achieve their goals successfully. In order to do so, entrepreneurs need to utilise external knowledge. The knowledge management literature describes several types of external knowledge agents, including angels, coaches, gurus, politicians and mentors. The focus of this study is limited to mentors. Mentors support entrepreneurs by providing a conceptual understanding and framework designed to ensure the entrepreneurs' learning, development and growth. On one hand, a mentor with the correct combination of experience, silent knowledge and network is an important enabler of survival and business growth in the target market. On the other hand, finding such a mentor is a challenge for entrepreneurs. This explorative case study bridges the above-described gap by elucidating the preconditions for building international business mentor networks for Finnish entrepreneurs. At this stage, two international case contexts, Southern California and Northern Norway, were analysed in order to explore the basic principles associated with mentoring in different international contexts. The first context is an example of a gateway to a large market, and the second is a potential market within a short geographical distance. The data were collected during 2014 through 14 semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted in key mentor networks of the case markets. The analysis provided here demonstrates the potential of business mentoring in the international context. Moreover, the preconditions and challenges presented here seek to provide sustainable guidelines for future development in this field.

*Keywords: business mentoring, internationalisation, knowledge management, growth, entrepreneurship, Norway, California*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to explore the preconditions of international mentor networks for Finnish entrepreneurs in their potential target markets. Entrepreneurs of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) targeting international markets need to overcome a significant learning gap in order to achieve their goals successfully. Thus, in order to succeed, entrepreneurs need to utilise external knowledge. The knowledge management literature describes several types of external knowledge agents, including angels, coaches, gurus, politicians and mentors.

The focus of this study is mentoring in an international context. The purpose of working with a mentor is to learn from the experience of others (Barret, 2006). Mentoring is often associated with memories of learning from an older person. It is a valuable life experience for both the “young man” and the mentor (Savidge, 1994). Entrepreneurial mentoring involves a support relationship between an experienced entrepreneur (the mentor) and a novice entrepreneur (the mentee), which exists to foster the personal development of the latter (St-Jean & Audet, 2012). Mentors can support entrepreneurs by providing a conceptual understanding and framework to ensure the entrepreneurs’ learning, development and growth (see, for example, Phusavat, Kess, Sanpanich and Muhos 2009). On one hand, a mentor with the correct combination of experience, silent knowledge and network is an important enabler of survival and business growth in a target market. On the other hand, finding such a mentor in an international context poses a great challenge for entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs can be seen as potential mentees when they are attempting to transition to new levels of performance and competence or when their businesses are developing towards more challenging stages of development. At some point in time, most entrepreneurs have a mentor (Savidge, 1994). Sullivan (2000) pointed out that mentoring is most effective when the entrepreneurs really need it (for example, during developmental crises). In addition, mentoring can be more cost-effective than up-front prescribed training in the long run. Mentoring provides a learning solution for entrepreneurs, who often lack the time and/or resources to commit to formal training programs (Barret, 2006). In situations in which there is not enough time for training, interactions with a mentor could facilitate the quick and efficient transfer of experience into learning, new knowledge and new business competencies (see St-Jean & Audet, 2012).

In recent decades, mentoring has been identified as an important learning activity in business contexts. Scholars interested in the field have found increasing number of positive outcomes to be associated with mentoring programs. Mentoring has been linked to a range of benefits, ranging from career advancement and increased self-confidence to a higher sense of belonging. In addition, literature exists suggesting that mentoring is a panacea for a variety of personal and societal ills. Thus, mentoring appears to offer numerous, far-reaching benefits (Hansford et al, 2002). Mentors provide added-value interventions that are likely to bring long-term benefits to both mentees and society (Sullivan, 2000).

Savidge (1994) divided mentoring processes into two groups. The first is the ‘guild system’ of mentoring. This process relies on third parties, which arrange the couplings of mentors and mentees. The second model involves the random connection of protégé and mentor. Bisk (2002) noted that there is a lack of studies evaluating the effectiveness of third party managed mentoring programs.

The focus of this study is on the potential of third party managed programs in an international context. There programs with local and/or national focus are numerous. For example Wikholm et al. (2007) analysed national level programs in fourteen countries and regions including ‘*Yrityskummit Business Mentors*’ in Finland, ‘*Sparring med erfaring*’ in Denmark, ‘*Merlin Mentoring Programme*’ England, ‘*Scottish Mentoring Network*’ Scotland, ‘*Mentor network*’ Ireland, ‘*1, 2, 3, go network for entrepreneurship*’ Luxembourg, ‘*SES - Senior Experten Service*’ Germany, ‘*EGEE - La passion transmettre*’ France, ‘*SECOT - Seniores Espanoles para la Cooperación Técnica*’ Spain, ‘*Saturno*’, ‘*Mentoring in Genova*’ and ‘*Mettersi In Propiro*’ Italy, ‘*SCORE – Senior Corps Of Retired Executives*’ USA, ‘*Entrepreneurship Centre Mentorship Programme*’ Canada, ‘*Business Mentors New Zealand*’ New Zealand, and ‘*The Stepping Up Mentor*’ Australia. However, there is an increasing interest towards business mentoring in international context (See e.g. Carragher et al. 2008).

The purpose of this explorative case study is to analyse the preconditions related to the formation of international mentor networks for SMEs in the potential international target markets. There is a need

to explore business mentoring contexts in order to generate a sufficient understanding of the preconditions for such relationships. On a very basic level, there is a need to generate an understanding of the expectations related to mentoring in international target markets. A potential source of challenges in international mentor-mentee relationships stems from the level of values or basic principles associated with the mentoring. To explore this challenge, this study devises the following principles associated with mentoring in the Finnish context and explores the applicability of these principles to the potential target markets of Finnish companies. The above-described research problem can be condensed to the following research question: *How do the basic principles/values associated with business mentoring in the Finnish context fit into the mentor-mentee expectations of international contexts?*

This is a multiple-case study. Two potential target markets were selected for closer analysis. The first one is the greater San Diego area of Southern California, which is an example of a globally significant target market with long distance. California can be seen as a testing ground for the entire US market. The second potential target market is the Tromsø region of Northern Norway. This is an example of a geographically and culturally close market with promising growth potential.

## **2. ROLES, DIMENSIONS AND THE EFFECT OF CHANGE IN BUSINESS MENTORING**

According to Hansford et al. (2002), the most frequently noted positive outcomes for mentees were related to career satisfaction, motivation, advice and promotion. The second most frequently cited benefits for mentees included coaching, ideas, feedback and strategies. In addition, involvement in challenging tasks helped mentees improve their skills or performance. Counselling, listening, support, understanding and encouragement were also benefits highlighted in literature. For mentors, rewards associated with mentoring typically stemmed from the establishment of networks, increased career satisfaction, improved workplace skills, personal pride and satisfaction, and an increase in the sharing of ideas with colleagues (Hansford et al., 2002). The fact that both individuals benefit from the relationship makes it vital and significant (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

The role of the mentor is to enable the entrepreneur to reflect on his or her actions and modify future actions. It involves enabling behavioural and attitudinal change and encouraging the entrepreneur to dissect, reflect and learn from critical incidents. Mentors can provide a useful service with regard to identifying the point in an entrepreneur's development at which knowledge and skills are required—and, then, they can give support designed to meet the identified needs (Sullivan, 2000). The role of a mentor is to help entrepreneurs explore options and ideas that they can then use to solve their own business issues (Barret, 2006).

Working with a mentor causes the entrepreneur and the mentor to engage, challenge each other, discuss issues, and collaboratively consider relevant alternatives. Mentors do not judge, tell, preach, orate or do. The characteristics of interactions with a mentor include dialogue (open, probing, introspective), listening (quiet and intent), discussion (objective, synthesizing, logical, prioritized, constructive) and proposing (reflective, illuminating, non-judgmental, suggestive). A mentor may have opinions, but not ready-made solutions. (Savidge, 1994)

Mentoring encompasses two important dimensions: career mentoring and psychosocial mentoring. Career mentoring tends to highlight external, career-progress-oriented functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, protection, visibility and exposure. These functions serve to strengthen an individual's ability to develop in his or her career and prepare for career advancement. On the other hand, psychosocial development functions are internally oriented and include role modelling, counselling and friendship. These functions help individuals develop personal feelings of competence and provide emotional and psychological support (Hansford et al, 2002; Kram, 1985; Sullivan, 2000; Waters 2002).

On one hand, mentoring has the most impact during change processes, such as growth and internationalisation. On the other hand, the need for mentoring changes as entrepreneurs and/or their businesses change. Thus, the mentoring process is not stable; it is a relationship designed to meet developmental needs. As the entrepreneur develops, he or she requires different skills or types of assistance from the mentor (Sullivan, 2000) According to Kram and Isabella (1985), changes in organizational circumstances or in individuals' needs may cause the mentor-mentee relationship to move into a new phase. Organizational changes, such as transfers, promotions and demotions, as

well as individual changes, such as increased confidence or a growing need for independence, have been found to alter the mentoring relationship.

In sum, as Sullivan (2000) believed, the support of a mentor with suitable skills, knowledge and experience, together with access to appropriate expertise elsewhere, represents an effective support system for entrepreneurs.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This is an explorative case study, in which two potential target markets of Finnish firms were selected for closer analysis. The first target market is the Greater San Diego area in Southern California, which is an example of globally significant target market with long geographical distance from Finland. From the international business development perspective California can be seen as a testing ground for the entire U.S. market. The second target market is the Tromsø region of Northern Norway. This is an example of a geographically and culturally close market with promising growth potential.

The data were collected during the second and third quarters of 2014 in the Greater San Diego area in Southern California and in the Tromsø region of Northern Norway. In the Greater San Diego area, six organisations potentially capable of providing mentor services for Finnish companies were interviewed. In the Tromsø region of Northern Norway, another six organisations potentially capable of providing mentor services for Finnish companies were interviewed. Altogether, 17 representatives of these 12 organisations were interviewed.

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## **4. APPLICABILITY OF FINNISH MENTORING PRINCIPLES TO EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL TARGET MARKETS**

### **4.1. Introduction to case Greater San Diego area in Southern California**

Based on the interviews, business mentoring is an inseparable part of the business culture in Southern California. Giving back through mentoring is seen as a desirable responsibility that contributes to the good of the local business community. The success of the community seems to equal the success of everyone involved as pointed out by one of the interviewees in California: *It's not formalized. It's been something that is part of the way of doing business, particularly in high-technology clusters. And that is, we are able to ask others who are in a either similar industry or have a factory or something; in other words, we're able to go to them if we're not direct competitors and ask questions. ... So it isn't as if we have agencies or groups that have been told that they're going to be mentoring; it just happens in these kind of clusters.*

However, the Greater San Diego also provides formal mentorship, which is organized on various levels by local actors and federal government programs (e.g., the SCORE – Senior Corps Of Retired Executives Program). Local mentor services are offered through various, often community organizations, such as CONNECT San Diego, or through incubators or universities. The challenge in describing the mentoring ecosystem lies in figuring out exactly what kinds of organizations provide exactly what kinds of support to what kinds of organizations. The role of the mentors is multifaceted. Southern California has a vibrant start-up community, in which numerous people attempt to start businesses, grow them and then, eventually, exit. Thus, intrinsic characteristics of Greater San Diego business mentorship include support in how to start a business and in what kinds of resources are available.

The main task of local mentor networks in San Diego is to provide mentoring services for the networks' own communities. Based on the interviews, the most significant mentor arena in the case region is CONNECT, which works with the most mentors. CONNECT San Diego is one of the key umbrella organizations in the Greater San Diego area, and it is well connected to other actors in the region.

However, it is important to note that there are also numerous other business development organizations providing mentor services in the Southern California area.

CONNECT is associated with mentors at nearly all of the San Diego incubators and accelerators. In addition, CONNECT is well linked to other, more industry-specific mentor networks. Within the Springboard program at CONNECT, the network has a cadre of experienced entrepreneurial executives, who are known as executives in residence. The mentors at CONNECT are all volunteers who donate their time to the organization and to other people who are trying to start or grow their own businesses. These mentors could be either entrepreneurs themselves, who have made successful exits from their businesses, or members of senior management in large corporations, who are now giving back their time and talent to the next generation of business leaders.

Several organizations that have running incubators are located in the southern part of California. There are also other accelerator and incubator programs, including more than fifty in San Diego. Good examples of such programs are EvoNexus and Janssen Labs. There is a natural overlap among the actors, since some of the CONNECT mentors work with these other organizations, as well. Through incubators, new companies receive various forms of support, one of which is often mentoring. Not all incubators have a formal mentoring program, but several implement it informally.

The third highlighted mentor service provider group is that of universities, which often create and maintain various types of mentor organizations. The UCSD Rady School of Management is one example of a university that offers mentoring, and the UCSD Jacobs School of Engineering is another one mentioned by the interviewees. The Rady School of Management, for example, provides mentor networks for entrepreneurially oriented students. Students connect with mentors from the business community, and these mentors talk with the students regularly and guide them. Alumni associations have huge network of mentors as well.

#### **4.2. Introduction to Case Tromsø Region in Northern Norway**

Based on the interviews, the primary business mentoring activities in Northern Norway are associated with helping newly established businesses created by young people. If business mentoring is defined narrowly, CONNECT Norway is the only organization providing formal mentor services: *We have CONNECT, their own branch in Northern Norway, and they have an order or a contract from Innovation Norway to provide mentors for startups. Entrepreneurs are able to apply in Innovation Norway to get public coverage or support to buy mentoring services. So, they're quite important.*

An interesting consideration with respect to the international aspect of mentoring is that CONNECT San Diego and CONNECT Norway belong to the Global CONNECT network and, thus, share some similarities in their service portfolios. However, informally, there are all kinds of business mentors—actors, institutions, organizations, universities, research centres and municipalities—which, together, constitute numerous clusters of business supporters. In addition, there are experienced business owners and executives who provide business mentoring services, such as private counselling, through their own companies.

CONNECT Nord-Norge, the local branch of CONNECT Norway and a key actor in business mentoring in Northern Norway, provides start-up mentors in partnership with Innovation Norway. Innovation Norway has mentorship program through which start-ups are able to apply to get public financial support to buy mentoring services. The program is financed by Innovation Norway and organized by Connect, whose task is to match the right mentors with the right companies. The mentoring is fully financed, and the program has been operating for about five years.

If the provision of mentoring services is understood from broad perspective, Innovation Norway, Connect, and Norinova are the three key actors in the field. The biotechnology cluster is one of the most successful cluster developments seen in Northern Norway. Norinova is one of the leading organizations in this cluster. Many companies have come out of its processes, which help companies build technological platforms to do research, create commercialization processes or conduct testing. In addition to these supports, Norinova also offers business mentoring services. Norinova supports companies with experts who follow the business from start to market. Another one of the most developed industry-specific mentoring arenas is Nettverk. Nettverk operates within the petroleum sector and has worked with mentoring for many years.

### 4.3. Applicability of the values associated with mentoring in the Finnish context to international target markets

This study focuses on the values associated with mentoring. To explore this area of research, this study will preliminarily test the applicability of Finnish mentoring principles to the potential target markets. The Finnish principles are used to reflect the ways in which mentoring is understood in the Finnish context. These principles used in this analysis are derived from the public principles of the largest mentoring network of Finland, the 'Yrityskummit Business Mentors', and are described in the following table.

**Table 1:** Finnish mentoring principles

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Confidentiality</i>	Trust is everything. The mentor respects confidential business secrets. The mentor does not mentor a mentee's competitor. Moreover, the mentor does not take advantage of the information received during the mentoring process for the development of his/her own advantage or the advantage of others.
<i>Expertise</i>	Mentors are experienced entrepreneurs, executives and/or business experts who help entrepreneurs succeed. In addition, mentors may take advantage of the expertise and contacts of the mentor network and other mentors in the network.
<i>Honesty</i>	Mentors are trusted, are honest and have good reputations in their community. Their advice follows good business practices and the law.
<i>Independence</i>	Mentors are guided only by the benefit of the mentee business and the entrepreneur. Mentor cannot be, simultaneously, an owner, consultant or employee of the mentee's business or its subcontractors.
<i>Objectives</i>	The main objective with regard to the benefit of the customer is to enable the success of the business and the entrepreneur.
<i>Responsibility</i>	The business decisions are always the mentee's decisions, and the responsibility is his/hers.
<i>Voluntary and "free of charge"</i>	Mentoring is a voluntary service, and mentors do not get paid for their services. Mentors can, in agreement with the mentee, invoice their travel and accommodation costs.

The interviewees were asked to reflect upon the values and principles associated with mentoring in their own contexts through the mentoring principles used in the Finnish business context.

Almost all of the interviewees agreed with the Finnish mentoring principles of expertise, honesty, objectives and responsibility.

As a whole, the most contradictory viewpoints were related to the principle "voluntary and free of charge". In the interviews, it was said more than once that this principle doesn't work fully in practice, since there must be at least some kind of win-win situation between mentor and mentee. Some of the interviewees mentioned that mentors need some kind of compensation or recognition to show the value of their expertise in order to begin and to keep up the motivation to mentor. In addition, it was mentioned that the mentee listens more carefully if he/she is compensating the mentoring in some way.

The most significant differences between California and Norway were found in the principles of confidentiality and independence. Some of the interviewees from California thought that the Finnish principle of confidentiality was defined a bit too narrowly. It was pointed out that, for example, in some organisations, mentors are allowed to mentor potential competitors based on their own discretions, since this can result to so-called "competitive collaboration" (i.e., when you help one business to be successful, it forces the next business to be successful). It was also mentioned that, in mentoring, the principle of confidentiality does not require exact written contracts; instead, it is sufficient that the mentor does not have any conflicts of interest. Some of the interviewees from Norway found the definition of the principle of independence to be slightly unrealistic, since, for example, in practice, it is difficult to find mentors in sparsely populated areas who do not have ownership that is somehow connected to the company they are mentoring. Several interviewees from California pointed out that other roles on the part of the mentor are not a problem if the initiative comes from the company itself.

Some more scattered and singular contradictory perspectives were revealed in relation to the principles of expertise, honesty, objectives and responsibility. Related to the principle of expertise, it

was mentioned that a mentor's expertise does not always need to have straight link to entrepreneurship or the business sector of the company; instead, the mentor could be, for example, an academic or an expert in psychology. It was also pointed out that it is important for a mentor's expertise and networks to be aligned. In relation to the principle of honesty, it was mentioned that there is significant variation in what constitutes good business practice. One interviewee pointed out, in relation to the principle objectives, that the role of the mentor is not only to make the business that the entrepreneur has chosen successful, but also to help the entrepreneur find the technology and the business strategy that is most likely to result in success. In relation to the principle of responsibility, it was mentioned that, in practice, successful mentoring requires that the mentor and the mentee agree, for the most part, on the facts related to the business of the company. Further, it was also mentioned that one important thing the mentor needs to do is to help the mentee learn how to work with various pieces of expertise. The results are summarized in the following table.

**Table 2:** Finnish mentoring principles and a condensed summary of interviewees' reflections

Interview	Confiden- tiality	Expertise	Honesty	Indepen- dence	Objec- tives	Respon- sibility	Voluntary and free of charge
California							
1	+/-*	+	+	+	+	+	+
2	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
3	+	+	+	+	+	+	-
4	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
5	+	+	+	+	+	+	+/-
6	+/-	+	+	+	+	+	+/-
7	+/-	+	+	+	-	+/-	+/-
8	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Norway							
1	+	+/-	+	+/-	+	+	-
2	+	+	+	+/-	+	+	+/-
3	+	+	+	+/-	+	+	+/-
4	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
5	+	+	+	+/-	+	+	+/-
6	+/-	+	+	+/-	+	+	+

\*"+=" = agree; "-" = disagree; "+/-" = both

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study introduces the concept of business mentoring in two case arenas—the Greater San Diego area in Southern California and the Tromsø region in Northern Norway—and tests the applicability of Finnish mentoring principles to these potential target markets.

The research question of this study was answered in two phases in Section 4.

First, as an introduction to the reader, in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, this study provides a condensed introduction to the mentoring arenas in the case regions. In the Greater San Diego area of Southern California, informal business mentoring is an inseparable part of the business culture. Mentoring is the natural way of learning and doing business. This is consistent with Handsford et al. (2002), who noted that, in the U.S., mentoring has a long-standing role in the nurturing of staff in industry and business and that mentoring can be integral to career advancement for both the mentor and the mentee. In addition, Southern California has formal mentorship opportunities, which are organized on various levels by local actors. Organized mentor services are conducted either through various, often community organizations, like CONNECT San Diego, or through incubators or universities. Based on the interviews, the most significant formal mentor network in the case area is CONNECT San Diego, which is strongly connected to other industry-specific mentoring networks. CONNECT is also a home base for the Global CONNECT network, which provides an interesting link between the two case regions analysed here. In the Tromsø region in Northern Norway, business mentoring activities are mainly associated with helping the newly established businesses of young people. According to

interviews, CONNECT is the only organization providing formal mentor services in the case area. However, informally, there are numerous kinds of business mentors, including various actors, institutions, organizations, universities, research centers and communes, which constitute several clusters of business supporters. Informal mentoring is often a part of this support system. In addition, there are people who provide business mentoring services, such as private counselling, through their own companies.

Second, the answer to the research question is provided in Section 4.3. Based on the interviews, it can be said that, in general, Finnish mentoring principles fit well with the business ecosystems of the case areas. This reflects the idea of mentoring as a global concept that has a similar meaning (to an extent) in different cultural contexts. Most of the contradictory viewpoints revealed by this study are based on differences in definitions of mentoring and of the Finnish mentoring principles, which were used as a reference. However, some cultural and geographical differences also emerged. Additionally, some differences between California and Norway were revealed by this analysis. The perspectives revealed by this analysis should be taken into consideration when developing international mentor networks for Finnish businesses. First, it seems that 'expertise', 'honesty', 'objectives' and 'responsibility' can be expected to have largely similar associations to those of the Finnish context in both the Greater San Diego area and the Tromsø region. Second, in contrast to findings for the previous principles, it was found that the principle of receiving mentoring as a 'voluntary service, free of charge', which is often expected in the Finnish context, does not apply directly to the studied case markets. In the development of international mentor-mentee relations in these markets, some sort of win-win situation between mentor and mentee is expected. Fair compensation is seen to serve the interests of both mentor and mentee through true commitment. Third, mostly in the case of Greater San Diego, the Finnish definition of 'confidentiality' was seen to be too narrow, such that it did not apply directly to the context. It should be considered that mentoring potential competitors may be seen, in this context, as fostering competitive collaboration, which can lead to faster growth for both the company and the whole community. This was not the case in Tromsø. Fourth, mostly in the context of the Tromsø region, the principle of 'independence' was seen to be slightly unrealistic because, in practice, it is difficult to find 100% independent mentors in sparsely populated areas (where, for example, a mentor's ownership may be somehow connected with the company mentored). This limitation should be taken into account when developing mentor-mentee relations in this case market.

The construct validity of the study is based on a sound research plan, multiple sources of evidence, synergy between quantitative and qualitative data and an established chain of evidence. Analytic generalisation (i.e., generalisation to a theory) is possible. However, the research focus of this study is limited to the context studied. The findings of the study cannot be directly generalised to other countries or business contexts, and they depend on the time of data collection. Reproducing the same case study in the same environment over a later time period would change some of the findings. However, case-study protocols were followed and a database established, allowing further testing of the findings.

The focus of this explorative analysis was limited to the values and principles related to mentoring in an international context. In further research the rich research data collected will be analysed further to provide more insight into the concept, requirements and processes of international mentoring.

## **6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

To conclude, the findings revealed by this case study largely support the view that mentoring is a global concept with relatively similar associations for related values and principles across different case target markets. Therefore, from this perspective, the development of an international mentor network connecting entrepreneurs around the world seems to face no significant obstacles. However, some aspects condensed in this section show that cultural and geographical differences have an affect on these underlying assumptions, which may lead to differing expectations related to the principles of mentor-mentee relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to take these perspectives into account in the development of such networks. In so doing, it is possible to avoid some of the obvious pitfalls revealed by this study.

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