

Cutting IT

Final Evaluation of the ZIP Business Mentoring Pilot



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Background

Cutting IT has a strategic objective to develop support for business and economic growth within the apparel and textile sector in London, to verify the benefits of mentoring as a mechanism to support economic growth and to build up a mentoring network.

The UK has hundreds of fashion design courses at HE and FE institutions. However, although these courses major in design and the creative process, on the whole the courses do not appear to contain enough business and entrepreneurial training.

Designers seeking to establish their own label or entrepreneurs developing small businesses within the sector appear to reach a crucial point at 30 months, having naturally grown to a point where they will plateau without external business development support. This is a natural 'tipping' point in the process of entrepreneurial business growth, where individuals who haven't been exposed to corporate strategy or business development encountered in a corporate environment do not have the skills to take their business to the next level and cannot maximise growth. If unsupported the business remains static, growth slows or declines, affecting the individual's confidence and business' economic viability.

Research within the sector shows that there is a high failure rate (*actual stats/evidence here and to support the above from Skillfast where possible*) amongst designer makers who are most vulnerable at around the 30 month point of developing their own business. Research was carried out to understand current business development support available for these businesses and findings showed a lack of sector specific advice and guidance for established businesses.

There have been sector developments with business planning and forecasting skills addressed in a new Level 3 course, widely taken being taken up at xxxxx?????Check this with Peter Glover. There are also resources available from established sources for business start up information such as generic tax, legal advice etc.

What is not available is sector specific business support for established businesses on the point of expansion, about 2-3 years. It was apparent that many businesses were successful, but were subsequently failing, mainly due to lack of strategic planning, when they tried to expand.

As a result of the findings, a pilot mentoring programme was established as part of the EQUAL project Cutting IT, to gauge the impact of this type of business support on designer makers in the sector. This document provides an evaluation in Section One of the impact of the Mentoring Pilot on the Mentees and their businesses. Section Two gives the findings of an evaluation of the Mentoring Pilot undertaken with the Mentors who took part.

Mentoring Pilot Purpose

ZiP CoVE (Centre of Vocational Excellence) and LSC (Learning and Skills Council) co-funded a pilot programme for mentors and mentees within the design sector. The project's aims were to:

- To help businesses become more efficient and assist in their controlled development in order to make them more successful, profitable and ultimately increase employment in the sector.
- To encourage at least 50% of participants onto further training.
- Evaluate the Pilot to inform the development of a sustainable network of mentoring provision across the UK.

Mentoring Pilot Process

11 Businesses and 8 mentors have participated in the Pilot, which ran from January 05 to September 06, with the majority of the Mentoring sessions taking place over a three month period from March to May 06.

Selection of Mentors was based on their sector experience, specific skills and previous mentoring experience. The selected Mentors were invited to take part in the project and undertook a 2-day Mentoring training course prior to the Pilot commencing.

Mentees applied for the programme and were selected under a specific criteria:

- Been in business at least 2 years
- Have an existing business plan
- Have financial / profit loss forecast (however basic)
- Have short term working capital
- Have a developed product to show

Of the 11 businesses that participated in the Pilot, three businesses were run by duos and 7 by individuals, giving a total of 14 individuals taking part in the Pilot. Of the participants 86% had been educated to Level 4+, with the remainder at Level 2 and 3. The majority of the group were aged 31-40, with one participant falling in the older age group and one who was 20-30.

There were 11 females and 3 males in the group, which also reflects the gender balance in the sector with an average of xx % of SME's in the sector being run by women (*figures to come from Skillfast*).

Each Mentee paid £250 costs and received 15 hours of one to one mentoring. (The total cost per mentee to the programme is approximately £1,000)

The Mentees were assessed through an initial Training/Business Needs Analysis. This identified a common recognition by all the participants that they needed support with strategic planning, specifically to increase profitability and secure future growth. All the Mentees identified that they were at a turning point where they could see the business potential, but recognised that they did not have the ability/skills to move things onto the next level themselves. Common phrases occurring were “feeling stuck” and “plateau”.

From this they were then interviewed by the lead Mentors whose specialism was strategic planning. The lead Mentors worked with the Mentee to assess the business status and needs, identifying the most beneficial areas of support for further sessions with the Mentors.

Each Mentee had 15hrs with the Mentors over the three month period. The subject specialisms available to the Mentees were

- Strategic Planning
- Financial Planning
- Public Relations
- Marketing
- Retail
- On- Line Marketing

The Mentees were also offered additional training courses in the form of two workshops “Meet the Buyer” and “Range Planning and Building”, as part of the programme of support. These were run over a weekend and the 100% attendance by the Mentees suggests that running training out of office hours was highly appropriate to maximise attendance. This was also a cost effective way to deliver information on common issues, presentation and negotiating skills could be addressed in a group environment with greater effect and there was increased opportunity for a peer-to-peer network to evolve with increased contact with other mentees.

Monitoring Methods

The ZIP and LSC Mentoring Pilot project managers have undertaken monitoring for the pilot at regular intervals throughout the life of the project. Interviews, feedback forms, questionnaires and focus groups have run throughout the Mentoring Pilot as the main mechanisms for evaluation and monitoring of impact on the Mentees involved.

The methods used have been consistent throughout the Mentoring Pilot primarily using a formal questionnaire and focus groups to draw both quantitative and qualitative responses for evaluation from both the mentees and mentors. For the Final Evaluation with the mentees the questionnaire responses were filled in by the

respondent and collated by a member of the team. The questionnaire evaluation was then followed by a focus group, informal with a loose question framework to allow for in-depth probing and qualitative responses. This was supplemented with analysis of start points via the training needs analysis conducted at the start of the Pilot and telephone interviews 6 months after the Pilot's completion.

A questionnaire was also completed by the mentors, to draw their perspective into the final evaluation of the Pilot. The questionnaires used for the Final Evaluation can be seen in the Appendices of this document along with the question framework for the Focus Group.

For the mentees' mid term evaluation questionnaire and focus group, the same 11 respondents took part in each stage of the evaluation. For the Final Evaluation not all respondents completed the final questionnaire or attended the final focus group, probably due to the fact that the questionnaire was completed in spare time some time after the mentoring sessions had been completed. The responses were collected prior to the focus group, which some of the mentees were unable to attend due to other commitments. The Focus group was held on September 11th 2006 3months after the end of the Pilot. Out of a possible 14, 9 people took part in the Final Evaluation, a total of 7 took part in the questionnaire and 7 in the focus group with 71% taking part in both. This was followed up with qualitative telephone interviews with a further 7 mentees 6 months after the end of the programme.

Executive Summary

Issues

Without exception all the candidates who sought to participate in the programme, whether they subsequently signed up to it or not had a common issue they were trying to resolve. All had reached a point in their businesses development where, despite a majority having achieved Level 4+ in their formal education (and with 80% having previously received additional mainstream business skills development support in the form of general business support, basic fashion industry training or mainstream mentoring) they believed they could not take their business to the 'next stage' without external support that could specifically develop their 'fashion' business skills.

Impact

Throughout the Pilot the impact of Mentoring on both a business and personal level is overwhelmingly positive with 100% agreement and 83% respondents strongly agreeing that there had been a positive impact personally and on their businesses as a result of the Mentoring Pilot. This is further qualified by the Mentors with all but one perceiving over 75% of the sessions as having a positive effect and two thirds believing that over 75% of their sessions had facilitated a transfer of skills. From the mid term and final evaluation questionnaires and Focus group, the general feeling among the mentees was that sector specific mentoring is an invaluable asset to a business at the crucial 2-3yr point where expansion or formalising of the business' approach needs to occur to secure continued success.

The Mentees clearly felt an increase in confidence, development of communication skills and improved their ability to deal with the entrepreneurial side of their business. Mixing creative and business ability had already been identified as an issue within existing sector research. It is clear from the research throughout the pilot that Mentees were not concerned about their creative ability and skills, (only one asked for feedback on her products/designs) however, combining these with entrepreneurial ability was hard, and affected their confidence and ability to progress further on their own.

At the mid stage, the key for the mentees was that the mentors were role models - that they had successful business experience within the sector. Their qualifications were not in question, but their ability to succeed in what is a competitive market place was more important. This is further verified by one of the sectors most successful mentors, David Jones, who believes it is the diversity of expertise that comes from broad experience across the 'nitty gritty' of the textile and fashion design and manufacturing sector that makes the best mentors, because it is the workings of the sector that the younger businesses seek to understand.

In the final interviews with the Mentees six months after the Mentoring Pilot had been completed the Mentees all spoke highly of the Mentors and the impact they had had on their businesses, specifically emphasising professional expertise, sector knowledge and an ability to really push the Mentee forward as key skills. The style of mentoring also appears to be crucial, with an ability to challenge and push being identified as important, as opposed to a gentler leading style - also marking the difference between mentoring and coaching styles.

All mentees received brief profile sheets about the mentors before embarking on the project, evaluation indicates that this was acceptable to most, however further investigation of this through interview suggests that more detail on the skills areas of each Mentor and perhaps a Meet the Mentors session at the start would have

helped the Mentees discern the Mentor's specialism, enabling them to prepare more effectively for their individual support sessions.

Value

At the mid point and at the end of the programme all the mentees stated that they felt the programme was positive in all aspects - content, presentation and value for money. Although, as young businesses, paying for this support is an issue, the interviews six months later still clearly show that the Mentees, now they know the benefit of the mentoring to their business, would be very willing to pay £30 - £50 per hour session with a Mentor.

The Mentees are however unanimous in their appreciation of the benefit that mentoring has had and all believe that ongoing Mentoring is something that would continue to benefit their businesses. By the final evaluation there was a large shift in attitude regarding whether the mentee would pay for individual sessions with all those questioned saying they would be very happy to pay for ongoing sessions but this was generally with the proviso that the sessions were part of an ongoing programme of support, only one favoured an ad hoc arrangement.

Timing

Despite the majority of mentees stating at the mid term evaluation that they did not believe the sessions should be spread over a longer period of time, by the end of the programme the feeling had completely shifted. In the final evaluation, focus group and Post-Pilot interviews the mentees were commenting frequently that the period of three months that the programme ran over, was too short and meant that the fifteen hours of support became quite intensive, often making it difficult to do homework and apply what had been discussed between sessions. The majority of mentees questioned favoured a programme of quarterly mentoring sessions with a commitment to 12 months support, one quote acknowledging 'it is good to have goals', also demonstrates the general shift in mindset within this group regarding the difference between aspirations and goals.

Training

Additional training was integrated into the Mentoring Pilot and offered to participants in the form of one-day workshops. The take up for these workshops, although not obligatory, was 100% with all the Mentees attending both training days. Subsequent training has been undertaken by 50% of the Mentees questioned post the Mentoring Pilot, one of whom has decided to learn Chinese in order to facilitate her negotiations with the Far East, now she has established the sources for manufacturing her products and direction she wants to take her business, via the mentoring support she received. Several of the Mentees are undertaking Photoshop courses to support the presentation and marketing of their products.

Support development

All believed that they would also benefit from access to online email support from mentors or peers for specific questions, particularly relating to best practice when dealing with buyers or manufacturers with some additional resources available, like formulas, templates for forms and documents, contracts etc to draw on as needed. Two of the Mentees would have liked access to more intensive bursts of Mentoring, one on a more ad hoc basis as she felt her business needed it, and the other over six months, with support weighted at the beginning and end of the six month period.

Other Outcomes

Feedback from the Mentees 6 months on from their participation in the Pilot showed without doubt that the mentoring had had a major impact on the successful strategic development of their business since the Pilot.

The effectiveness of the increased awareness of strategic thinking and the increased ability to realistically evaluate the potential of a business and the individuals commitment to it became particularly apparent in the final interviews, where growth didn't just mean greater turnover, profit or viability. This is illustrated by one Mentee who, post the mentoring Pilot, confirms that the programme didn't make her grow her business but helped her decide what to do with it. She explored growth with the Mentors and started to sell on a more commercial basis, soon realising that what she really wanted was to keep her venture small and creative, as a sideline, rather than as her main business. The Mentoring clearly helped her work through the process and gave her the support and confidence to choose to stay small and viable, rather than developing a business that could have become vulnerable as she realised much further down the line that it wasn't what she wanted.

Another Mentee shared that her experience on the Mentoring Pilot "Was really good to bring information together about the business and organise it, looking at the best sellers and retail has had a major impact, some of my best sellers didn't have a large enough mark up, identifying these and what to do about it has been crucial. I have no fashion background so the strategic support and their experience has been invaluable, the sector relevance element is crucial." Suggesting that whilst the advice was clearly relating to general business practice the sector context it was illustrated in helped this Mentee relate to the information and apply it effectively to support her business development and potentially its survival.

A good example of the impact of the Pilot is from a Mentee who had utilised a mainstream business mentor before but felt she had outgrown the support offered. She said,

"The impact of the mentoring made a difference to me personally and my financials turned around in the space of 3 months, and that was just from a telephone session. The professional objectives and straight talking got it back on track, I had a foundation again and could strategically brainstorm where to take my business and what I wanted long term. My confidence, what made me start I, had gone, this process helped me look at what I was good at and build on my strengths."

The final quote emphasises the benefit of offering Mentors with sector experience, "Financially the Pilot made a difference and the sector experience and strategic advice has helped me double my sales for summer 2007. I wouldn't have secured such a large order with Topshop without the mentoring support, I would have just kept plodding along and definitely wouldn't be in the position I am now, with all my debts cleared. I have a FT work placement and a PT staff member and I have just bought a 2nd computer, it feels like a proper business - I've even taken more space in my building, all down to the programme. I am up 90% on last year's summer and expect to be up 130% on last year. Previously I was up 30% year on year, now I am doubling it!"

The programme and its format drew little criticism from the mentors or the Mentees. The main observations and recommendations were around the short time

frame that the Pilot was offered within, which did not work for the Mentors or the Mentees.

Both the Mentors and mentees may have benefited from a group session at the beginning of the Pilot to help strengthen the group of mentees as a peer network and to support the initial assessment of needs amongst the mentees. The mentor feedback also indicates that although written reports were always available in the mentees file, increased dialogue and verbal sharing of information amongst the mentors would have helped the provision of support.

Future Development

There is no doubt that Mentoring, for businesses at the crucial growth point of around 24-36 months could have significant positive impact on the economic viability of hundreds of small businesses within the sector. In turn this would also drive economic growth. In order to achieve this it is recommended that a national report is prepared drawing together the findings of other Mentoring providers within the sector, culminating in a Stakeholder Forum to discuss the findings of this Pilot and the experiences of other mentoring providers. The hope is that the shared experience can lead to a strong network of mentoring provision and a best practice model being offered widely across the sector in order to support businesses and their improved economic viability at crucial stages in their development. Further debate is required to decide the details of this and who is the most appropriate driver to take this forward within the sector.

The Mentoring Pilot has some very strong indicators that should be considered.

1. Industry knowledge, experience and contacts are a crucial element of any support
2. Information to promote the development of contacts/ networks to support business development is not easily available within the sector
3. Payment of £30-50 per hour is acceptable to Mentees who are at around the 30 month level of trading
4. Mentoring over a longer period is preferred with a clear timeframe so goals can be set between sessions
5. The benefit and availability of mentoring would be best promoted using case studies to illustrate impact

FINDINGS

Evaluation of the Mentees Experience of the Pilot

Transfer of knowledge

This was a new question to the evaluation specifically to ascertain the degree of skills transfer from Mentor to Mentee, and whether the Mentee had put the skills they had learnt into practice within their own business.

Based on a total of 25 sessions where Mentees had met with the Mentors, the large majority of 80% perceived a transfer of skills and by the end of the Pilot 56% of these had already begun to put the skills they had acquired into practice. Several respondents commented that the skills contributed to potential developments in the future. One Mentee's specific comment was, "Not necessarily put into practice yet - all valuable for developing next year's collection and marketing". This was verified to be true in the final interviews where all of the respondents confirmed they were now using all the information gleaned from the mentoring sessions.

Skills Transfer from Mentor to Mentee

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Didn't see
Strategic Planning	7			
Financial Planning	2	1		4
Public relations	4	1		2
On-line Marketing	5		1	1
Marketing	1		1	5
Retail	1		1	5

If yes, have you put these skills into practice?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Strategic Planning	5	2	
Financial Planning	1	3	
Public relations	3	3	
On-line Marketing	3	3	
Marketing	1		
Retail	1		

Impact

Impact on a personal level

It was clear from the initial mid term findings that the mechanism of mentoring was impacting on these individuals on a personal basis. This was because, with a high degree of creativity being essential to business success, personal belief and the ability to accept constructive criticism regarding creative processes and outcomes that are rooted in personal ability and talent are crucial to business success. Previous findings showed that mentoring undoubtedly had an impact, within this group, on their personal lives as well as their business' development and this remained the case in the final evaluation where 83% of respondents strongly agreed that the mentoring had the same positive impact on their personal life as it had on their business life.

It is important to draw a distinction between mentoring and coaching, mentoring is purely a business-focused activity, and it is not intended to support these people on a personal level. However, as creative businesses, knowing that they are confident and positive can only assist the creative process.

- All respondents from both the mid term and final evaluation questionnaires felt very positive or positive about the impact on their personal lives and this was substantiated further with specific comments from the final focus group and interviews relating to confidence increasing due to the programme.
- The impact on specific areas of their personal lives was positive as well. Unsurprisingly, there was less impact on creative ability, but more on communication and entrepreneurial attitudes/skills. Interestingly, all the mentees rated the impact on their confidence as very positive or positive in the mid term research and this was substantiated further in the final evaluation where despite the impact questions being more specific to business outcomes, the following comments illustrate the impact was also felt on a personal level,
 - Personally I feel much more confident about my ability to run my business
 - Personally, it gave me a structure within which to work, and support and encouragement during a personally stressful time
 - Boosted my confidence in the product and the direction I am aiming for

Impact on Business

As with above, it was important to gauge any effect that the mentees felt the mentoring was having on the way they ran their businesses. How they approached their business as an entrepreneur, as opposed to a creative. The Final Questionnaire was revised to more extensively illustrate the impact on the mentees businesses.

- One person did not answer this question, 5 strongly agreed that the Mentoring had had a positive impact on their business and 1 agreed.
- 100% of mentees saw strategic planning as the area where Mentoring had the greatest impact, with an increased level of professionalism and ability to make business decisions also featuring highly. A positive impact was also felt by half the respondents within the areas of business turnover, sales, approaching buyers and time-planning, with the other half indicating not sure, with comments such as “too soon to tell” and “next season”.
- Within the section ascertaining impact on specific areas of business the mentees gave responses that showed a positive impact across the range of business areas listed with no one expressing a negative impact on their business. Where Mentees were ‘not sure’ of the impact mentoring had had on a specific area, several indicated that the reason they were ‘not sure’ was because they felt it was too soon to see the benefit of their learning.
- The impact of the Mentoring programme on specific areas of their business mirrored exactly the Mentoring sessions they had participated in and the perceived transfer of skills and implementation of those skills within their businesses.
- Marketing, Sales and Business Turnover plus Sourcing, Approaching and Negotiating with Buyers were the areas with the most uncertainty regarding impact, which for marketing could reflect the fact that these were the Mentor sessions with the lowest take up, and also suggest that the priority for the mentees was to ‘get their house in order’ before they felt able to look at developing sales through marketing. The “Meet the Buyer’ seminar came early in the Mentoring process and again could reflect the need to sort out the Mentees commercial offer before implementing buyer relationship strategies. The impact on sourcing was particularly low and could reflect both the need for assistance in this area and previous lack of industry contacts, and the fact that any assistance offered through

Mentoring had not yet been implemented when the questionnaire was completed.

	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Not Sure</i>
Business turnover	3	0	3
Sales	3	0	3
Approaching buyers	3	0	3
Negotiating with buyers	1	0	3
My level of professionalism	5	0	1
Making business decisions	4	0	1
Strategic planning skills	7	0	0
Marketing	2	0	5
Working/negotiating with manufacturers	2	0	3
E-commerce skills	2	0	3
Financial planning	2	0	3
Sourcing	1	0	4
Time planning	3	0	2

Comments regarding the Impact on the business from the questionnaire responses were;

- The main impact was looking at the business in sections by analysing sales information and where sales are coming from
- Taking what we do more seriously, seeing the value and potential in our business. Better understanding of what help and advice is out there
- Boosted confidence and commitment to the product and direction that aiming for. Especially as not trained in 'fashion'. Good advice and workshop to give basis for next positive steps
- The program provided a lot of bespoke information, which will inform the development of my business over the next 6 months. Personally, it gave me a structure to work within plus support and encouragement during a personally stressful time
- The business planning
- Range planning after analysis of previous sales figures and learning what will make me the most money. Professional approach to meetings with major buyers (Top Shop) and maximising the relationship. I have VAT registered and now have a more professional approach to finance (with a computerised accounts package) although some work definitely still needs to be done. My business is generally much more professional in many respects. Personally I feel much more confident about my ability to run a business

The general feeling of increased confidence was also apparent in the findings from the focus group where participants commented,

- I felt more confident in things being turned over in my head and making those decisions
- Mentoring gave my ideas more validity/context making them into something more
- Felt it moved me on giving me more confidence to look at different parts of the business
- Made me assess finances in a new way, something I do not think I would have done successfully without the programme

Timings

In the mid term analysis we asked which time best suited the needs of these designers to understand the peaks.

- Mid morning 10-12pm was the most popular with 7 responses.
- Lunchtime (12-2pm) received 2 responses and just after (2pm-4pm) 1 response.
- Simply they prefer to get the business advice and mentoring support completed before they set to work.

In the final evaluation we also wanted to ascertain if the mentee believed that their business was of an age where it was ready for the Mentoring service.

- At the time of the final evaluation questionnaire none of the mentees agreed that their business might have fallen on hard times without the mentoring programme - all of them disagreed or were not sure in response to this statement. However, in the interviews six months after the programme comments suggest a realisation that the mentoring had actually had a significant impact and there was a strong feeling from 75% of those interviewed that their business may have been in trouble without it. Comments included
 - Financially it made a difference
 - Would have kept plodding along
 - If we hadn't had that (fashion industry advice) we would have been in a lot of trouble
- When asked whether their business was too young to take full advantage of the mentoring pilot two thirds of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Two business agreed that their business was too young, but the mentoring monitoring suggests that this may have been related to the point those businesses were at in their development rather than the actual number of years that the businesses had been trading.
- The statement 'I wish this programme had been available to my business before,' drew agreement but 3 respondents were not sure, suggesting that they felt the timing was right and earlier would not have worked for them. Only one respondent disagreed with the statement, interestingly her business was the youngest at 18months, strongly suggesting that the average age of the businesses run by the mentees (30 months) was accurate targeting to those most likely to benefit from a sector specific mentoring programme of this nature.

The time frame of the programme was discussed at length in the focus group and, despite earlier indicators soon after the start of the Pilot and at the mid term point that the Mentees would not be keen on a longer time frame for the sessions, it was widely acknowledged by the end of the Pilot by all the mentees that actually a longer time frame would be beneficial as the following comments illustrate

- There was a small time frame for the programme, which made it difficult to get the maximum from it.
- Prefer to have the mentoring over a longer period to get all the homework and other things done.
- Wish to take the sessions according to own business needs and when business can free the time
- Was too rushed
- Was perfect timing for my business and the more I put in the more I got out so it has been very helpful
- Did not feel the business was in the right place for to get the most out of this mentoring right now but can see the value of the information.

- Just wanted information, I was too busy to take advantage fully and did not have time to do all the homework. Wished I could have just the facts and not have to do the homework.
- The more you put into this the more you get out of it.
- I put aside the time to get the most out of the pilot and it really worked for me.
- I can see the value of the programme, it was too rushed to take full advantage
- If I had more mentoring hours I would have liked more marketing support and to go and see the retail mentor

This was qualified further by the final interviews where all the respondents confirmed they would welcome further mentoring and would be willing to pay for it, the mentees were commenting frequently that the period of three months that the programme ran over, was too short and meant that the fifteen hours of support became quite intensive, often making it difficult to do homework and apply what had been discussed between sessions. The majority of mentees questioned favoured a programme of mentoring sessions and a commitment to 12 months support, with a 50/50 split between monthly and quarterly sessions. One quote acknowledging 'it is good to have goals', also demonstrates the general shift in mindset within this group regarding the difference between aspirations and goals.

Quality and Value of Sessions

For the final evaluation this question sought to evaluate the experience of the mentee, their perception regarding the value of the information they received and the expertise with which it was delivered. The scores were requested on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being excellent and 1 poor.

- The responses reflect the impact responses almost exactly, strongly suggesting that the number of sessions and quality of the mentoring within a subject area does have a direct impact on that area of business growth regardless of the age of the business or the starting ability of the Mentee

Session Attended	Content		Presentation		Mentoring	
	Replies	Average score	Replies	Average score	Replies	Average score
Strategic Planning	7	4.86	7	4.86	7	4.86
Financial Planning	4	3.5	4	3.5	4	3.65
Public relations	6	4.17	6	3.83	6	4
On-line marketing	6	3.3	6	3.16	5	3
Marketing	2	3	2	3	1	4
Retail	2	4	2	4	1	4

The findings here again emphasise the importance of the Strategic Planning area of support. Strategic Planning Sessions with mentors Buying Vision were rated as the most valuable by 57% of the respondents followed by 28% for PR and 14% on-line marketing.

Comments were as follows

Strategic Planning

- They were knowledgeable, informative and incredibly enthusiastic

- Perfect timing for the stage I am at - needing strategic plan for the next direction ie beginning wholesale - so their knowledge was essential in developing a concise package to present to childrenswear buyers
- They were really supportive and encouraging and really understood issues I was facing in my business. Their targets and deadlines were realistic and manageable and gave a good framework to work within. Their advice was bespoke to my business needs and very relevant
- They hit the nail on the spot, really listened to me and were easily able to pinpoint the areas which needed work

Public relations

- It was the most valuable session as it has helped us develop our place in the market and see who our customer was, which at the time was very important to learn
- This was the area that we needed the most direction and help. It helped us to locate our 'customer' and our place in the market

On-line marketing

- I was able to have professional help and feedback on what were the positive and negative aspects of my website and recommended changes made an impact almost immediately

Financial Value of Mentoring

We wanted to assess what mentees thought the value of the mentoring they were receiving overall was and what each session would cost if they bought it on the open market. All mentees contributed £250 towards this programme (getting between 6 and 10 hours of mentoring for this price). The actual total cost per mentee is £1,000 -1,250, with a real value per hour of a mentor being approximately £50 per hour

Cost for programme	£0-£250	£250-£500	£500-£750	£750-£1000	£1,000-£2,000	Over £2,000
No of responses		2	2		3	1
Cost per session	£0-£15	£15-£30	£30-£45	£45-£60	£60-£75	Over £75
No of responses		2	5	2		

- Not all respondents answered this, only 8 out of 10 for the first question and 9 out of 10 for the second
- It is interesting to note the attitude to money, given that 5 valued a single session worth between £30-45, while there was a mixed reaction to the overall value of the programme as a whole, despite an accurate perception of the value of the programme being well over £1000 by the majority.
- Although, as young businesses, paying for this support is an issue, the interviews six months later still clearly show that the Mentees, now they know the benefit of the mentoring to their business, would be very willing to pay a minimum £30 - £50 per hour session with a Mentor.
- At the mid point of evaluation there was an overwhelming 'No' to paying for sessions on an individual basis. By the final evaluation there was a large shift in attitude regarding whether the mentee would pay for individual sessions with all those questioned saying they would be very happy to pay for ongoing sessions, but reflected the earlier findings that this was with the proviso that the sessions were part of an ongoing programme of support, only one favoured an ad hoc arrangement.

- The Mentees are however unanimous in stating that the programme was value for money. They were also unanimous, when questioned further, in their appreciation of the benefit that mentoring has had and all believe that ongoing Mentoring is something that would continue to benefit their businesses.

Their comments on the value were

- Previous to the program, and being uneducated in the fashion world, we would not have known how or where to find mentors such as the ones on the Pilot
- It made us aware of things that we might not otherwise have been aware of
- The value of the sessions was excellent
- We wouldn't have had the opportunity to have 1-2-1 with the likes of the mentors involved. Think there should be more choice/flexibility regarding timing for sessions and workshops. I would have chosen mentoring between November and March/April for my business
- I gained an amazing amount of help and feedback that I would not have been able to afford on an individual basis privately
- It is the right price, just enough to make me work at it

The high quality of the lead mentors, Buying Vision does impact on the perceived value of the sessions, as most respondents were aware that the commercial mentoring rates for this company's support are considerably more than the subsidised rate offered on the Pilot. This does however also indicate an impression that this calibre of Mentoring support would have been out of their league if they hadn't been part of this Pilot, which is a perception that would need to be overcome should the programme be continued, or should mentoring be widely offered across the sector. This would also be a strong reason for developing grant funding to support any effort to establish mentoring across the sector, once its benefit is more widely accepted and it becomes integrated in the economic development strategies for the sector, it should become easier to charge higher, unsubsidised rates.

Format of sessions/mentoring support

Sustainability is a strong element of this programme. In order to understand how mentees felt about other types of support and methods of mentoring, a simple question was asked in the mid term evaluation about their attitude toward other formats for the kind of sessions they were receiving.

The findings were that

- Physical access to mentors is important, responses show mentees would prefer 1-2-1 sessions or masterclasses / seminars. These are expensive to sustain, so further research into the mentee attitude to other formats is probably needed.
- Seminars, Master classes and face-to-face were the overwhelming favourites for any future mentoring. Video conferencing, online questionnaires, email discussions all were very low scoring.

This question was not repeated at the end of the Pilot but was further verified in interviews 6 months after the Pilot had finished revealing that

- Whilst the 1-2-1 sessions were definitely still the preferred format the respondents could also see benefit (as long as it was sector specific) in telephone support
- Although on-line support was still unpopular, the availability via the internet of some generic information e.g. templates and formulas, access by email to experts for specific questions or networking with peers to share

experiences on line were all mentioned as potentially useful. This is verified further by 100% of the mentees who answered the final evaluation questionnaire stating that appropriate business skills fact sheets, guides to working with manufacturers or buyers and guides to show and events, databases of specific manufacturers and sample units should be available to designers in the UK.

- The responses suggest that there is reluctance within this group to be part of a designer database and little appreciation of the benefit of this, however this could be being perceived as a competitive/creative threat as opposed to a marketing opportunity
- There is clearly a need for centralised resources and advice as well as mentoring, even those who thought some of these resources were already available could rarely specify where they could be found
- All but one Mentee felt that training on line should be available

This is illustrated in the table below, which shows the responses of the six mentees who answered the question concerning which resources would the Mentees use and whether they believe that the resources listed are currently available.

	Should be available	Is currently available	
		Yes	No
Database of specific manufacturers	7		3
Database of sample units	7		3
Database of designers	4	1	
Appropriate business skills fact sheets	7	1	
Specific fashion courses	7	2	
Training online (e-learning)	6		1
Guides to working with Manufacturers	7	1	
Guides to working with buyers	7		1
Guides to shows / exhibitions	7	1	
Other - please state			
Branding/Packaging and Printing information	1		

The following comments from the focus group also indicate the importance of the nature of the Mentoring support

- The main thing was that I trusted them to understand where I am coming from
- Meeting up meant we can have social interaction and conversations to bounce ideas off each other
- We could turn the information around in one conversation
- As a soundboard the mentor's experience and knowledge brought out ideas in me
- It was user friendly - anything on-line would need to be user friendly too
- It helped me keep on track with my goals and you can lose that on your own

Other Support Agencies

- In the final evaluation the respondents were asked if they had used any other business support agencies during the six months of the Pilot. Four of the respondents had used other organisations and they rated them as follows,
 - Two thought the service at Fashion Capital was good with one of these respondents also rating the service at London Fashion Forum as good too.
 - Another respondent had used Portabello Road, which they rated as good and Business Link, rated as average.
 - The fourth mentee to use other services found the provision at the Welsh Clothing and Textile Centre poor.
- Mentees were asked whether, in their opinion, any other existing business support agency or organisation could offer similar advice. All those who answered the question stated that no they didn't think so and this was further explored in the Post Pilot interviews where the nature of business support received prior to the Mentoring Pilot was discussed

Questions regarding the respondents' experience of previous support drew the following responses

- The Princes Trust but it was very general, guiding me to other help
 - I have previously done a fashion management course at Portabello Road
 - I have had mainstream support before through Clerkenwell Green and used a mentor there, who wasn't in the sector was good on general business support and gave me sound advice. I just outgrew the mainstream mentor and needed far more specific sector advice.
 - I have used Business Link in the past but found them very geared to start ups
 - I had some support from Portabello Road, David Jones was very good
 - Business Link was too generic, their heart wasn't in it, they had no passion
 - The difference was they (Mentors) didn't treat me like an amateur, the other ones (support agencies) treated me like a fledgling business
- The Mentees were also asked about what they believed was on offer with the Mentoring Pilot that was not available elsewhere and their responses emphasised the huge importance of sector specific support and confirmed the positive response to the use of subject specific mentors with experience of the sector.

This is illustrated in the following comments

- The benefit was getting specific help with specific areas of my business, the more choice of support the better... the variety of mentor specialisms was very good.
- Sector relevance was crucial
- This support helped me get my production and the practical format of my business so I could survive in the sector
- The most beneficial thing was their strategic support, I have no fashion background so if I'd not had their experience would have been in a lot of trouble
- I doubt that any other agencies are offering such personal mentoring which can then be so tailored to your own specific business needs
- An introduction to services not readily available elsewhere
- Range of mentors, tailored to individual needs

- One to one sessions with a wide range of professionals
 - Excellent advice and mentoring for a fashion specific business that is no longer a start up but was still struggling to be taken up to the next level. There is lots of advice for start-ups but I had outgrown most of that support
 - I have been to several support agencies previously and I feel that this scheme has been much more relevant because of the specialist knowledge, credentials of the mentors and the tailor-made advice and understanding of my business and fashion industry
- The mentees believed the availability of mentoring support to be important within the fashion and textile sector because the unique needs of a fashion sector business are markedly different from those of most SME's and it is the lack of experience of the sector, not simply a lack of business skills that is perceived as holding back the economic development of many businesses at the transitional 3yr stage of business growth
 - The focus group also concluded that there is a lack of peer-to-peer networking opportunity and a fear of competition that creates isolation amongst businesses at the 2-3yrs stage of trading, which is also alleviated by access to Mentoring support.
 - There is a belief that without more effort to support the development of fashion and textile businesses in the UK there is a threat of greater numbers of creatives leaving the UK to work overseas, where the opportunities are perceived as greater than here in the UK.

This is illustrated by the comments below, which were shared at the Mentees Focus Group and in previous evaluation mid term

- Peers do not seem to share information
- Do not get information and mentoring off peers, has to be from people who have been there and done that.
- The sector is frightened of sharing information - so the chances of finding this type of business information is difficult.
- Other designers etc have problems sharing information
- Mentoring network would make businesses more viable at the next level - keeping UK designers in the UK
- Next level has no support and its needed here
- Sustainability of the designer industry in UK
- Keeping British Crafts in Britain
- Need to support young up and coming designers not just the established names
- High street and big brands are getting stronger and independent boutiques are consequently in a more vulnerable position
- There is still a need for good designers but confusion about fashion and where to earn a living

FINDINGS

Evaluation of the Mentors Experience of the Pilot

Eight mentors were recruited with sector experience and different specialist areas. The key was to recruit Mentors with industry specific experience, enabling them to quickly establish a rapport and credibility with the beneficiaries. The Mentors specialist areas included strategic planning, finance, PR and marketing, production, e-commerce and visual merchandising.

The final evaluation sought to assess the mentors experience of the Mentoring Pilot in order that any development of the programme can develop strengths and improve any weaknesses identified, 6 mentors took part in the questionnaire.

Motivation

The mentors were all invited to participate in the Pilot and were asked to confirm their motivation for agreeing to take part.

- All of the Mentors strongly agreed that they wanted to help young designers succeed and they also either strongly agreed or agreed that they took part because they were approached and it sounded interesting
- The desire to help designers is balanced by other benefits for the mentors with 50% agreeing that part of their decision to take part was that they had anticipated that taking part would extend their business contacts and provide an income source for their business. There was also feedback confirming that the experience and opportunities to further develop the Mentors' own skills made the Pilot a valuable two way process
- A third of the mentors strongly disagreed that their motivation for taking part was because it would provide an income source for their business, indicating that some individuals may be willing to participate in Mentoring simply for the opportunity to support enterprise development in the sector

Expectations

The mentors were asked what their expectations were at the beginning of the Pilot regarding their role.

- All of the mentors agreed or strongly agreed that they were there to have an impact on the Mentee's businesses and their confidence, suggesting a synergy between the two areas
- All but one of the Mentors also strongly agreed or agreed that the Mentor's role was to improve the business skills of the Mentees. One Mentor disagreed that this was part of their remit, however they agreed they were there to have an impact on the mentees businesses
- There was also strong agreement from the majority of mentors that they expected to have an impact on the level of professionalism within the sector with one neutral response
- The general feeling from the comments was that the Mentors didn't really know what to expect, some thought the businesses might be smaller than they were, another believed that providing a support network was one of their expectations and would have welcomed the opportunity to work with a larger group of mentees

The expectations of the role mentors would fulfil were realistic and offer an insight into the motivations and drivers to encourage others to participate in this type of initiative in the future.

Support for Mentors

The mentors took part in a mentoring workshop run by a mentor training specialist to ensure that they would offer the same standards of delivery throughout and to give the Mentors a clear understanding of how to get the most out of the mentor/mentee relationship. The feedback on the preparation for becoming a mentor showed

- Regarding the initial mentor workshop day, the Mentors were equally split between satisfactory, useful and very useful, which could also reflect the professional experience of mentoring amongst the participants, with two thirds indicating that they may be interested in further training and a third stating that they did not feel that further training was necessary
- The mentors comments strongly indicated that more contact with the other Mentors to share information and support each other would have been beneficial
- There was also a request for an opportunity to have met all the mentees at the beginning with direct contact rather than contact only through a third party in order to gain a better insight into the needs of the businesses prior to the Mentoring sessions with them
- The support from the organisers of the programme was seen as very satisfactory by 50% of the mentors with the other 50% finding the support satisfactory but this was qualified as mainly due to issues that were outside of the control of the organisers eg bureaucracy of form filling and the delay in the programme start
- Closer monitoring of the outcomes of Mentoring sessions and direct contact between the organiser and mentees to monitor progress between sessions was requested as a means of supporting the mentors

Clarity of the Purpose of the Pilot

The aim of the Mentoring Pilot programme was to evaluate the need for a mentoring network within the fashion and textile design sector and to encourage designers to undertake continuous professional development courses to enhance their working life.

- The aims and objectives were clear to the mentors but there was an observation that whilst this was clear in terms of what the Mentors were trying to achieve was not clear regarding the aims of the programme itself
- All except one of the respondents believed that the programme achieved its aims and objectives and that this was done well or very well, with one stating yes and no as he felt that the programme needed to be longer to make a difference to some of the mentees
- Comments from the Mentors clarify the uncertainty regarding the definition of success for the mentees, with all of the Mentors observing that some Mentees developed demonstrably and others didn't due to time constraints and lack of work on the part of the individual Mentee.

Mentor/mentee relationship

The next section of the evaluation sought to gain further understanding more about the mentees in terms of the relationship formed and how Mentees should be selected.

- 50% of the Mentors disagreed that the selection process for mentees joining a business development mentoring programme should be more rigorous. However 2 mentors felt that the process should definitely be more rigorous qualifying this with indications that more in depth assessment at the start

- would be beneficial for the Mentors to maximise support, perhaps sorting those appropriate for 'Fast tracking' through an online diagnostic.
- It is clear from the comments that there are improvements that can be made to the entry point of a mentoring relationship, although the programme worked well for the mentees, in some cases it was clear to the mentors that the mentee wasn't getting as much as they could due to their failure to complete actions they needed to take in between sessions. This clearly frustrated the mentors and suggestions were made to help overcome this issue in the future. These included,
 - Managing the expectations of the mentee through clearer explanation at the start regarding what is possible in the time frame
 - Running the programme with a longer timeframe - several of the mentors believe this would have alleviated the pressure on mentees and enabled greater progression and fulfilment of 'homework' between sessions
 - Developing the training needs assessment that was highly praised as an information resource for Mentors at the beginning of the project, to act as a tool to manage Mentees expectations of the programme, potential outcomes and what they would need to understand regarding expectations
 - All the mentors agreed that the Mentees understood the relationship between the Mentor and Mentee and that they were able to form a professional relationship with their Mentor. Despite concerns amongst Mentors regarding managing the expectations of Mentees it was felt that despite some lack of understanding regarding what was and wasn't possible, their expectations were generally realistic

Outcomes

The next section of the questionnaire sought to understand the outcomes and achievements of the Project from the perspective of the Mentors.

- Two thirds of the Mentors believed that over 75% of their sessions had had a positive effect on the mentees and created a transfer of skills, with a third believing 50%, a third 75% and 1 that 100% of their sessions had empowered the Mentees.
- The perception of positive effect is actually higher amongst the Mentees with all of them perceiving a positive impact on confidence and their business plus over 80% believing there had been a transfer of skills even if these had not yet been utilised.

The lower perception of impact amongst the mentors could be due to their ability to assess whether all the mentees were maximising the potential benefit of the mentoring on their business or not as the following statements illustrate,

- I realise this is not quick, it will take a while, the mentees need to search through their own heads. This is only part of the solution and they need to keep working at it, doing the tasks enables assessment of whether they have taken on board the benefits
- Some were not ready for what could be done together and there was some problem around the time of year. They need head space to do planning and PR and couldn't be empowered but there was a transfer of skills - they couldn't act on it straight away because of time constraints
- For the mentees the programme raised business issues that sometimes even they weren't aware of, so to ensure outcomes were achieved and mentees benefited it was important to channel them to specific action points

- The Mentors were also asked how many sessions in their opinion, would be necessary to transfer skills/expertise with an average response of 3-5 sessions with the first session focused on assessing the confidence of the mentee and in depth familiarisation with the Mentee's business in order to get the most out of the sessions.

Future Development

The aim of the programme was to transfer the knowledge and experience from the Pilot into a larger more comprehensive network of Mentors and Mentees.

- All but one of the Mentors expressed a willingness to continue as a Mentor and to encourage their peers to become Mentors too. Only one Mentor answered no to this, expressing concern at their ability to sustain the time commitment required due to other work commitments and a perception that participating in mentoring of this nature involved a lot of paperwork.
- The Mentors estimates on how much a mentee should pay to access a mentoring network were mixed, but lower than expected with majority of recommendations between £25 - £50. Several mentors suggested that the first session should be free and that the rate should be realistically set according to turnover or some other measure of affordability
- Half of the Mentors thought that the future development and management of a Mentoring Network should sit with the British Fashion Council, with LARC, ZIP or web based Fashion-Enter also mentioned as possible 'owners'. Interestingly this mirrors almost exactly the responses given by the Mentees to the same question at the mid term evaluation suggesting the preference for a London based centralised management of this service amongst the Pilot respondents

Insert final evaluation questionnaires/focus group framework as appendices