Global Essay Competition 2024

Title: Unleashing Ideas and Empowering Labour: Mentorship’s Answer to Scarcity

Essay:

Introduction

Dr Myles Munroe once said, “The wealthiest place in the world is not the gold mines of South America or oil fields of Iraq or Iran. They are not the diamond mines of South Africa or the banks of the world. The wealthiest place on the planet is just down the road. It is the cemetery. There lie buried companies that were never started, inventions that were never made, bestselling books that were never written, and masterpieces that were never painted. In the cemetery is buried the greatest treasure of untapped potential.” Whereas it is practically impossible to resurrect dead dreamers from the grave, this poignant reflection serves as a stark reminder of the untapped potential that often lies dormant within individuals, societies, and the global community. It underscores the persistent challenge of scarcity in the face of unlimited wants – both in terms of innovative ideas and by extension, skilled labour – that hinder the realization of countless possibilities.

In the contemporary landscape, the pursuit of ground-breaking ideas and the quest for skilled labour are two challenges that define the trajectory of progress. The scarcity of ideas inhibits creativity, hindering the development of novel solutions and advancements. Simultaneously, scarcity of skilled labour poses a significant hurdle to industries striving for excellence and growth. This essay embarks on an exploration of mentorship as a multifaceted solution, addressing not only the scarcity of ideas but also the shortage of skilled labour in diverse contexts. The essay delves into the transformative potential of mentorship, seeking to unravel its contemporary role in fostering innovation, developing expertise, and ultimately reshaping the narrative of scarcity into one of abundance.

Background and Problem Statement

Evolution of Mentorship

Over the years, mentorship has evolved subject to different cultures and the overall advancement of society. But the earliest mentions of mentorship can be traced back to the figure portrayed in Homer's Odyssey. When Odysseus sailed against Troy, a figure named Mentor who was his wise and faithful advisor entrusted him to protect his son, Telemachus3. The definition of mentorship has also evolved. This paper will follow Kram’s definition from his 1988 paper where he defined the mentor-mentee relationship as, “a relationship between a young adult and an older, more experienced adult that helps the younger individual learn to navigate in the adult world and the world of work.”

Today, mentorship is mainly a tool for nurturing quality employees in various aspects of company life, ultimately toward achieving the company’s goals. Research shows mentorship programs are a means of helping employees accelerate their abilities and open doors to better opportunities2. Various mentorship programs at different levels exist globally to cater to different types of individuals surrounding the mentor-mentee relationship and are all ultimately meant to achieve their full potential.

Scarcity of ideas

Ideas are the backbone of any innovation; they are the very beginning of what makes society what it is today – they shape what we have come to know today as reality. However, over time, many have adopted the notion that ideas are getting harder and harder to find1. Others go further believing that even if one has developed a brand-new idea, then it must be increasingly difficult to execute it, as societies at a global level increasingly evolve towards what might be perceived as a “peak.”

It is based on this that the scarcity of ideas bares fangs. This truth is what is believed to be the basis of what companies have come to know as their R&D department. In economic theory, the product of people creating ideas and the long-run growth rate provides the basis for economic growth4. Outside of economic theory and research and development, ideas are the very potential to solve any problem.
However, the scarcity of ideas is unique in that its alleviation is more commonly measured through the tangible advancement of society and not intangibles.

Scarcity of human labour

It involves a shortage of individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and expertise to meet the demands of the labour market and contribute effectively to economic and societal development. It encompasses the deficit in qualified professionals, skilled workers, and individuals possessing the competencies required in specific industries. Addressing the scarcity of human capital involves strategic investments in education, training and workforce development to bridge skill gaps and enhance the overall capabilities of the workforce.

The scarcity in human labour is more often than not, subjective to a specific industry or sector of work. Such is the case with the global shortage of teachers\(^5\) and nurses\(^6\) or caregivers more prominently pointed out in Finland\(^7\) and the United Kingdom\(^8\), which are reportedly importing labour as a solution to that scarcity. This is a good attempt at alleviating scarcity in those sectors, but it remains a short-term solution.

Scarcity of human labour remains a much larger issue than the highlighted cases in the teaching and nursing industries. It is also faced on a global scale estimated to increase to a shortage of over 85 million workers by 2030\(^9\).

Rising Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning is moving the world of ideation and innovation management increasingly away from human organization towards AI – human-organized innovation management structures, with some level of belief that AI will potentially replace humans in the workplace and reshape existing organizational processes\(^10\). This development poses a question on the prevailing incidence of the scarcity of ideas and the role that humans play moving forward. Will AI completely take over the process of idea generation and human labour? Or perhaps has AI merely accelerated and improved upon the human innovation management process?

**Proposed Solution**

By introducing a mentorship system where industry experts with experience mentor their juniors and those juniors mentor college students and college students mentor high school students and high school students mentor primary and elementary students, the potential of various individuals can be realized much earlier in their careers and give sway to decision makers to ‘persuade’ young minds to pursue certain career paths, targeting scarce labour industries. This tier-based mentorship system will not be strict and it will be possible for industry experts to mentor high school students or even primary school students.

Mentees will regularly visit their mentor’s place of work (or mentors will visit their mentees) and gain experience beyond their classroom or junior working stations. How regular will depend on their level of education or career. It will allow mentees to align their private learning activities directly with the first-hand experience from their mentors. Mentees will not be restricted from learning or choosing a mentorship track that they want, regardless of their career level. All mentor-mentee interactions shall not go without some form of monitoring to allow for heightened safety of mentors and mentees as well as tracking the growth and development of mentees during the programme.

A robust mentorship program like this will see students in K-12 begin to pursue studies that align with their intended career and those who have no idea what they want, can explore diverse possibilities. Being unrestricted on the career mentorship they want will allow young people to make informed decisions about their intended careers as early as possible and will also allow them to grow their network in that career path.

In this proposed mentorship system, national education curriculums would ideally introduce students to learning the fundamentals of AI while pursuing their K-12 or general education. In as much as young
people will be given the opportunity to share ideas with industry experts, they will be exposed to some of the working tools presently used in industry to enhance their ideas.

Through this model, industry experts can gain access to potential talent for the future. It is also through this initiative where young minds of K-12, college, and high school are exposed to real-time industry problems, that unique ideas and solutions to these problems may arise, allowing industry mentors to harness outsider insight or ‘childlike creativity’. The brilliant ideas we seek are probably in the minds of the young people who are present today, but otherwise not exposed to the challenges of the day.

**Executing the Solution**

The idea is applicable across the globe in varying capacities. 1st or 3rd world countries each have their accepted labour management policies or frameworks, economic and social conditions, and cultural differences and as such, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to enacting this mentorship system. However, the ideal institutions to execute this are National Labour Offices or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) by acting as middlemen between working professionals and schools across their registered jurisdiction. The schools would thus have a club we are calling the Junior Experts Club (JEC) and this club would be overseen by an NGO or national labour office unit which we will be coined the Junior Experts Initiative (JEI).

**Junior Experts Initiative**

JEI remain the better option for executing the mentorship programme in developing countries. For example, seminars can be organized in schools by JEI where industry experts explain their work to students as is the prevailing case in Zambia. But unlike presently, the relationship between the experts and the students can be extended beyond the seminar to allow more focused learning on what happens in industry. Interested students can then make up the Junior Experts Club, with its members calling themselves ‘Junior Experts.’

Financing using this system would mostly be through donor agencies for a start and mentors are also recruited voluntarily. Growth of JEI and the club across different schools, colleges or communities will increase its value addition and encourage a state-funded program that supports it. Its success could also aid in reducing the overall size of the informal sector in most developing countries due to increased interaction between junior experts and industry experts.

Eventually, the programme would be adopted by the state as the most ideal situation, allowing the benefits of the program to be experienced evenly across entire nations and could further lead to international collaboration between labour offices.

**National Labour Offices**

Institutions like Finland’s TE Office are state-funded services that are well-informed on the labour shortages in their countries, whereas most developing countries like Zambia or Nigeria have a large informal sector at around 88% and 93% respectively, and as such monitoring labour statistics is rather difficult. This makes a solution like this one ideal for closing that gap and improving upon prevailing scarcity in labour and ideas for most developed countries.

Operating through labour offices is ideal, as they possess employment information as well as information on entrants into the workforce and statistics on education trends. They are better suited to linking industry experts to schools and colleges. It is also ideal for any financing that may arise, as one possible option is for the state to make it mandatory for companies to provide mentors, who can then be selected voluntarily within their company. Companies would also stand to gain as their investment in these young people could translate into attachments or internships whose marginal cost of labour would be significantly less than hiring a full-time employee with a similar level of skill.

**Conclusion**

In the short run, ideas will be readily available to industry experts. In the long run we can expect reduced skills mismatch, a global network of professionals, a continuous learning culture and a strong legacy of mentorship.
Through intentionally harnessed mentorship, we can strive for more creative ideas and solutions to the problems that plague our world, while conversely thriving with the ‘less’ human labour presently at our disposal regardless of the industry sector experiencing scarcity. AI has certainly made the world wonder where human labour fits in the future and even in the generation of new ideas, however, it remains a human-developed tool, once a simple idea. Mentorship is not a new tool, but perhaps re-inventing it to fit present needs, can usher in a new era of learning that brings out the best in young people by allowing them to become junior experts and breathe life into their ideas through purposeful relationships with decision-makers. Of all the ideas that have ever existed in the world, the lucky ideas are the ones that were given the chance to be executed, whereas the best ideas are likely in the mind of someone with no one reliable to share it. Where there are ideas, there’s work to be done and an opportunity for individuals to ‘die empty’, a sentiment echoed by Dr Munroe.14

References


Word Count (essay text only): (2064/2100)