Business loves its buzzwords and it is tempting to regard these as mere expressions of fashion or trends with limited meaning. While caution is advisable, sense should also prevail. This is certainly the case with mentoring. The idea of an experienced, older individual counseling a younger charge is an ancient one reaching back to classical Greek mythology. Mentoring has been practiced down through the ages to the present day where it has found vogue in corporate culture as a means of growing and refining the skills that modern business requires.

Mentoring derives from the character Mentor, a friend of the Greek hero Odysseus, who was given the task of educating Telemachus, son of Odysseus, at the time of the Trojan War. The relationship between teacher and student developed further in Athens, resulting with Socrates’ Academy and the establishment of a method of educational inquiry by means of discussion. One of Socrates’ pupils, Xenophon, went on to write the Cyropaedia, which translates as The Education of Cyrus. This describes the training of an ideal ruler and exerted an influence far beyond its time into the medieval and Renaissance eras when Machiavelli famously authored The Prince.

The arts, science and academia have also profited from such nurturing arrangements. Leonardo da Vinci honed his genius in the workshop of the Florentine master Verrocchio. Mathematician Bernhard Riemann was advised by Carl Friedrich Gauss and went on to influence profoundly the development of a number of important branches of science and technology. More complicated but still-productive relationships were formed between, for example, Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace, and Sir Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday.

Such mentoring ventures were, however, not confined to Europe down through the ages. Teacher/disciple relationships are common to all disciplines in which the transmission of wisdom is involved. Instances are found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, and are still in use to this day.
In the present era, from the 1960s onwards, corporate business has made extensive use of mentoring programs to a variety of ends including nurturing raw talent to developing potential to knowledge transfer. Whatever the application, mentoring has been an integral part of creating effective leaders in all manner of pursuits.

It is no surprise that the scope of these programs has extended to other business areas and, in this instance, to translation and localization. Young professional linguists wishing to join this exciting venture will unquestionably benefit from being mentored by experienced individuals, allowing them to contribute to effective multilingual communications and increased monetization.

There are many mentoring initiatives around the world in our industry, mainly spearheaded by associations for translators and interpreters and are usually language or country specific.

The ATA mentoring program

Perhaps the best known such Mentoring Program is designed as a member benefit of the American Translators Association (ATA). Any ATA member can apply to become a mentee and there are numerous talented translators and interpreters who are experts in a wide variety of fields, including literature and opera. The ATA Mentoring Committee matches mentors and mentees with the main objective of conveying the business side of the translation and interpreting profession to the mentees. The pairing is not according to language or location and mentor and mentee will decide jointly on the modus operandi of the mentoring year, which begins and ends in April. It is the mentee’s responsibility to drive the mentoring relationship; that is, to set goals, stay in touch with their mentor, and establish milestones for themselves. It is the mentor's responsibility to be there with advice and encouragement.

Caitilin Walsh, the ATA President for 2013-2015, stated that “our program is structured to provide mentees a chance to delve into the business aspects of our language enterprise. And because it’s predicated on the learner articulating their goals and driving the learning, it reinforces these same skills, which are vital to success.”

The ATA mentoring program existed in a less structured form for a number of years and in 2010 Susanne, an ATA-certified translator from English into
German, was invited to become its new chair. “I was given complete freedom to make any changes I wanted, and together with my new-formed committee we recreated the program in a different format and changed the focus to what it is today,” van Eyl shared. “We initially interviewed previous mentors and found that all of them felt overwhelmed and unanimously concluded that the agreed-upon time commitment of one hour per month could hardly meet the language-specific enquiries from the mentees. Taking their experience into consideration, we decided that in order to make a volunteer program like this sustainable, we needed to make sure that all parties, especially the mentors, had a positive experience.” This meant focusing on the business side of things, and matching people not by language but by fields of expertise, mentee goals or even particular interests in some cases. However, they did work to match mentees in languages of lesser diffusion with mentors who work under similar conditions, such as Albanian with Czech, and Hebrew with Finnish, as they deal with similar issues. Mentors and mentees now spend about two hours per month communicating, and the goals mentees set are being generally reached.

The revised ATA program has been active for four years with over 200 mentor-mentee pairs. The success of the program is further validated by the many former mentees who are now active and successful mentors and by managing to attract volunteer conference interpreters in the growing number of mentors.

The issue of sustainability has also been solved. The ATA has over 70 mentors in its database, and as mentees come with very specific goals, new mentors who can help with those goals are invited to join the program each year. “This way, not every mentor is needed each year,” said van Etyl. “While we hand-picked each one in the beginning and still do when an uncommon goal is listed, we now have quite a few volunteers each year who bring wonderful skills to the table. With that, we feel that the program is sustainable.”

ProZ.com mentoring program

Another nonprofit mentoring initiative is the ProZ.com mentoring program, which is language and specialization specific. The program was first conceived by site staff in 2007, but didn't fully take off until May of 2011. Since
then, there have been over 160 pairings of mentors and apprentices, with about 65 experienced language professionals currently acting as site mentors. Some typical discussion topics within a mentoring pairing include ways to get established in the industry, specializing, marketing tips, business issues and software use, to name a few. Mentors are also encouraged to provide commercial work to their apprentices at an agreed rate, as well as check, edit, and provide feedback on any projects delivered by their apprentices. Both parties agree on the amount of time and commitment involved in the pairing, and report to the ProZ.com support team to provide feedback on their experiences.

The program's mission statement is to provide "less-experienced members of the profession with the opportunity to meet and work one-on-one with an established professional translator or interpreter."

Positive feedback on the program has been received from both mentors and apprentices. Samuel Sebastian Holden Bramah, one of the site's most active mentors, said he thought it was "an excellent initiative, helping budding translators dive into the complex, rich and exciting world of being a self-employed linguist."

The ADT initiative
Translator and interpreting programs are designed towards newcomers in our industry, but there are many more aspects to mentoring that we need to address. During the planning of the Bangkok LocWorld Conference in 2014, Rain Lau, Language Services Manager at Google and member of the planning committee, suggested that the problem with professional development was derived from the lack of incoming new talent in the industry. Rain, a ten-plus-year veteran in localization, is passionate about localization quality and is involved in Google’s roll out of “readability” as a quality category. She is also an active member of Women at Google, a group that aims to support women within and outside of Google and a key mentor in one of the group's mentoring programs in Taiwan addressed to female university students. It was only natural that she wanted to extend her activities to include aspects that are not traditionally handled by mentoring programs, such as evangelizing and attracting new, talented professionals.
During the LocWorld conference and thanks to Ulrich Henes of Localization Institute, extensive connections, an advisory committee was gradually formed with Rain Lau from Google, Andre Pellet from Manpower, Andrew Lawless from Rockant, Anne-Marie Collander Lind from Inkrea, David James from Adaptive Globalization, Iris Orriss from Facebook, Karl Kelly from University of Limerick, Reinhard Schaeler from Rosetta Stone and Teresa Marshall from Salesforce.

The basic ideas and concepts discussed during the initial brainstorming sessions were whether our industry is known enough and whether people know what translation and localization is. Most importantly, the biggest question is whether our industry is attractive enough to pull new, high-quality people.

ADT, Attracting, Developing & Training professionals was formed and its main functions are better defining what talent we need, bridging the gap between industry and education, creating an ecosystem allowing better career development and evangelizing. Their committee meets two to three times per year and are eager to create awareness for all aspects of Localization.

The Translation Commons Mentoring Think Tank
Translation Commons is a new nonprofit online language community formed in 2015. Its objective is to allow members to collaborate through an open-source platform of translation and localization tools and engage in language-related activities stemming from within the community. While creating the platform, a LinkedIn group was formed and it has already attracted over 1,600 members. Throughout the various discussions that have taken place in LinkedIn, the important concept of mentoring inspired a small team to create a sub-group, the Mentoring Think Tank, with the purpose of creating a standardized template/framework for mentoring internships of students, graduates or new language professionals with freelance translators and interpreters. The group is currently working on a questionnaire to be released over summer of 2015 and gather information from as large a section of our industry as possible. The ultimate objective of the group is to create a standard or guideline with a list of all competencies that the mentee needs to have before the onset of mentoring, a list of objectives for during the period of
mentoring and a list of tools to help document them. On the same principle, the team is creating the same for the mentors so both parties can track themselves. The generation of these guidelines is stemming from the experience of the members of the Think Tank. Here is how some of the members describe their motivation for volunteering.

Nancy Matis has been involved in the translation business for around 20 years, working as a translator, reviser, technical specialist, project manager and teacher, among other roles. She currently manages her own company based in Belgium, she also teaches translation project management at Université Lille 3 (France), KU Leuven (Belgium), Hogeschool Gent (Belgium) as well as at Haute Ecole de Bruxelles ISTI (Belgium) and is the author of the ebook How to manage your translation projects. As a result of the work she performs through her agency, Matis collaborates with a variety of freelance professionals on a daily basis. These range from translators and revisers to DTP and other technical experts, and include translation project managers. Although several of them welcome interns every year, mentoring by freelancers is still far from becoming a common practice in the industry. “I believe that a standard would help inspire trust and confidence,” said Matis. “Not only would freelancers feel more secure about their ability to mentor translation students, or even colleagues wishing to improve their skills or develop new ones, but translation schools and universities would also feel more at ease entrusting freelancers with this task.”

Another member, Birgit Böttner, originally from Germany, has been a sworn translator for over 20 years. She lives in South Africa with her family and writes novels under the pen name Evadeen Brickwood. “The translation industry in South Africa is not as regulated as perhaps in other countries,” said Böttner. “Not every translator is skilled or qualified. When I lectured at WITS University in Johannesburg, I was, on occasion, asked to informally mentor translation students. I was mentored during my studies in Germany; however, the realities and pressures of being a freelance translator in the economic hub of Africa do not allow for the time and expense of mentoring. A possible loss of reputation if the student doesn’t live up to expectations is also a concern. That’s why I believe that our mutual cross-continent effort through the
Translation Commons group on LinkedIn, will go a long way at making standards for prerequisites and follow-ups of the mentoring process more accessible everywhere.”

Barbara Werderitsch, a German freelance translator and interpreter in Madrid, believes that for the translation industry to excel, “it must regulate itself, with initiatives and best practices as well as new talent growing from within. To do this, it depends on its independent professionals.” She also believes in “helping all the young professionals learn from us so they don't have to re-invent the wheel every-time… they are the backbone of our industry, yet there is no standard for them in place to rely on.” The idea is that standards will be tools “for democratization, in helping to place the freelance translators back at the center of the translation workflow processes, open source initiatives,” and so on.

Diana Nisterenková-Chester, another member volunteer of the Mentoring Think Tank, is questioning the essential concepts of our profession and the lack of a uniformed global approach to qualifications, evaluation and regard of our profession. The lack of general understanding of the linguistic process is in the core of her desire to elevate the profession and therefore mentor newcomers in an effective manner. “Everybody seems to be an expert and have an opinion and advice and even the audacity to masquerade as an interpreter or translator! So much talk about interpretation and translation but there is still an unprofessional approach towards the interpreters and translators,” due to the misconception surrounding these “ambiguous but nevertheless very important” social roles. The Translation Commons Mentoring Think Tank is open to contributions to ensure that everyone in the community is included.

The way forward

The benefits of the structured education and guidance provided by mentoring programs are indisputable. Sir Isaac Newton, when appointed Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University in 1669, aged 27, famously remarked, "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." This generous acknowledgement of his debt to those who nurtured him does however contain yet another tacit nugget of wisdom. Newton struck out on his myriad scientific and intellectual
investigations by harnessing his own talents. We can't all be geniuses like Newton, but the same lesson applies across the board. Instead of simply remaining under the shadow of the mentoring he or she has received and acting like a mere copyist, a mentee who strikes out on his or her own and builds upon what they have learned from their mentor will be an achiever. Innovation and originality have been prized qualities throughout the modern era, if mentoring can stimulate their spread, we will all be much the better off for it.