

# WORKPLACE MENTOR CASE STUDY

## Mentoring into work

ACCA

Most people who have mentored generally agree that it's a great way to add to one's own development as a rounded professional. That's why mentoring can earn valuable units that count towards ACCA's annual CPD requirement. Countless ACCA members can point to their workplace mentoring activities as tools for enhancing skills in people management, time management and project management, to name but a few.

Shemara Pullenayegum, a member based in Canada, certainly recognises the benefits of having a mentor at work – but another mentoring 'story' of hers demonstrates how mentoring doesn't have to be confined to the office; nor need it interfere with work-life balance.

### A SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) – which brings together stakeholders affected by the under-utilisation of skilled immigrants' education, talent and experience in Ontario – is working with ACCA Canada in a mentoring partnership. Under the scheme, accountants (not just ACCA members) who are 'new Canadians', arriving in the province, are matched up with ACCA members (who are screened to be deemed suitable to mentor), who then help them identify career opportunities, network and apply for jobs.

'I'm an immigrant myself,' says Pullenayegum. 'My husband and I came here from Dubai with KPMG, who he works for, and I subsequently began work with PricewaterhouseCoopers. But when my wider family arrived, they found it hard to find jobs – even my brother who had a degree from Imperial College London, and my mother, who's a qualified lawyer. Here, there's a strong emphasis amongst employers on having Canadian experience – so no matter how highly skilled you are, it can be difficult to land yourself a job that matches your qualifications.'

'That seemed unfair to me – so when the opportunity presented itself to do some good and help someone else who might otherwise have struggled, I was really keen.'

### BOOSTING CONFIDENCE

TRIEC matched Pullenayegum up with a Annie\*, a Chinese accountant who had been in Toronto with her husband for six months, yet had failed so far to get an accounting position. Her husband had found work in Smiths Falls, nearly 200 miles away; Annie had decided to stay in Toronto as a better bet for accounting work and was only seeing her husband on weekends – an unhappy scenario for both.

'She was demoralised,' says Pullenayegum. 'When you've been looking for decent work for that length of time, especially when you're also coping with learning to live in a new country with a completely different culture – and on your own – it's easy to feel as if continuing your job-hunt is a bit pointless. So my first task was to help her regain that sense of optimism she'd have had when first arriving; to provide the motivation.'

Pullenayegum suggested voluntary work as a start-off for Annie, along with some classes to brush up on her English. She also organised an interview at PwC – which, although not resulting in a job offer, was the source of immensely useful feedback.

'My colleagues in HR were happy to talk about how Annie had performed at interview, along with some tips as to how she might improve in terms of presentation, self-assurance and how she talked about her previous experience. That kind of feedback is rare for many interviewees, so in itself was a confidence-booster for the next time.'

CASE STUDY

## **PRACTICAL HELP**

TRIEC asks for a four-month commitment from mentors, usually of around an hour a week (PwC was happy for Pullenayegum to invite Annie into her office).

‘To begin with, an hour really wasn’t enough – plus there was lots of email contact,’ she explains. ‘But it became something of a mission, and I was determined to keep Annie going and not be discouraged by any setbacks.’

Although she had mentored many junior colleagues at PwC, Pullenayegum found mentoring Annie quite a different affair altogether. ‘When you’re mentoring people within your firm, although they’re far less experienced, there are certain things you share; you tend to be like-minded, with not dissimilar professional and career goals, whereas Annie had the mindset of accepting any job that came along. That was an eye-opener for me.

Pullenayegum also helped by spending time – often staying late in the office – conducting research on Annie’s behalf, even though this was in the firm’s busy tax season.

‘You have to be prepared for the time commitment required,’ she says. ‘You can’t simply schedule an hour’s session and then put your mentoring hat away and forget it until next week. You have to engage fully in the relationship; and that will occasionally mean giving up some of your own time to take your mentee onto the next stage – for instance, helping them to prepare for an interview or re-phrasing certain parts of their résumé so that it’s tailored for a specific job.’

The happy outcome was that after only three months under Pullenayegum’s guidance, Annie finally secured the job she wanted with an accounting firm. Not only that but the job was in Smiths Falls – meaning that she could be reunited with her husband.

‘It was great news,’ says Pullenayegum. ‘And it showed that with perseverance, a good attitude and the right tools, you can give real help to those who’re disadvantaged. I’m not saying it was easy – in fact, I’d say at times it was draining – but it was a worthwhile experience. Making a difference to someone’s life is quite a feeling.’

*\* Not her real name*