

# Evaluation of Enterprise Ireland Mentoring Programme 2008- 2012

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**Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation**  
**An Roinn Post, Fiontar agus Nuálaíochta**

*Strategic Policy Division*

## 8. Enterprise Ireland Mentor Programme 2008-2012

### Programme logic model

#### Objectives

- Develop effective leadership and management capability in Enterprise Ireland client companies;
- Help entrepreneurs and Irish business owners identify and overcome obstacles to growth with the key objective of sustaining and growing jobs through exports; and
- Give the CEOs in Irish SMEs access to experienced, independent business people, with high levels of strategic and sectoral expertise, to advise and guide them on business development, selling into specific markets and sectors, growing the business through partnerships and alliances, establishing agents, distributors, contract negotiation, preparing for funding and raising finance.



#### Inputs

- Direct costs for mentoring provision and indirect costs for service management and hosting



#### Activities

- Number of mentors appointed to work with Enterprise Ireland and CEB client companies each year



#### Outputs

- Number of mentoring assignments completed



#### Outcomes and Impacts

- Behavioural change leading to improved performance and productivity;
- Improved knowledge, skills and leadership abilities; and
- Increase in company turnover, employment, exports and innovation.

## Evaluation aim

The aim of this evaluation is to assess the appropriateness, efficiency, and effectiveness of the Enterprise Ireland Mentor Network programme. An evaluation of the Enterprise Ireland programme was completed by FMR Research in 2012 and has been reviewed and updated by Forfás to accord with the Forfás Evaluation Framework. The evaluation period relates to assignments undertaken from 2008 to 2012.

## Programme background, objectives and target population

The Mentor Programme gives clients access to experienced business people that provides a confidential sounding board for the CEO, to help him/her accelerate growth, survive in difficult times and build management capability. Mentoring has been a long standing service offering of Enterprise Ireland, and its Mentor Network has been in existence since the late '80s. In more recent years, Enterprise Ireland has considerably re-shaped its Mentor Programme offering and seeks to ensure its continuous improvement to meet changing client company needs.

The mentor service consists of one-to-one mentoring and monthly mentor panel sessions. The service is provided by mentors from Enterprise Ireland's mentor panel that operate on a contract basis under the Enterprise Ireland brand. The service is managed and promoted by an executive Enterprise Ireland function. There are three coordinators (external to Enterprise Ireland) who help with recruitment to the Network and matching of mentors to clients and with regional and sectoral coordination. These coordinators operated under a service level agreement.

There are over 330 active mentors on the Network, all of whom are senior executives, entrepreneurs or owner managers who volunteer to advise clients based on their own business experience. New mentors are recruited in line with client needs (for example, where there is a gap for their expertise). Mentors sign a strict confidentiality agreement with Enterprise Ireland, and when working on an assignment they cannot work in any other capacity with the company. While mentors volunteer to advise Enterprise Ireland clients, Enterprise Ireland pays mentors a per visit fee of €175 and any out of pocket expenses.

The mentor service to clients is delivered in line with Enterprise Ireland's strategy and mentor assignments are focused on providing advice and guidance to High Potential Start Up (HPSUs) and established companies on:

- ensuring companies have adequate access to finance;
- helping companies to win export sales;
- improving competitiveness;
- driving innovation and industry led R&D; and
- fostering entrepreneurship.

Companies are offered 100 percent grant support toward mentor per diems for up to 10 visits; maximum eligible cost of €175 per visit (total €1,750). Assignments are typically completed within 12 months.

Clients are, ideally, offered a choice of three best fit mentors. Mentors are shortlisted with the relevant skills, senior level business and sectoral experience. Enterprise Ireland provides mentors

to clients of Enterprise Ireland, the County/City Enterprise Boards<sup>1</sup> (CEBs) (although many CEBs have their own panels). In 2006 Enterprise Ireland published a Best Practice guide to mentoring - incorporating elements of International Best Practice - to ensure its service is delivered to a consistently high standard. All new mentors attend a one day workshop.

The objectives of the Enterprise Ireland Mentor Network programme are to:

- help Enterprise Ireland achieve its strategic objectives by developing effective leadership and management capability in Enterprise Ireland client companies;
- help entrepreneurs and Irish business owners identify and overcome obstacles to growth with the key objective of sustaining and growing jobs through exports; and
- give the CEOs in Irish SMEs access to experienced, independent business people, with high levels of strategic and sectoral expertise, to advise and guide them on business development, selling into specific markets and sectors, growing the business through partnerships and alliances, establishing agents/distributors, contract negotiation, preparing for funding and raising finance.

Target population - Irish owned companies focused on achieving export sales growth, in particular:

- High Potential Start Up (HPSU) companies;
- established manufacturing and internationally traded services businesses that are SMEs;
- locally traded service companies and micro-enterprises that can access the service through the support of CEBs and Údarás na Gaeltachta.<sup>2</sup>

### Programme rationale

The rationale for State intervention via the promotion and provision of a business mentoring service is based on three factors. The first is that many organisations do not know the value of having a business mentor ahead of experiencing the benefits of one. The value of mentoring is well recognised in research literature (especially as a relatively low cost business intervention), but it is also recognised that such a service needs to be packaged and promoted in order to encourage the adoption of the approach and enable businesses to derive the benefits. Second is the recognised characteristic that many businesses have difficulty in identifying the particular challenges that prevents them from progressing. There is often a difference between the need 'presented' by a business and the 'real' need. Third, even if clients were able to diagnose their business need accurately, it would be difficult for them to identify/source appropriate mentoring support.

### Evaluation methodology

The research strands which informed the evaluation were as follows:

- discussions with the Mentor Network management;
- online survey with all current mentors;

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<sup>1</sup> The CEBs were re-launched as Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) in May 2014

<sup>2</sup> The CEBs and Udarás na Gaeltachta also run their own mentor programmes

- two focus groups with mentors and additional one to one conversations;
- online survey of Enterprise Ireland and non-Enterprise Ireland clients who had either completed an assignment since 2008 or had an assignment in progress;
- follow up one to one telephone discussions with clients;
- a focus group with the Mentor Network coordinators;
- online survey of development advisors (DAs) and their department managers;
- a focus group with Enterprise Ireland and DAs; and an
- online survey with CEB executives.

Three factors need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the objectives for each mentoring assignment are the subject of discussion and agreement between each mentor and client. In this way the mentoring intervention is customised and focused on each client’s issue. It does however mean there are no uniform metrics that can be used as outcome measures.

Second, within the context of business development it can be difficult to attribute an impact on or change to a client’s business to the mentoring intervention. Often mentoring is part of a broader support package to a client organisation and it can be difficult to isolate the contribution of mentoring from other interventions. Mentoring in its pure form is based on the client ‘owning’ the solution to the issue his or her organisation faces and, some cases, clients can fail to appreciate the contribution of the mentor in stimulating thought and encouraging the client to explore possibilities.

Third, the primary data for this evaluation is drawn for (a largely self-selecting) sample of mentors and of clients. This is purely for pragmatic reasons, and in the spirit of a formative evaluation, this seems appropriate. Feedback from both stakeholder groups is capable of illuminating the perceived strengths of the Enterprise Ireland programme and generating ideas of how it can be improved.

Email invitations to take part in an online survey were sent to clients, mentors, DAs, and CEB executives by the mentor network programme manager. Reminder emails were sent to boost response rates. The following table shows the response rate for each of the four online surveys.

**Table 8.1: Response rates to online surveys**

	Sent out	Returns	Response rate %
Clients	1000	267	27
Mentors	330	168	51
DAs	120	47	39
CEBs	35	3	9

### Focus groups with mentors, development advisors (DAs) and coordinators

Mentors were chosen at random from a database supplied by Enterprise Ireland and invitations to take part in a focus group were emailed to 90 mentors. Due to the level of interest shown, FMR conducted two focus groups, and eight mentors attended each meeting. In addition, four mentors who did not attend the groups were interviewed by telephone or face to face. Enterprise Ireland supplied FMR with a list of 32 DAs who were all either telephoned or emailed to invite them to a focus group, which was attended by 6 DAs. Enterprise Ireland arranged a focus group with the three current coordinators.

### Telephone interviews with clients

Clients responding to the online survey were asked if they would be willing to take part in a short follow up telephone interview - 40 interviews were conducted with enterprises from a range of sectors and size. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed in conjunction with the Mentor Network management team.

### Additional data

Additional data to complete the evaluation of the Enterprise Ireland Mentor Network within the framework of a Programme Logic Model were received to augment the findings from the above.

## Alignment with national policy

The Enterprise Ireland Mentor Network was established to help companies overcome obstacles to growth. The Mentor Network programme was set up in 1988 by IDA Ireland and further developed by Forbairt/Enterprise Ireland from 1996 to address this market failure.

The need for business mentoring in Ireland is recognised in national policy documents and reports, including: *Ahead of the Curve: Ireland's Place in the Global Economy* (2004) *Small Business is Big Business: Report of the Small Business Forum* (2006), *Making it Happen* (2010) and *A Voice for Small Business: a Plan for Action* (2011). Informed by international literature review and best practice, each cites the essential role that business mentoring plays to support firms (particularly SMEs). Aligned with the policies at the time, Enterprise Ireland's 2008 - 2010 Strategy *Lead - Innovate - Grow* identified leadership and innovative management capability as the key contributors to the growth of Irish companies. It acknowledged Ireland's need for strong management capability to drive the creation and development of innovative companies who could adopt new business models, respond to ever changing customer needs and achieve scale.

## Inputs

Direct costs for mentoring provision and indirect costs for service management and hosting and for Enterprise Ireland personnel involved in managing the programme are set out in Table 8.2.

Participating companies are not required to make a financial contribution to the programme costs. In terms of financial processes, no proportion of the programme funding is paid directly to companies - companies are required to authorise Enterprise Ireland to pay the per visit fees directly to the mentor on its behalf.

**Table 8.2: Mentor network total (direct and indirect) costs**

Year	Direct costs	Indirect Costs	Total Costs
2008	€810,856	€ 211,410	€1,022,266
2009	€962,819	€ 211,410	€1,174,229
2010	€997,157	€ 187,635	€1,184,792
2011	€1,085,642	€ 170,125	€1,255,767
2012	€874,785	€ 146,262	€1,021,047
Total 2008-2012	€4,731,259	€926,842	€5,658,101

## Outputs and activities

Enterprise Ireland exceeded its targets for assignments in each year of the evaluation period. These data are shown below.

**Table 8.3: Mentor network outputs**

Mentors Appointed to	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Enterprise Ireland clients (target)	220	220	220	220	220
Enterprise Ireland clients (output)	226	271	217	288	439
Non-Enterprise Ireland clients (target)	0	0	60	60	60
Non-Enterprise Ireland clients (outputs)	85	94	110	79	51
Total Assignments (target)	220	220	280	280	280
Total Assignments (outputs)	311	365	327	367	490

Key performance indicators (KPIs) have been established for the programme coordinators who manage the operational capability of the programme on day to day basis. Coordinator's KPIs include:

- manage a panel of circa 80 - 130 mentors in line with Enterprise Ireland policies;
- coordinate approximately 150 - 200 new mentor assignments annually;
- coordinate Mentor Panel sessions (circa 2 / 3 per month) as required; and
- manage new mentor applicants.

The following sections contain the key findings from the primary research. This includes the online surveys and telephone or face to face conversations, with clients, mentors and DAs.

Reporting on the online survey the results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding and some questions were multiple response, i.e. respondents could give more than one answer. The data provided usually excludes the 'don't know' responses as these dilute the data and the reader should always take note of the number of respondents/base as well as any percentages. Unless otherwise stated, the number of respondents/base is:

- 267 for the client survey;
- 168 for the mentor survey; and
- 47 for the DA survey.

### Client survey responses

The key findings of the online survey and telephone interviews are presented below, as follows:

- nature of the business;
- mentor assignment, including the matching process;
- impact of the mentor assignment; and
- suggestions for improvement.

### Nature of the business

Clients were asked who they were clients of, with options given as Enterprise Ireland, CEB, Údarás, or another agency. 83 percent were Enterprise Ireland clients, 25 percent were County/City Enterprise Board (hence some clients of both organisations) and the remainder were Údarás or other agency.

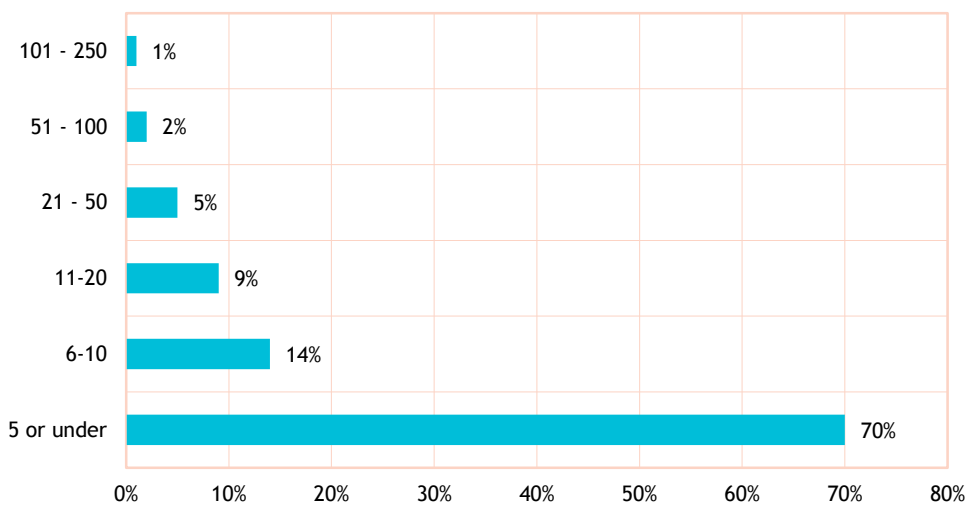
Almost half (48 percent) of the companies were established between 2010 and 2012, 31 percent were established between 2005 and 2009, 9 percent were established between 2000 and 2004, and 11 percent pre 2000.

In terms of turnover, 39 percent of companies were pre-revenue, 23 percent had less than €100,000, 18 percent were between €100,000 and €500,000, 8 percent were between €500,000 and €1 million, 11 percent were between €1 million and €5 million and 2 percent had more than €5 million.

Figure 8.1 shows the company size in terms of employment. The vast majority at 70 percent, employed less than 5 people and another 23 percent employed between 6 and 20 people.



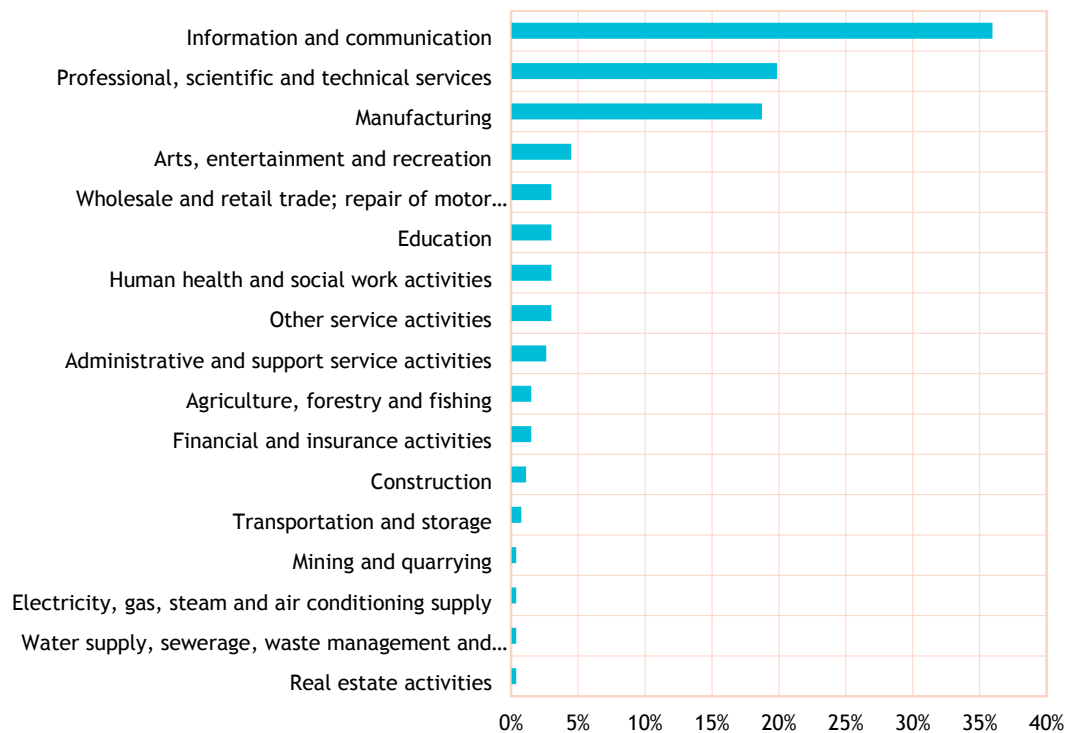
**Figure 8.1: Numbers of employees - company size**



Source: Company survey

The sectoral breakdown (using NACE codes) indicates that the majority of enterprises were involved in services activities including ICT (36 percent) and professional, scientific and technical services (20 percent). And 19 percent were involved in manufacturing (Figure 8.2).

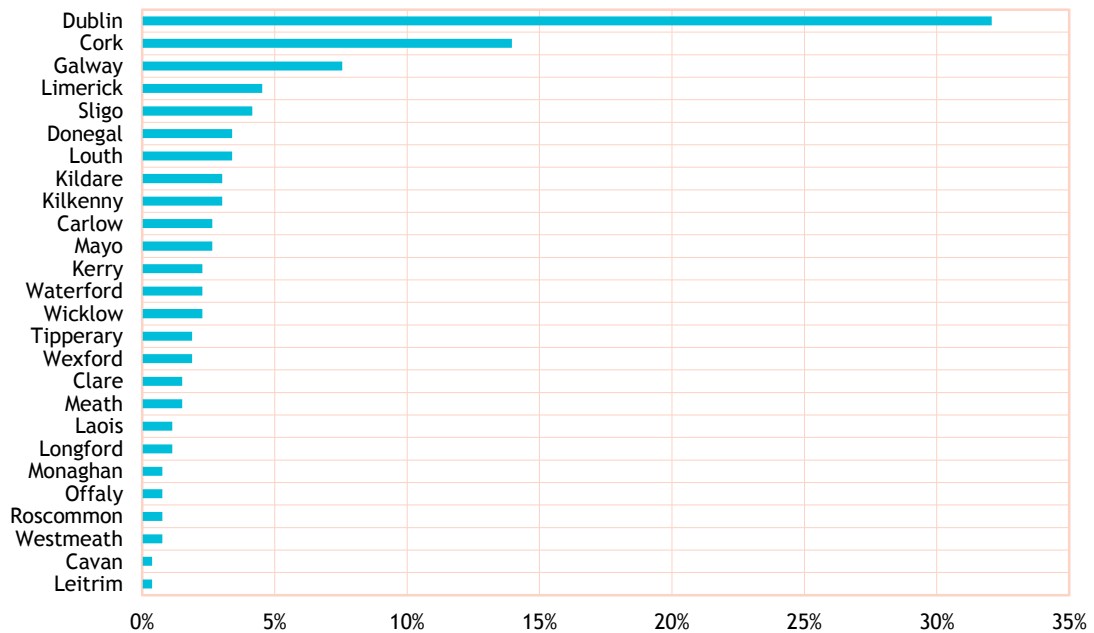
**Figure 8.2: Main business activity**



Source: Company survey

In terms of regional spread, 59 percent of survey respondents were based in counties with Ireland’s largest urban centres, including Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick, although all counties are represented with Cavan and Leitrim at the lower end of the spectrum at less than one percent (Figure 8.3).

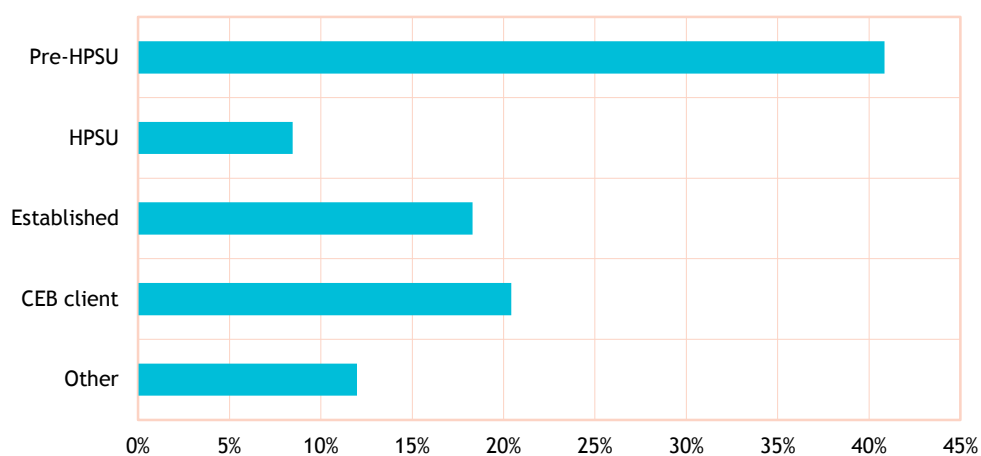
**Figure 8.3: Regional spread**



Source: Company survey

Using the organisation name clients gave at the end of the questionnaire, Enterprise Ireland was able to supply data on 142 respondents with respect to their classification within Enterprise Ireland. The majority of these clients were pre-HPSU (41 percent, 51 clients). The full range of organisations is shown in Figure 8.4.

**Figure 8.4: Enterprise Ireland client classifications**



Source: Company survey n=142

### Mentor assignment

This section sets out the number of assignments and the reasons why companies considered accessing mentor support, as well as the views on the mentor matching process.

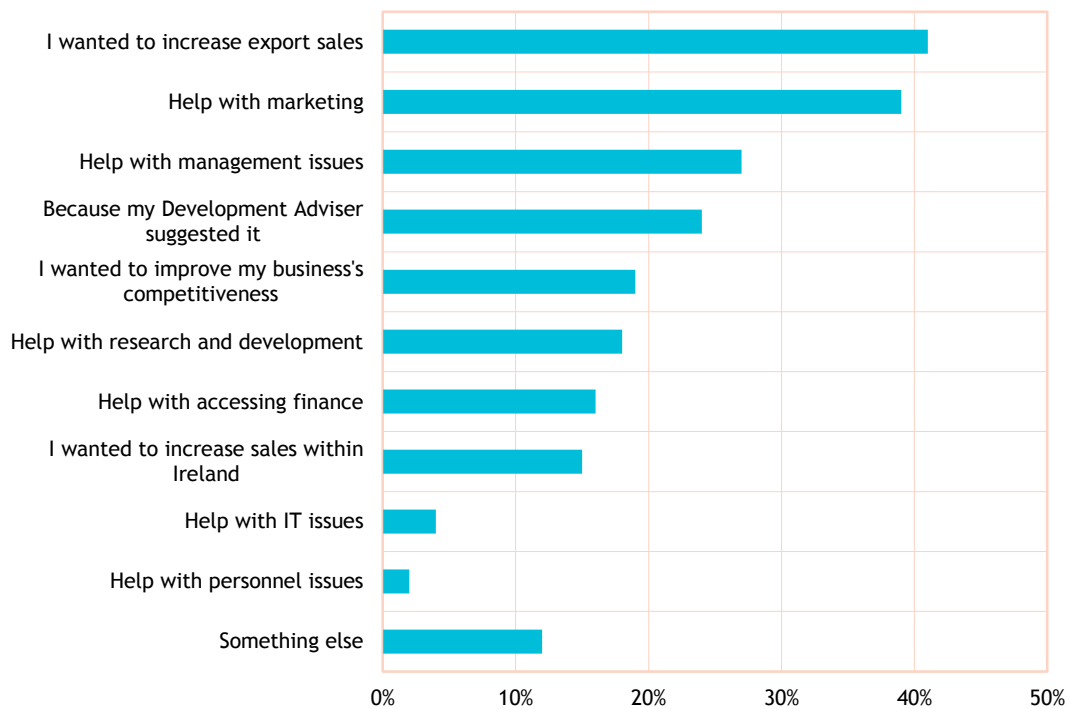
Clients were asked the number of assignments (including current assignments) they or their business had been involved in with Enterprise Ireland or the CEB. The majority (60 percent, 160 clients) had only had one assignment, 22 percent (59 clients) had 2 assignments, and 9 percent had between 3 and 5 assignments. Almost 1 in 10 had been involved in more than 5 assignments (9 percent, 24 clients).

Organisations classified by Enterprise Ireland as CEB clients were more likely to have had more than one assignment (66 percent, 19 clients) compared to Enterprise Ireland clients, whether they were pre-HSPU (40 percent), HPSU (25 percent) or Established clients (35 percent).

Almost half of all clients responding (47 percent, 125 clients) were currently involved with an assignment.

Reasons given for accessing the Mentor Network (for the latest assignment if more than one) are shown in Figure 8.5. Note, clients could choose more than one option. Increasing export sales and help with marketing were the reasons most cited by clients at 80 percent.

Figure 8.5: Business objectives for engaging in mentor assignment



Source: Company survey

'Something else' included responses such as developing a business plan (6 clients) or 'was part of a programme or funding (6 clients)'. Examining the differences between the Enterprise Ireland classification of clients showed the following:

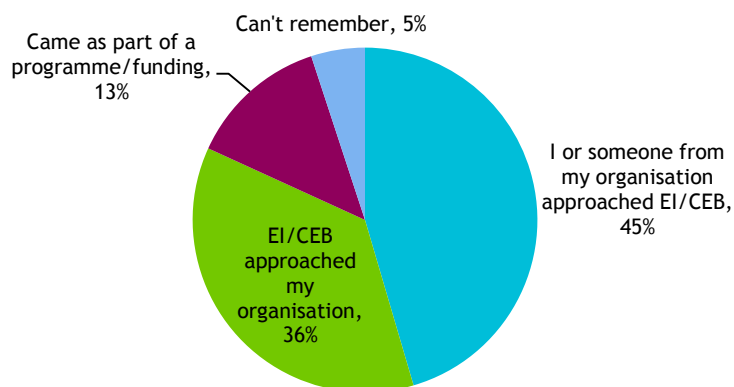
- Pre-HPSU clients were most likely to have accessed the Mentor Network for the following reasons:
  - help with marketing (40 percent, 23 clients);
  - to increase export sales (34 percent, 20 clients);
  - help with management issues (34 percent, 20 clients);
  - because their DA suggested it (33 percent, 19 clients); and
  - to obtain help with accessing finance (21 percent, 12 clients).
- HPSU clients were most likely to be involved because:
  - their DA suggested it (42 percent, 5 clients);
  - help with management issues (33 percent, 4 clients).
- Established clients were most likely to give the following reasons:
  - wanted to increase export sales (69 percent, 18 clients);
  - wanted help with management issues (35 percent, 9 clients); and
  - wanted help with marketing (31 percent, 8 clients).

Clients were asked to indicate who made the initial approach for support from the Mentor Network.

CEB clients were more likely to say that they approached Enterprise Ireland or the CEB for mentor support with almost three quarters (72 percent, 21 clients) having done so, compared to 58 percent (15 clients) of Established clients, 33 percent (4 clients) of HPSU clients and 45 percent (26 clients) of pre-HPSU clients.

Four out of five clients were already in contact with someone from Enterprise Ireland or the CEB, prior to being involved in the Mentor Network and, not surprisingly, this was the case for all Established clients.

**Figure 8.6: Who made the initial approach about the Mentor Network?**



Source: Company survey

In terms of the matching process, although 59 percent of clients were offered a choice of at least three mentors, a notable number (30 percent) were offered no choice and this was the case particularly with two-thirds of HPSU clients. That said, 86 percent (227 clients) of all clients felt that their mentor was very or quite well matched to their needs. When asked how well clients felt the coordinator listened to and understood their needs, 88 percent answered very well (51 percent) or quite well (37 percent).

When asked why they gave this response, the most common reasons, from those who felt they were **not** well matched, could be grouped under the following headings:

- lack of knowledge or experience of the sector or market (15 clients);
- lack of appropriate business/technical skills (10 clients);
- a lack of understanding of the product, not grasping what the business needed (7 clients); and
- did not do what they were supposed to, gave poor advice (6 clients).

Clients were asked about how well they felt they understood what support the mentor would be able to give them. The majority felt they understood this very or quite well (81 percent, 215 clients) with 43 clients (16 percent) saying 'not very well' and 7 clients (3 percent) saying 'not well at all'.

CEB clients were least likely to feel they understood the support given by the mentor, with 24 percent (7 clients) responding not very or not at all well to this question, compared to 13 percent of pre-HPSU clients, 8 percent of HPSU clients and 12 percent of Established clients.

Clients were then asked about their contact with the mentor, in terms of number of meetings and contact by telephone or email. As the number of visits by the mentor during the assignment can be anything from 3 to 10, this is reflected in the numbers cited by clients. For those with completed assignments only, 10 percent had received 3 or 4 visits, 33 percent had received 5 or 6 visits and 43 percent between 7 and 10 visits. At the extremes, a few clients, 6 percent, said they had received more than 10 visits and 8 percent less than 3 visits.

Contact by telephone and email appeared to be more frequent and would indicate that, in general, mentors are keeping in touch with clients outside the scheduled visits.

Clients were then asked to express their satisfaction with the amount of contact and the majority at 81 percent (210 clients) felt this was about right. 15 percent (40 respondents) said it was too little and 4 percent (11 clients) said it was too much. This figure was similar across the different Enterprise Ireland classification of enterprises.

Some of the clients who felt that the amount of time they were allocated was **too little** gave the following reasons:

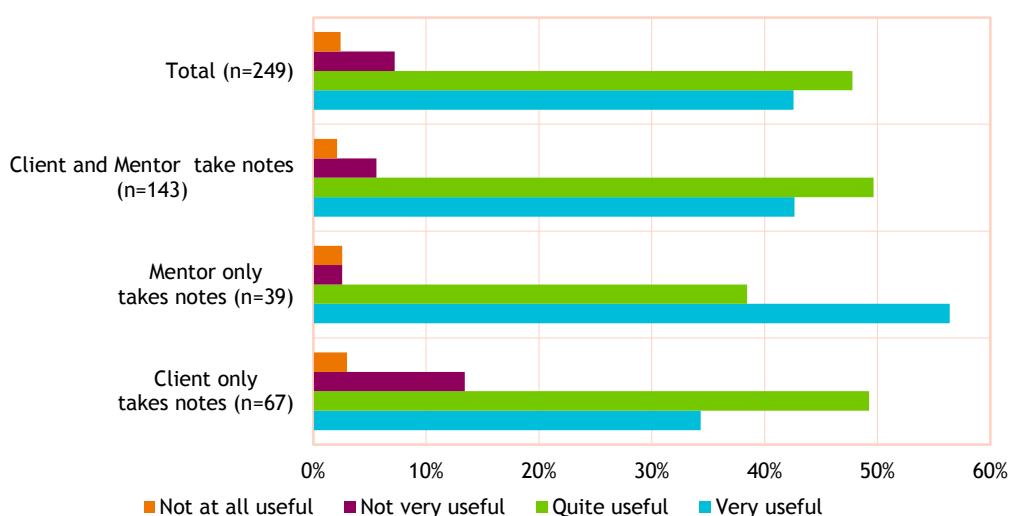
- could do with continued support, not enough time to do all that needed to be done (16 clients);
- mentor shortcomings that included considerations such as follow-up by the mentor, time spans between engagements and geographic distance (10 clients); and
- took time to get into the project, need time to build rapport (4 clients).

Of the 11 clients who felt there was **too much** contact, reasons given for this were generally connected to their dissatisfaction with the mentor or that the assignment had been completed in fewer than the allocated number of visits.

Clients were then asked about note taking following each meeting. In the majority of cases (54 percent, 143 clients) the client reported that both the mentor and the client took notes. 26 percent (69 clients) believed that only the client took notes and 15 percent (30 clients) believed that only the mentor took notes. In 5 percent of cases (13 clients) clients believed that no one took notes.

Most clients (91 percent, 225 clients) felt that, where notes were taken, they were very or quite useful, with only 9 percent, 24 clients saying they were not very or not at all useful. Levels of satisfaction with note taking were lowest where only the client took notes as Figure 8.7 shows.

**Figure 8.7: How useful did you find these notes?**



Source: Company survey

### Mentor survey responses

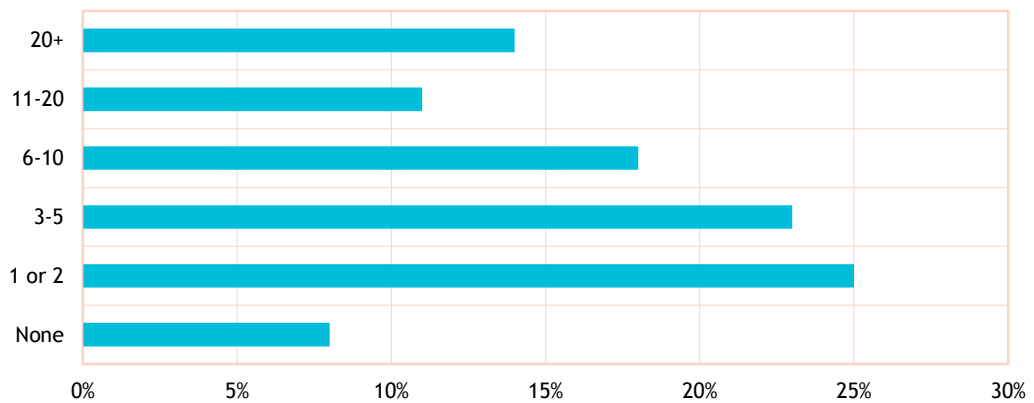
The key findings of the online survey and one to one interviews are presented below, following the flow of the online questionnaire with findings from one to one interviews providing further illumination. The main sections of the online questionnaire were as follows:

- the process overall including the matching process;
- the matching process and coordinator’s role;
- training and support from Enterprise Ireland/Mentor Network; and
- mentor assignment and post assignment.

Mentors were asked about how long they had been involved in the Mentor Network, and while the majority were more established mentors - 57 percent (95 mentors) have been involved for three years or more - 43 percent (73 mentors) had been recruited within the last 2 years.

Mentors were asked about the number of assignments they had been involved in, and 8 percent (14 mentors) had not been given any assignments. Almost a half of mentors (48 percent, 80 mentors) had worked on between 1 and 5 assignments. The following Figure 8.8 shows the number of assignments undertaken by all mentors who responded.

Figure 8.8: How many assignments have you been involved in (completed and in progress)?

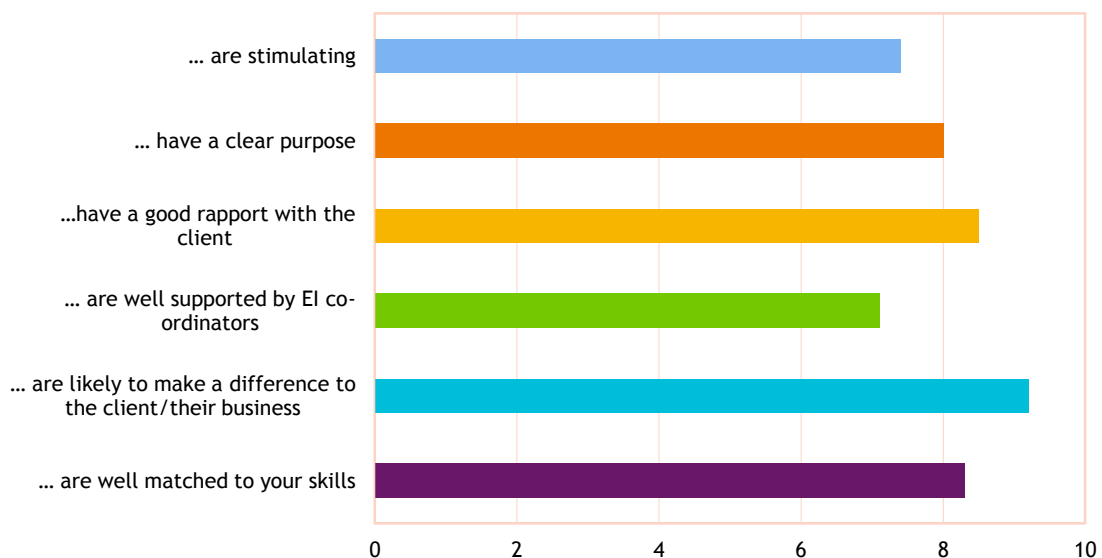


Source: Company survey

### The process overall

Mentors were asked to rate the importance to them of a variety of characteristics of an assignment on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 was not at all important and 10 was extremely important. While all were rated highly by mentors, the characteristic of being ‘likely to make a difference to the client/their business’ was the most highly rated by mentors. The mean scores for all mentors are shown in Figure Figure 8.9.

Figure 8.9: How important is it that any assignments you are given....? (mean figures)



Source: Company survey

Mentors who had been involved in at least one assignment were asked to rate the match between their skills and the assignment. While 98 percent (150 mentors) rated this as very or quite well matched, four mentors felt the matching had been unsatisfactory.



Where matching was felt to be less than perfect, the following aspects were cited, including poor client objectives, client expectations not always clear, poor communication or a poor selection process for organisations suitable for the programme by Enterprise Ireland.

Following this, mentors were asked how well they thought the coordinators and Enterprise Ireland communicated the mentor's role to the client. Although 10 mentors were unable to answer, of the remainder, 81 percent (115 mentors) felt this was done either very or quite well.

Mentors were asked who, in their experience, requested support from the Mentor Network. In an average of 3 out of 10 projects, mentor said they were unaware of who requested support. For those assignments where mentors knew who requested support, they felt that around two thirds of the time this request came from the client and one third of the time from the DA.

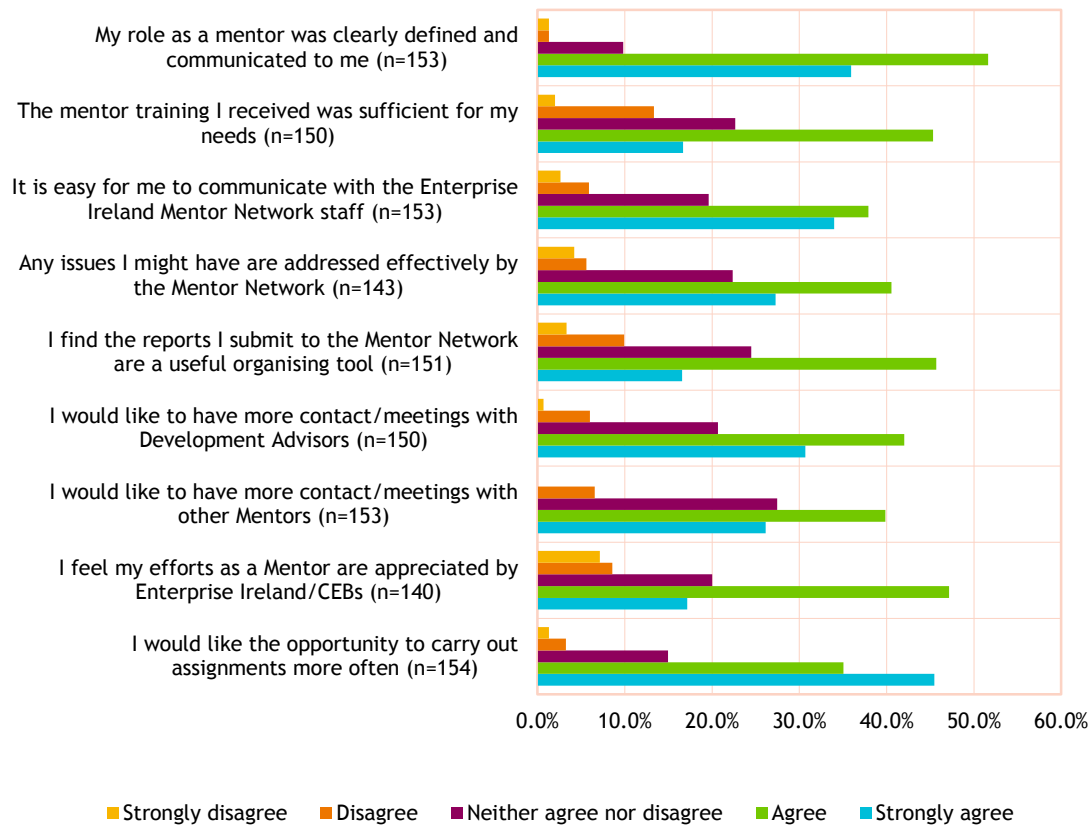
### **Training and Support from Enterprise Ireland/Mentor Network**

Mentors were asked to state the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about the Mentor Network.

The statement which received most support from mentors was 'My role as a mentor was clearly defined and communicated to me', with 88 percent (134 mentors) agreeing or strongly agreeing. This was followed by 'I would like the opportunity to carry out assignments more often' where 81 percent (124 mentors) agreed or strongly agreed.

Whilst the majority of mentors were positive about all statements (more than 60 percent agreed or strongly agreed with all statements), those with which mentors expressed the highest levels of disagreement were 'I feel my efforts as a mentor are appreciated by Enterprise Ireland/CEB' (16 percent, 22 mentors disagreed or strongly disagreed) and 'The mentor training I received was sufficient for my needs' (15 percent, 23 mentors disagreed or strongly disagreed). Figure 8.10 shows the responses.

Figure 8.10: Mentor experience



Source: Company survey

**The mentoring assignment**

Mentors were asked about their contact with the client, in terms of number of meetings and contact by telephone or email. As the number of visits by the mentor during the assignment can be anything from 3 to 10, this is reflected in the numbers cited by clients. For all mentors who responded, 22 percent had made 3 or 4 visits, 16 percent had made 5 or 6 visits and 38 percent between 7 and 10 visits. At the extremes, a few mentors, 3 percent, said they had made more than 10 visits and 21 percent less than 3 visits. It should be noted that these data are for the most recent mentor assignments, some of which will have been in progress.

Mentors were then asked to express their satisfaction with the amount of contact and 78 percent (118 mentors) felt this was about right, with 31 (20 percent) feeling it was too little and 3 (2 percent) feeling it was too much. Some mentors felt that assignments vary and more flexibility around the contact schedule is needed.

Many of the mentors who felt that the amount of time they were allocated was **too little** felt that it was difficult to achieve targets in the allocated timeframe and that the client would need more support.

Of the 3 mentors who felt there was **too much** contact, reasons given for this were that ten visits dragged the process out and, similar to some comments from other mentors, there needs to be flexibility in visit scheduling.

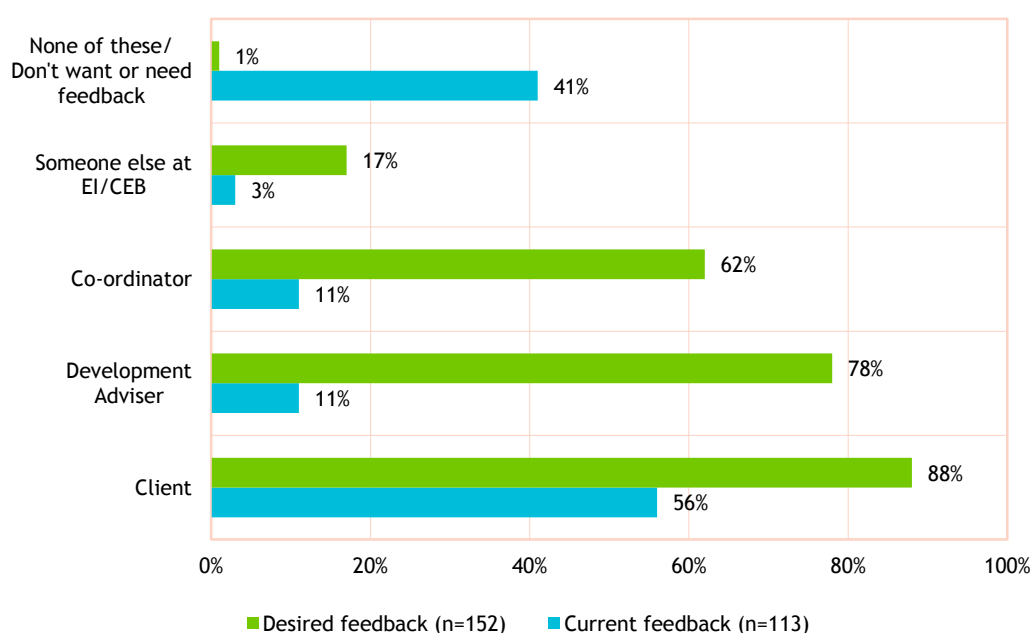
Mentors were asked whether they shared their reports with clients. Whilst half of mentors who responded either always or usually shared the reports, almost a third said they never shared them with clients. When asked whether they felt it would be useful to share their reports with clients, over two thirds responded positively. Despite a third of mentors never sharing reports at the time of the survey, only one in ten said it would definitely not be useful.

### Feedback during and following the assignment

Mentors were asked if they received feedback during an assignment from the client, DA, coordinator or anyone else. While 73 percent (112 mentors) currently receive feedback from the client, 24 percent (36 mentors) said they received no feedback at all. In order to test the gap between desired feedback and reality, mentors were asked who they would like to receive feedback from. There is an appetite amongst mentors for more feedback than is currently received from Enterprise Ireland/CEB staff and the coordinator during the assignment.

Similar to the previous question on feedback during an assignment, mentors were asked about receiving feedback at the end of an assignment. Again there was an appetite for more feedback at the end of the assignment than is currently received, as shown in Figure 8.11.

**Figure 8.11: From which of the following do you/would you like to receive feedback at the end of your assignment?**



Source: Company survey

### Development advisor survey findings

The key findings of the online survey are presented below, following the flow of the online questionnaire. The main sections of the questionnaire were as follows:

- the matching process and coordinator’s role;
- during the mentoring assignment;

- strengths and weaknesses of the Mentor Network; and
- suggestions for improvement.

Of the 47 DAs who responded to the online survey, 2 had not recommended the Mentor Network to any of their clients. One of these cited uncertainty regarding the quality of mentors and ability to find an appropriate mentor. The other cited reluctance to engage.

### The matching process and coordinator's role

Those DAs who had clients who had used the Mentor Network were asked who generally made the initial suggestion about using it, and for 4 out of 5 clients, the DAs indicated it was they who made the suggestion to the client. The effectiveness of the dialogue between DAs and coordinators was tested and, while 82 percent (37 DAs) found this to be very or quite effective, 18 percent did not find it effective.

As with client and mentor survey, DAs were asked about the matching between mentor skills and client assignments. The majority of DAs (89 percent, 35 DAs) felt that they were either very well or quite well matched with the remaining 11 percent citing that they were not very well matched.

When asked to give reasons for their responses, DAs who felt they were very or quite well matched took into consideration the feedback they received from clients and cited the fact that efforts were made to ensure a good match was made in the first instance, that there is a wide range of mentor skills mentors of high calibre available. However, some DAs were critical of certain aspects of the matching process, such as client/mentor relationship difficulties and issues with the range of mentor skills (or communication of these).

### The assignment - reporting and feedback

DAs were asked firstly about the reports completed by the mentors and whether or not they see them. 33 percent of DAs either occasionally or never (2 percent) saw the reports submitted to Enterprise Ireland by the mentors during the assignment and 24 percent responded that they always saw the reports. Two aspects of the perceived usefulness of the reports was tested and the majority of DAs found these very or quite useful both in keeping them up to date with progress and moving the client organisation forwards, although 'keeping up to date with progress' was rated as very useful by more DAs (30 percent, 13 DAs) than was 'moving the client organisation forwards' (7 percent, 3 DAs).

When asked what reason behind their rating of usefulness was, DAs comments could be grouped into the following themes: the variation in quality and depth of information provided impacted upon how useful (or not) the reports are; where quality reports are provided the DAs found them useful in gauging client progress and providing additional insights into client company plans; reports are (generally) received too late and are therefore too dated to be of any real value.

DAs were asked whether they remained in contact with the client during the course of the involvement with the Mentor Network and 30 percent said the always remained in contact, 50 percent said usually and 20 percent said occasionally.

They were also asked what they thought were the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Mentor Network. The strengths cited by DAs included:

- the breadth of experience and skills of the mentor panel (21 DAs);
- the support given to clients (15 DAs);

- good tool/resource for DAs/Enterprise Ireland (13 DAs); and
- good value (5 DAs).

The weaknesses suggested by the DAs were much more varied. Weaknesses were perceived to be:

- shortcomings in the mentor panel in quality and scope (11 DAs);
- DAs don't know Mentors/no interaction (10 DAs);
- issues with the matching process (5 DAs); and
- reporting/feedback (5 DAs).

Other weaknesses suggested by more than one DA were: the format of the assignment; issues with mentors' 'style of working'; clients' expectations and commitment; mentors' knowledge of Enterprise Ireland services; and mentors not being used widely enough.

On average, DAs felt that around 66 percent of their clients benefited from their involvement in the Mentor Network. When asked how effective the clients' involvement in the Mentor Network was in terms of enabling them and their businesses to develop, 16 percent (7 DAs) said very effective and 71 percent (32 DAs) said quite effective. The remainder (13 percent, 6 DAs) said not very effective. Those who felt it was less effective cited poor matching, something the client felt they had to endure, and that the activity often happens in isolation.

That said, DAs felt that, on average, 70 percent of their clients were satisfied with their involvement in the Mentor Network.

### Suggestions for improvement

Suggestions for improvement given by DAs were around the following recommendations:

- improve DAs' knowledge of mentors/Mentor Network and interaction between DAs, mentors and Coordinators (8 DAs);
- improve the mentor panel (7 DAs);
- improvements to the matching process (4 DAs); and
- improved communication regarding the assignment (4 DAs).

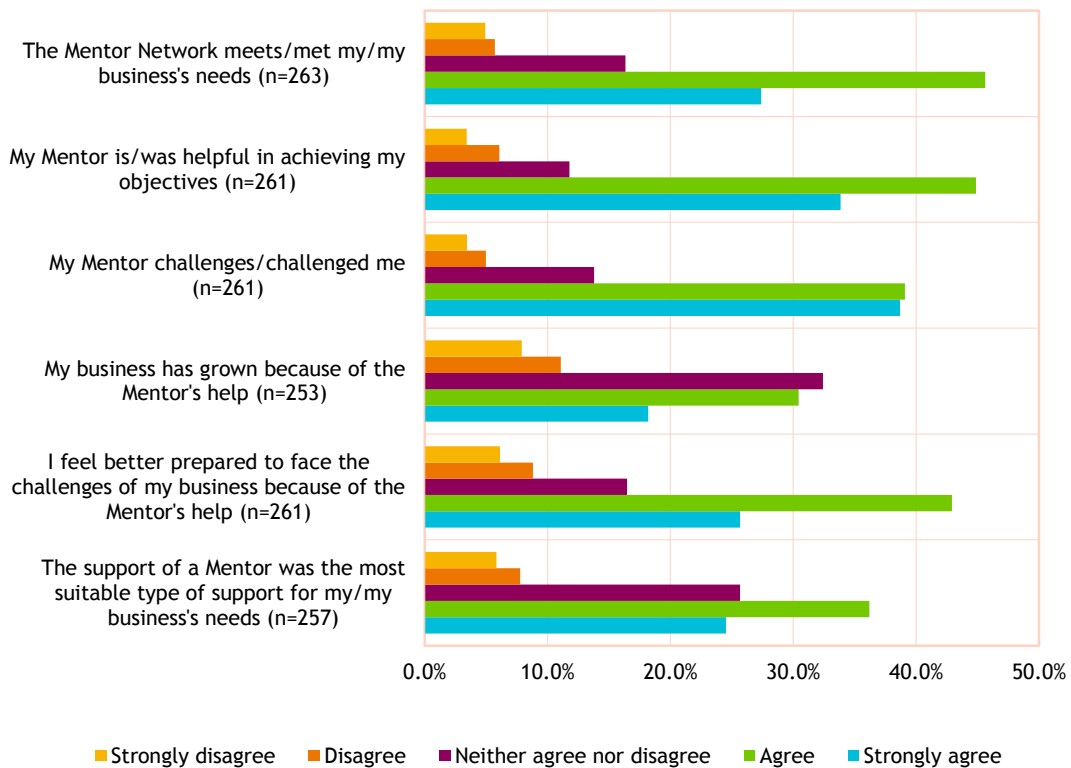
## Impacts and outcomes

### Overall impact

Clients were asked to reflect on their overall impressions of the Mentor Network by stating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements. Those who answered 'don't know' have been excluded from the following results.

The statement receiving the highest level of support was 'My mentor is/was helpful in achieving my objectives' with 78 percent (207 clients) agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. This was closely followed by 'My mentor challenges/challenged me' with 77 percent (203 clients) agreeing or strongly agreeing. The statement with least support was 'My business has grown because of the Mentor's help' where 47 percent (123 clients) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The results are shown in Figure 8.12.

**Figure 8.12:** For each of the following statements, please state the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of them



Source: Company survey

Examination of the differences between Enterprise Ireland classifications showed the following:

- **HPSU clients were more likely to disagree** with the statements ‘The Mentor Network met my business needs’ and ‘My mentor was helpful in achieving my objectives’, compared to other groups;
- **Established clients were more likely to disagree** with the statement ‘My business has grown because of the Mentor’s help’ and **pre-HPSU were more likely to agree** with the statement; and
- **Pre-HPSU clients were less likely to disagree and more likely to be neutral** about the statements ‘I feel better prepared to face the challenges of my business because of the Mentor’s help’ and ‘The support of a Mentor was the most suitable type of support for my business’s needs’.

**Making a difference to the business**

Respondents were asked a broad question about whether they felt the help of the Mentor had made a difference to their business. Of those who expressed an opinion, 64 percent (172 clients) agreed the Mentor had made a difference, 14 percent (38 clients) felt the Mentor had not made a difference, and 21 percent, (57 clients) felt it was too early to say. Established clients were most likely to say ‘yes’ to this question (77 percent, 20 clients) and CEB clients were least likely (52

percent, 15 clients). CEB clients were most likely to respond 'don't know yet' (34 percent, 10 clients).

Many of those who were positive about the difference made by the mentor mentioned a wide variety of benefits, including the following:

- giving focus;
- recommended or introduced contacts;
- provided a sounding board or impartial ear;
- changed client's approach or strategy;
- gave real life expertise/experience, a practical approach;
- gave client more confidence; and
- improved client's skills or knowledge.

These sentiments were endorsed by some of the clients interviewed by telephone. Over three quarters of these clients felt the mentoring support had been useful to themselves or the business in some way. Two clients felt it was too early to say and the remainder felt it was not useful.

When questioned about the impact on their business, the following themes emerged:

- the impact was to do with focus and pace - helping the business move on/develop quicker than it would have done (14 clients);
- mentor challenged them, expanded their horizons and provided support/confidence (11 clients); and
- opened up new markets (5 clients).

### Quantifying impact

Clients responding to the online survey were asked if, where the mentor had made a difference to their business, they could quantify this impact. The majority (104 clients) who responded were unable to quantify the impact but expressed it in more qualitative terms, 43 clients felt it was too early to say, 21 were able to quantify the benefit of mentoring.

The quantified impact was mainly around business growth, e.g. money and/or people, rather than business efficiency, e.g. cost or time saving. Clients who did so quantified the impact in the following terms:

- 6 expressed absolute increases in turnover (up to €100k);
- 5 cited increases in the numbers of people employed in the firm (up to 10 people);
- 4 expressed percentage increases in turnover (up to 100 percent);
- 2 cited export growth (up to a four-fold increase as a proportion of sales);
- 2 cited cost savings (up to €50k);
- 1 cited secured funding (€500k); and
- 1 cited time saving (6 months).

### Return on investment

Clients interviewed by telephone were asked about the rate of return on their investment, perceived mainly to be in terms of their time. From those who were able to talk about return on investment the following emerged.

- 19 clients gave an enthusiastic response, return on investment was high;
- 2 clients said there was a modest return;
- 2 said it was difficult to say;
- 9 said it was too early in the process; and
- 8 said there was no or a poor return.

Some of the more recurring sentiments shared by those responding to the online survey, who felt the mentor support had **not** made a difference to them or their business could be grouped into the following themes:

- business has not progressed/no difference made (6 clients);
- lack of appropriate knowledge/skills/understanding (5 clients); and
- mentor did not engage with business (5 clients).

### Giving feedback on the assignment

Those who had completed at least one assignment were asked if they had given feedback to anyone on that assignment - 39 percent (78 clients) of clients who could remember whether or not they had given feedback had not done so, whether because they weren't asked to or did not want to; 35 percent (59 clients) had given feedback to their mentor; 21 percent (35 clients) to their DA; and 15 percent (26 clients) to their coordinator.

### Any other support

Clients were asked about any other support from Enterprise Ireland which would have been more suitable, many clients mentioned funding, whether from grants, loans, or seed funding. Others mentioned access to contacts or networks. Several clients mentioned very specific support, examples of which are licensing or patent applications, legal assistance, or NHS experts.

## International practice

Many developed economies have formal mentoring programmes as part of their business support recipes. It is widely practiced. There are many different designs of mentoring programmes in evidence, indicating that there is no one best way to configure and manage mentoring support and that programmes are context-specific.

Accepting the definitional challenge, in practice business mentoring programmes around the world seek to set and maintain service standards and service consistency by establishing criteria for the recruitment of new mentors. There is also consideration of training for mentors and in some cases the accreditation of mentors, written service standards and practice guidelines, pro-formas for



programme administration and mechanisms to derive feedback from individual clients and mentors.<sup>3</sup>

In other countries, there is a greater preponderance of business mentoring programmes which depend on unpaid mentors than exists in Ireland. Programmes around the world vary in style (for example duration, number of meetings, whether stand-alone or part of a broader business support offer) but the predominant delivery style remains one-to-one, face-to-face. While still a valid and essential component of the mix, the traditional business mentoring model is being extended and broadened into different models.<sup>4</sup> These include peer to peer, web-enabled/un-brokered, 'reverse mentoring', speed mentoring/bootcamp, and group-based approaches.<sup>5</sup> In web-based approaches, business clients have a more direct say in their choice of mentor, being guided by web-based diagnostics to help them determine the fundamental challenge their business faces.

Internationally, business mentoring is capably applied to businesses at the pre-start/start-up phase and to established businesses, with widely varying levels of penetration. Data from countries with established national mentoring programmes suggest that mentoring is mostly focused on start-ups (in terms of sector penetration). For example, in the UK, approximately 11 percent of SMEs aged 0-3 years have used a mentor in the previous 12 months, compared to 5 percent of SMEs aged 4-10 years and 4 percent of SMEs 10 years and older.<sup>6</sup> It is believed there are three reasons for this trend:

- the first is about awareness of provision and businesses not knowing such services exist.
- the second (and believed to be more challenging) is the degree to which potential business clients are 'ready' for mentoring:
  - research shows that micro/small businesses display characteristics such as the distrust of external advice (and the motives of the advisers), concerns around the loss of face and personal insecurity, and also scepticism of the value of such help to their business; and
  - there are also questions about business clients ability to 'self-diagnose' and accurately identify the fundamental challenges their businesses face are echoed by mentoring programmes around the world.
- the third is that it is difficult for a single programme to be 'all things to all people', based around one engagement model. Some businesses will favour different modes of engagement and desired benefits, such as a geographical and/or sector focus, which a national programme may not be perceived to offer.

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<sup>3</sup> The Get Mentoring programme in the UK sought to recruit unpaid mentors from the business community and encourage each to undertake a short mentoring skills training session (delivered face to face and online) which was examined. Many mentoring programme seek to develop service consistency

<sup>4</sup> Evaluation of Enterprise Ireland Mentoring Programme pg. 44, FMR Research, (2012)

<sup>5</sup> In reverse mentoring, the mentor has more knowledge in a particular area. However, the mentee has more overall experience (typically as a result of age) than the mentor (who is typically younger), thereby reversing the typical configuration. Examples are when ICT graduates train experienced executives in realising the benefits of social media or mobile technology

<sup>6</sup> Demand for Mentoring Among SMEs, UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (December 2013) Research Paper No. 158

Many mentoring programmes around the world have been independently evaluated, including an extensive review of over a hundred studies and evaluations on mentoring.<sup>7</sup> The evaluations point to the conclusion there is no single best design for a business mentoring programme and effective mentoring solutions are context specific. However there are some consistent themes that emerge from the independent evaluations - the main four of which appear below:

- first, the economic value of business mentoring is difficult to quantify. The two main challenges are the lack of objective data and, where data exist, the difficulty of asserting the attribution of quantifiable business benefits back to mentoring interventions;
- second, the general findings from the evaluations indicate that mentoring for businesses is beneficial and that an integrated approach - mentoring as part of a broader business development programme - is even more beneficial;
- third, and related to the above, is the recognition that 'good' mentoring is more useful than 'more' mentoring. Enthusiasm to extend the scope of mentoring programmes should be tempered by a reflection on the quality and competence of the mentors and the knowledge that raising the quality of the service is likely to be more valuable to clients; and
- fourth, the primary impacts are that businesses speed up the pace by which they accomplish things and they have increased focus and confidence about their future.

Studies do not generally find unintended effects. For example, while concerns have been raised about negative impacts of publicly-supported technology advisory services on private consultants, the studies that have examined this do not find such effects. Indeed, it is noted that private consultants are often engaged by public technology advisory services allowing them to serve and market to SMEs that would not otherwise have employed their services.

The available evidence for the benefits of mentoring programmes highlights the generally positive contribution made by mentoring support to participating firms, with much evidence to support positive outcomes across a range of tangible and intangible aspects of business performance, including management capacity and innovation performance.

However, there is less evidence of impact in terms of jobs creation, sales benefits, profits, export performance, and contribution to Gross Value Added. This lack of impact evidence is partly due to the challenges of measuring impacts in the context of mentoring programmes and also the relatively few studies which assess these indicators. However, where available, evidence of impact (in terms of sales, jobs etc.) is also positive, and supports the prevailing view that mentoring is a potentially significant contributor to business growth and economic development.

## Conclusions and findings

### Appropriateness

The Mentor Network appears an appropriate business support programme. It is grounded in national policy documents, in line with international best practice and with and Enterprise Ireland's own strategy.

The Mentor Network is well developed, having been refined over the years, and its continued growth (in terms of the numbers of assignments completed per year) endorses its appeal to the

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<sup>7</sup> The Benefits of Mentoring: A literature review for East Mentor's Forum, Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, Garvey, B. and Garrett-Harris, R.(2008)

target business community. The development of the Mentor Network has also seen the creation of performance standards and targets for its operation, to help ensure a consistent client experience despite the scale of the provision.

In addition, the client feedback from the programme is high. As reported earlier, 82 percent of clients responding to the online survey within this evaluation felt the Mentor Network met their business need and 79 percent of clients responding felt the mentor was helpful in achieving their business objectives. In terms of conduct of the mentor, 77 percent of clients responding felt the mentor challenged them. 59 percent of clients responding said the support of a mentor was the most suitable type of support for their business' needs.

### Synergies and overlap

The main synergies around the Mentor Network relate to its integration with other Enterprise Ireland programmes. It functions well as a stand-alone service for Enterprise Ireland clients and also as an integrated component for other Enterprise Ireland programmes (for example, for first-time exporters or for HPSUs). These synergies provide both flexibility of service provision without detracting from the scale economies of operating the Mentor Network.

There are areas of connection with other mentoring provision in Ireland, particularly the mentoring services provided by the City and County Enterprise Boards (CCEBs). Some mentors are part of both networks and it can be reasonably assumed that mentor skills development (for example) that Enterprise Ireland provides to its mentors will have a positive impact on mentoring practice by these mentors in other mentoring programmes. Enterprise Ireland has also worked with the CCEBs in the refinement of the CCEBs mentoring programmes.

There might be the opportunity for the Mentor Network and the CCEBs to strengthen the overall approach and restrict overlaps and inefficiencies. The recent review of business mentoring in Ireland (conducted by Forfás) recommends the establishment of a single mentor pool across State funded mentoring providers. This would potentially enhance access to specialist mentoring experience (which might not be known to all mentoring programme managers/coordinators) at the same time a taking away the cost duplication of running more than one mentor panel for State funded business mentors.

### Efficiency

The most recent annual data (2012) for the Mentor Network shows that mentors were appointed to 490 assignments at a total cost of €1.021million (direct and indirect costs). Accepting there will be a degree of difference between the points at which mentors are appointed and costs incurred (and accounted for), the data indicate a cost per client for the mentoring provision of just over €2,000 per client.

### Effectiveness

This evaluation has mentioned the prevailing outcome and impact data are qualitative. This is a characteristic seen in the evaluation of business mentoring programmes generally, and not necessarily a deficiency in the Enterprise Ireland approach. Mentoring, as a soft support, can be hampered by difficulties in attributing client outcomes to specific mentoring inputs. That said, further work around the exploration and development of appropriate outcome and impact measures by Enterprise Ireland is recommended. An approach to achieving this is set out in the Forfás review of business mentoring in Ireland.

The qualitative data in this evaluation point to a service which, overall, demonstrates positive impacts in the eyes of its clients. 64 percent of clients responding to the online survey felt mentoring had made a difference to their business and 46 percent said their business has grown quicker because of mentor help. 67 percent of clients responding said they felt better prepared to face challenges because of the mentor's help. And from the internal Enterprise Ireland perspective, 87 percent of DAs responding to the online survey felt mentoring was effective in enabling Enterprise Ireland clients and their businesses to develop and in 66 percent of cases, DAs responding felt their clients benefitted from their involvement in the Mentor Network.

The strategic challenge facing the Mentor Network is how to extend the service to a demanding and varied client base, using a diverse mentor pool, at the same time as strengthening communications and management of the service and creating greater consistency.

### Recommendations

A detailed list of recommendations was provided to Enterprise Ireland on foot of the report provided by FMR Research in 2012. Many of these have been progressed by Enterprise Ireland in order to standardise the processes and enhance the mentor service offering. A synopsis is provided below.

#### Clarify and enhance the mentor service offering

- define what is meant by 'mentoring' for businesses and clearly articulate how the mentor network service contributes to delivering on Enterprise Ireland's strategic objectives;
- set out how mentoring fits with other Enterprise Ireland services/products (especially when mentoring is part of that offer), so this is clear to all stakeholders from the outset; and
- pilot other forms of mentoring, capable of using mentors in less-intensive modes than a five or ten meeting assignment. This might include advisory boards, mentoring clinics, e-mentoring etc., and promote the greater use of technologically enabled media in mentoring assignments, such as Skype, sharing desktops Webex, email etc.

#### Development of the mentor pool

- continuously review and refresh the mentor pool, and recruit new mentors to fill gaps in skills areas/experience and also to replace mentors unwilling to carry on; and
- provide guidance and training to mentors informed by (a revised) Best Practice Guide and Code of Conduct and reenergise the Mentor Network LinkedIn group to enhance shared learning and support.

#### Administration and management of the Mentor Network

- improve the coordinator service and management processes, informed by standardised codes of practice, enhanced software solutions for contact management and standardised approaches regarding reporting and feedback; and
- re-engage with the CEB structure/staff in respect of the role of the Mentor Network with their clients.

### Mentoring assignments

- strengthen the focus of mentoring assignments on the client's quantifiable business objectives and seek to clarify these early in an assignment;
- strengthen the Mentor Network's terms of reference sent to clients in advance of an assignment, to help clarify expectations at the start of an assignment so that clients have a better understanding of what mentoring can offer (and what it does not cover) prior to starting an assignment; and
- reinforce and standardise the action planning process post-meeting for mentors and clients, with the expectation that actions for the client are agreed by client and mentor and written down. Create stronger guidance in the Best Practice Guide to that effect.

