

# Swedish mentors for Immigrant Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

The Swedish ALMI Business Partner is a governmental organization that helps companies to develop and grow and is also encouraging new kinds of innovative ideas in order to help renewing Swedish business life. In 2006 they started a mentorship program for immigrants who have started businesses. Entrepreneurs with a foreign background get a mentor with long experience of the Swedish business life in order to help them develop their businesses and to get access to the relevant Swedish business contacts and circles. Another aspect is that the Swedish government hopes that the mentor program will help with integration. This is a study of how the mentoring program is perceived by the entrepreneurs. Two hour long interviews with ten entrepreneurs' show that the mentor program is appreciated by the participants. However, there are some problematic issues. All immigrants are treated in the same way although they have very different backgrounds and prerequisites, meaning that they have very different possibilities to actually benefit from the program. The people from outside of Europe do not as easily understand what kind of mentor to ask for or what they will get. The impact of cultural differences is ignored. Moreover, a mentorship where a person born in Sweden is mentoring a person born in another country cements the norm and prejudice that the Swedish way is the only right way, rather than renewing the Swedish businesses. One suggested solution to this problem is to start an additional mentor program where the foreign entrepreneurs' works as mentors for Swedish business people hoping to do business abroad.

# Introduction

## *"Mentors in the role of Protégés"*

The picture of immigrants mediated via newspapers and television is often negative in Sweden. Reports about attacks against the police and fire brigade, segregation and marginalization are quite common and it is in general the problems that are highlighted and discussed, rather than any positive issues. This study shows a somewhat different picture. It is a study of entrepreneurs who have immigrated to Sweden and who are currently participating as protégés, or mentees, in a government sponsored mentoring program run by *Almi Företagsparterner*. These businessmen and women are amazing people with an attitude that should inspire us all. In many ways, it is *they* that should be the mentors.

It is generally more common to run a business among people born abroad compared with those people born in Sweden. Every ninth foreign-born and one in ten Swedish born is running a company (NUTEK, 2007a). But in order to develop a successful business in Sweden, it is good to have knowledge of how the Swedish business life works and to have access to the right networks. This is something that foreign-born entrepreneurs often lack. *Almi företagspartner* has therefore mandated by *Tillväxtverket (the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth)* started a mentoring program in which they employ the services of a Swedish-born mentor to learn more about Swedish business culture and markets.

The reasons why these immigrants have started their businesses are many; some seem to be "born" entrepreneurs, while others are more or less forced to become business men. They have troubles getting work in Sweden despite high education; they are often discriminated (NUTEK, 2007b). As businessmen they are sometimes discriminated too, but they do not complain, and they do not see the discrimination as a personal thing, instead they tend to treat it as an inevitable "Fact of Life".

Various recommendations and tools in design and implementation of mentoring programs have been discussed extensively in both the popular press and research journals. These recommendations have rarely been studied empirically (Allen, Eby, and Lentz 2006; Young and Perrewé 2000). This study is just such an empirical study of a mentoring program.

The study is based on in-depth-interviews with 10 pupils and examines how the mentoring program has been perceived by the foreign-born entrepreneurs. It is no proper evaluation of the program and its results after the events, but more an examination of how the program is perceived by the mentees, while it is still ongoing. The mentee's needs hopes and dreams for the future are also discussed. The contact with Almi and with the mentors helps with developing business ideas to better suit the Swedish market, and perhaps most important of all, reduces the loneliness that comes with working alone. Thus the mentoring program is a success. The seminars and meetings held by Almi are also appreciated, however there are, as we soon will see, also problems.

The study concludes with recommendations on what to do in the future in order to help the integration via the mentoring programs.

## About the mentoring program

Mentor program has become very popular around the world the last 10-20 years. In Sweden, this type of activity started in 2006 through a pilot project in Örebro, where 50 mentoring pairs were launched. Since then, approximately 1000 additional mentoring pairs have been launched around the country.

This study examined a mentoring program that was started by Almi on behalf of the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Tillväxtverket). Almi advertises for participants through the press and through municipal websites, and entrepreneurs register their interest and is then examined on the basis of the requirements. The requirements to participate in this program are that the owner must have a foreign background and the entrepreneurs, or in other words, “mentees”, must have been in business for 2-7 years. Moreover, the company must be run as main occupation, and the mentee should be ready to develop the business further. The entrepreneurs are interviewed where their motivation and willingness to develop their activities is ensured. The entrepreneur is also assessed along their commitment and ability to devote time. The mentee may then wish for what kind of qualification the mentor must have, such as lawyer, banker, business developer and coach. Thus the choice of mentor depends partly on what the entrepreneur wants, but it is *Almi* that finally matches up the pairs. The intention is that the mentor should give the adept advice, tips and support, and valuable contacts, however, the mentor provides the services for free so it is up to the mentee to maintain contact. Usually the pair tries to meet about once a month.

Almi's mentoring program is very ambitious and well-founded. The program is based on research and has been inspired by other mentoring programs around the world - in Finland, Denmark, England, Scotland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Wikholm, Henningsson and Hultman 2007).

According Almi mentoring program should:

- allow individuals to feel they have influence over the matching process
- give the feeling that the program is voluntary (which it is)
- ensure that the pairs meet frequently
- carefully analyze the players and their skills to provide for maximum learning
- offer training programs before mentoring begins where you go through goals, clarify responsibilities and establish mutual expectations of the mentoring process.

Almi also offer the mentor and mentee a notebook that includes an action plan for business, consisting of various strategic and tactical actions. It lists the usual business activities, such as goals and objectives, situation analysis, business intelligence and desirable outcomes, etc. The mentees are expected to be the main driving force of the relationship and are therefore

expected to come prepared with questions for the meeting with the mentor. The mentor is only expected to give passive feedback.

According to Almi's philosophy, it is important never to serve ready-made solutions but rather to help the mentees see their own needs and to work with them (Almi, Annual Report, 2008, p. 28). Thus, the mentor's role is merely to support the mentees' own ability to both identify the problems and find the right solutions. This view and approach is similar to what has emerged as important in the research on mentoring. It is generally considered that the role of the mentor is to ask the right *questions* rather than giving the right answers (Ortiz-Walters, R. 2009). However, this way of looking at help is considered to be vague and imprecise and difficult to understand according to some of the mentees in this study.

## What is studied?

This study focuses primarily on Almi's activities and the mentoring program's role when it comes to businesses' development and growth. There are several different growth strategies and measurement: turnover, value of assets, value added, number of employees and volume (produced/sold), increased market penetration, diversification (Ahlström Söderling 2006). However, the main focus is the general perception of the mentoring program from the perspective of the mentees. This means that those accounting figures are not studied here, by "growth" we mean increased sales/marketing, development and extension of the business (diversification) that may require hiring of staff, as communicated by the mentees *own words*. This means that the focus is on their stories rather than on the financial facts of their companies. The investigation is also a study of the foreign-born entrepreneurs' needs, expectations, experience and reception of the mentoring relationship, something that has not been studied so often (Ortiz-Walters, 2009). Moreover, in the mentoring program there is also an aspect of integration, that is to say, there is a hope that the mentoring relationships will increase the understanding between the foreign-born immigrants and the Swedish-born people in general. This issue will be addressed with respect to the mentoring program in the final section of this paper.

Research on mentoring has typically focused on the concrete results *afterwards* in terms of what mentees have learned, how they have evolved and what they got out of mentoring, rather than on studying the relationship as it is going on and as it is being perceived (Ortiz-Walters 2009; Apospori E., I., and Nikandrou L. Panayotopoulou, 2006; Allen, Eby, and Lentz 2006; Young and Perrewé 2000). Mentors are believed to contribute to two main areas: development of a career, and psycho-social assistance, where the career assistance consists of coaching and challenging tasks, while the psycho-social assistance includes assistance as personal counseling and social networking (Young and Perrewé 2000, p. 613). However, it is often unclear exactly *what* the result of the mentor contact really is because the results often manifest themselves only after a long period (Ortiz-Walters, 2009, p. 40). It is also difficult to safely be able to establish causality in economic terms. This is because the relationship between a mentor and a mentee is characterized by numerous *informal* elements such as mental support and informal networking.

The results of the in-depth interviews in this study shows that it is precisely the effectiveness and usefulness of the mentoring program which is questioned by some of the mentees. This does *not* mean that a mentor program is worthless, but that the value of a mentoring program – similar to the value of all types of education – often becomes apparent much later (Ortiz-Walters, 2009). The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is similar to the relationship between a teacher and a student, and the direct *benefit* of higher education is not always obvious. Education is recognized as good and useful, although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how. You should keep this in mind and look at Almi's various activities including the mentoring program in the same way: that the meeting itself – the contact between a Swedish-born mentor and a foreign-born entrepreneur – is likely to be valuable in many different and perhaps unexpected ways, as it provides a new experience that surely means learning for both parties.

### *Classification Problem*

There is a classification problem when it comes to naming the heterogeneous group of people who are foreign-born entrepreneurs (NUTEK 2007b). NUTEK's studies emphasized the need to see the immigrants as individuals with unique needs and problems. The category "immigrant" is a particularly diverse group of people, not only in the case of first or second generation immigrants, but also with regard to their different regional origin (NUTEK 2007b, p. 19). NUTEK states: "To draw general conclusions for this group is in practice almost impossible." (NUTEK 2007b, p. 35). This corresponds with our experience - great heterogeneity has turned out to be the case also in this study.

The differences, however, depends partly on which continent mentees comes from. Although it is difficult to make general statements and categorizing all people you can, at an aggregated level, still discern some general differences among the world's peoples and cultures (Markus and Kitayama 1991). This is because they grow up in a more or less common culture with common societal norms (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Categorizations of people based on the home country can - despite all the heterogeneity - help us to highlight and explain some more general phenomena and problems found in this study.

Hofstede's famous model of the world's different cultures shows that the western world, with the U.S. in the lead, idealizes individuality, autonomy and independence. People in the northern parts of Europe are according to Hofstede's model quite individualistic people, unlike people in many countries in Asia and South America that first and foremost see themselves as part of a collective, and where the individual is subordinate to the collective will (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The categorization corresponds with that which emerged in my interviews with the foreign-born entrepreneurs. It is clear that the *European* mentees had a completely different view of Almi's activities and of the mentoring program as compared to the overseas mentees. This is a problem that Almi should take into account and act upon. The assumption also helps us, as we will see, to understand why some of the mentoring relationship did not work so well. Finally, I choose to call these entrepreneurs "foreign-born entrepreneurs", a name which also occurs in other Swedish studies.

## *In-Depth Interviews*

The method is essentially depth interviews. By this type of interview is usually meant a type of psycho-dynamically oriented interviews or interviews that are semi-structured or fairly unstructured (Bryman 2002). The interviews are often in the form of deep conversation.

Alvesson (2003) discusses what he calls a “romantic” approach by which means that the researcher, through empathy and understanding of the respondent’s situation, is trying to build *trust* so that the interviewee dares to open up and share their hidden or actual thoughts, ideas, intentions and desires. The aim of the interviews are, therefore, that by turning on the ability to interpret, reinterpret and reason about their own thoughts and views the interviewee is transformed from an “empty cup” of superficial views and motives to a reliable core of knowledge (Alvesson 2003).

This is something we have tried to achieve. The goal has been to make the mentee feel that he or she can be perfectly honest. The “romantic” researcher is looking for closeness and tries to get away from the hierarchical notions. The approach abandons therefore the traditional ambition of staying distant, impersonal and “objective” in order to avoid affecting the interviewee to instead devote himself to “real, honest and healthy conversation between equals, where both give and take and seek to understand each other” (Alvesson 2003, p. 94). The interview is partly guided by what comes up in conversation. However, it is the researcher who set the overall framework and guidance questions.

There are according to Alvesson (2003) at least three different problems in an interview situation: the researcher’s intentions and expectations, the person that is being interviewed and the social situation. These factors can lead to the situation that the researcher gets only the response he or she desired, that the interview is tendentious. Qualitatively and interpretation oriented researchers tend, however, regard this type of interview method (interview) to be the least controlling and manipulative method (Holme and Solvang 1997), something we agree with. Depth interview is considered to be contrary to the predetermined questionnaire where the questions are strictly defined in advance and are the same for all. In these cases the researcher lacks the ability to follow up answers with further clarifications and explanations. This survey method means that misunderstandings can occur and that objectivity therefore cannot be ensured. Holme and Solvang (1997, p. 99) likens the problem with the case of forcing all people to wear the same shoe size, whether it fits or not.

We talked for two hours with each person. Besides interviews, we conducted two telephone interviews, which took about 60 minutes each. We had some pre-determined themes: mentoring program, the mentees’ background and the reason they started business, their aspirations and needs, and their view on risk taking and growth. We made sure those topics were dwelt upon, but there was room for the interviewee to express also what he or she wanted. The respondents were able to reason their way, change their minds and really think about what she or he knew and felt. The latter was important because it often takes time to figure out what one really means. Since the respondents could express themselves openly and freely there was allowed a high degree of flexibility. Sometimes “the talks” was broaden

out and slipped over in discussions about how it is to live in Sweden. Because of this open and flexible method another interesting theme was raised: the participants' *expectations* of the mentoring program and the mentor relationship.

We have chosen to present the empirical results and the research available under the different relevant themes stated above. They also follow what came up during the interviews. The structure of the text follows, therefore, both the pre-defined themes, and the themes generated through empirical data.

### *Selection*

The selection of the mentees of this study was done as follows. Almi contacted a number of pupils and asked if they were willing to participate in the survey. Then we got a list of 18 names located throughout Sweden, from Malmö to Dalarna, to contact.

we e-mailed and / or telephoned them all and booked time for the interview with the first 10 people who said they wanted to participate. Geographically we prioritized to first contact those who work and live in Mälardalen because we are located in Stockholm ourselves, but we also included people from Skåne. One person declined.

For the sake of the mentees, we have chosen to let them stay anonymous. Many of them did not want their comments and complaints to be linked to them. So that they could be completely honest, we hid their identity. The mentees are instead divided into the country or region of origin, approximate age and education.

The activities are of several different kinds. Some companies are cleaning companies, others are operating in the industry, and some are consultants. One was involved in IT-development, others worked with Health & Garden, Design, Travel and Import. Companies whose business was less qualified had more employees, approximately 5-10 people, than the companies that deal with specialist knowledge. The latter were either solo business or had one or two employees, or alternatively consisted of one or two partners. The respondents are presented below.

- A man from Serbia, age 50-60 years. Qualified education at university level. Double degrees, one degree from his home country and one from Sweden.
- A man from Turkey, age 20-30 years. Qualified education at University level.
- A man from England, 30-40 years. Qualified education at University level.
- A woman from China, 20-30 years. Qualified education at university level. Double degrees, one degree from their home country and one from Sweden.
- A woman from Iraq, 20-30 years. Lower education.
- A woman from China, 30-40 years. Qualified education at University level.
- A woman from Finland, 30 - 40 years. Qualified education at University level. Dual education in Sweden.
- A woman from Brazil, 40-50 years. Lower education.
- A man from the Middle East, 40-50 years. Qualified education.

- A woman from Poland, 40-50 years. Qualified education. Several additional courses of various kinds.

## Study Results

### *The value of having someone to talk to*

We have decided to show the bulk of the research on mentoring in conjunction with the presentation of empirical data and conclusions. This is because the research helps to illuminate and explain the empirical results in this study.

The mentees were at different stages in the mentoring program. Some had only had three, four meetings in as many months while others had been in the program for at least eight to ten months. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the mentoring program, because it is too early to demonstrate any tangible economic results. It is also certainly too early to comment on which and how many of these companies may grow thanks to the mentoring program. But as stated earlier, we can already ascertain valuable effects, and also some problems.

According to Almi, a small business in recession is “very lonely. The possibility of having a mentor as a sounding board is invaluable” (Almi, Annual Report 2008, p. 40). The results of the interviews show that the mentees really appreciate having someone to talk about their business with. Loneliness is something that is widely recognized as difficult and the possibility to have someone to share that burden with and to get new perspective on their activities is something that is greatly appreciated. Three of the mentees wanted a more informal and open relationship with their mentor, and more support. In cases where the mentees were satisfied with their mentor, they had such a good relationship, the mentor had also acted as support on a personal level. One of the adapters put it this way:

*It's incredible, it's like speaking to a psychologist, it is incredibly nice to talk about ones business with another person who is interested.*

The Polish mentee believes that all solo entrepreneurs suffer from a bit of solitude, and here the mentor can be very helpful. Her mentor is also an solo entrepreneur and she believes the benefit is mutual. *It is wonderful to have someone to talk to; we exchange valuable ideas. We have great help from each other.*

Mentor program is great according to her. During Almi's mingle meetings she noticed that the mentor is a kind of security:

*Just the fact that there are mentors encourages people to start businesses. It's good to know that you are not completely alone, and that you get mental help. Otherwise, you may not start a business.*

So the fact that Sweden is actually offering mentors, that you are not completely alone, may be that deciding factor that gives the courage to start your own businesses. This is probably one of the mentoring program's great values.

However, another mentee thinks that Almi and other governmental agencies are fooling people to start businesses, making it out as if it is easier than it is. She said that many gets encouraged and tricked by the various courses given by the Swedish government; that they do not know what they get themselves into, and that they fail and end up having to go to social services. Another mentee said that only two out of ten people participating in Almi's courses are really interested in starting companies, and that the rest of them are only there to get the state money. The question is who is right? Perhaps all of them.

In the three cases in which the mentoring relationship had not worked the mentee had experienced a lack of interest and commitment from the mentor's side. One of the women expressed it as:

*He is not interested in my business, I see really no interest.*

According to this mentee, the mentor did not want a *relationship*; he only wanted to give answers to very specific questions within his field of expertise. She had asked for a mentor with knowledge in business law, but had realized that she wanted more, and something else, than he could offer. She did not quite understand what he was talking about, and felt that they were not speaking the same language. She felt that she did not get anything out of her mentor, and that she did not want anymore contact with him.

Many of the mentees wanted to get access to informal business contacts and networks, rather than simply discuss the company's business plan and economic figures. The fact that the more "informal elements" is significant in a mentoring relationship is also shown in previous research which distinguishes the two main types of mentoring: formal and informal mentoring (Allen, Eby, and Lentz, 2006). Mentoring will usually mean that you build relationships *outside* mentor - / mentee relationship (Apospori E, et al, 2006, p. 522). The studies show that formal programs are better than no mentoring at all, but that they are still not quite as "effective" as informal mentoring relationships (Allen, Eby, and Lentz, 2006).

During informal mentoring, the actors are looking each other up spontaneously on the basis of approval, identification and attraction. Formal mentoring means that the match between mentor and mentee are made by a third party, such as the employer, and in this case, Almi företagspartner, which means that it's harder to get the mutual attraction (Allen, Eby, and Lentz, 2006). A recommendation is therefore that even in formal programs try to establish more informal elements, which Almi trying to do in the form of "mingling meetings" where the prospective couples meet each other and other mentoring pair. In the same time, it is the informal element that makes it so difficult to clearly measure the economic performance and the value of a mentor program.

There are a number of criteria for good mentoring (Ortiz-Walters, R. 2009):

- A mentor should ask questions rather than providing answers.

- Successful mentoring involves a dialogue where *both* parties learn something of importance.
- Mentoring requires that both parties approach the relationship as “beginners”, both must be open and determined to learn something new.
- Mentor relationship begins with both parties agreeing on how the relationship will be terminated.

These targets are also present in Almi’s mentoring program.

### *Contested efficiency*

Almi’s philosophy of *not* providing solutions and answers to various problems is something that is not understood or appreciated by all respondents in this study. This applies to the overseas mentees, who generally have been more interested in concrete answers and more effective help.

A complaint was in four cases such that the mentoring relationship so far had not given any *concrete benefits* in addition to the informal social relations. The somewhat dissatisfied mentees came from Asia and the Middle East. These mentees had hoped that through their mentors get access to useful business networks.

One of the Chinese women had a male mentor. She found it problematic that her mentor strictly wanted to follow the template given to them by Almi. It considered objectives, targets, activities, action plan, situation analysis, business intelligence, etc. She had rather hoped to get a foothold in one of the networks that her mentor was part of (financial industry). She wanted to learn how to do in Sweden to get financing, but did not get access, and therefore there were some troubles in the mentoring relationship:

*I have not had access to his business networks because he only wanted to depart from Almi’s model, and it is not what I want. I have sent some papers on my work projects, but ... Perhaps it is a case of communication problems ... and he does not know me so well either.*

The second Chinese woman, who had a female mentor, was also a little dissatisfied with the efficiency because the relationship had not led to any new or valuable business contacts of affairs. But she was still quite happy with her mentor, as they met regularly on a social basis and did fun things together. The mentor had introduced her to some people that she had seen as potentially valuable for mentee’s activity, but so far there had not been so much business value of the mentor contacts. She puts it this way:

*My own mentor is great but she is more like a friend. She does not really match my needs because she does not understand my industry. But the mentor program is good because that relationship, as opposed to a business relationship, is given; there is no stress when I do not have to perform. I know that the mentor is here to help me in any case.*

So, there is some kind of value in the informal aspects although the match was not the best with respect to business efficiency. Four of the mentees said that they really appreciated the help they were getting. One said that his business had become much more focused thanks to the tools offered by Almi and by the mentor. The four mentees who were really satisfied with the *business assistance* were all Europeans.

The Finnish mentee said:

*I've got a lot of tips with the economy and on valuable contacts when I started the shop. And then she has helped me to tighten up some things, some more concrete help. I have had many ideas so it was helpful to see exactly what to go for. I can also send email to her and ask who knows anything about this and that. She has been a great help to me.*

The woman in question had chosen a female coach with a gentle holistic approach. She said she was very careful to make sure she got a professional coach - rather than a "technical expert". She wanted a person who could see the big picture, the great prospects, who could understand her and her company, who could support her privately, and who could also appreciate a more tentative process. The mentee had herself taken the initiative and decided what she needed to talk about and she was able to "talk about everything". They had talked about her life situation; a help that is an example of the valuable informal contacts and talks.

The male mentees from Europe were also very satisfied with their mentors. One had a female mentor who was a great support and a great help in a private and commercial planes.

*I think it has been great to talk through my company. She has also helped me to get balance in life; we have been able to talk about my family, before, I used work too much.*

She had helped him to diversify his company by contacting new companies and recommend him. She had also helped him to write offers. The man was very pleased to get so much help at no cost and tried to go to all seminars given by Almi. He was impressed by how much Sweden does for its people.

### *About growth and risk-taking*

Many start-ups in Sweden is known as a solo enterprise where only self-employed are employed in the business. Two of the three companies have no employees at all, and about 99 percent of all businesses have fewer than 50 employees (Almi, Annual Report 2008). It is known that only a few of these companies grows, and if they grow, they generally grow slowly. Whether a company is growing or not is considered to be due to psychological factors and personality traits of the contractor, and his or her motivations and intentions (Ahlström Söderling 2006). The availability of financial resources is essential for growth. Financial resources, however, is something that is often missing in small businesses. It is well known that it is difficult for SMEs to get funding for their activities. But small businesses are also wary of borrowing money. All this is consistent with that which emerged in the interviews in this study.

The foreign-born entrepreneurs wanted their companies to develop and really believed in their company missions, but they saw growth as something that should come naturally and something that is happening in the long term.

One of the mentees, a woman from Iraq, had a service business with about five employees. She was very energetic and had learned everything from scratch all by herself. She would like to see that her company eventually expanded both regionally and functionally, but said it must happen slowly:

*I am interested in expanding my business and we have tried to expand with offering different services, but I don't know ... it is something that must happen gradually as we can afford it.*

It was not something she prioritized right now; she was more interested in finding out what her *current* customers needed to be able to satisfy them best. When asked what help she would wish that she got from the state if she could choose freely, she replied:

*I would like to know what my customers think and feel, and what they actually need.*

She would like to receive a customer survey conducted and paid for.

She also felt that her company completely stood and fell with her. She wished that it would be a little more “self-reliant”, so that she could delegate more of the work. She was about to train one of her employees to take more responsibility for the overall issues and problems. The mentor had not been of much assistance when it came to increase her sales, she said. She felt that he was too specialized in his field of expertise and was not interested in her or her activities.

Another of the mentees, a man from the Balkans, believed strongly in his business model which focused on environmentally friendly cleaning tools for the industry. He believed in increased sales and really needed to recruit a knowledgeable and skilled salesman, but lacked funds to implement a professional recruitment. He had been fooled once by an employee who was found to have problems, which made him extra cautious. The risks of employing people in Sweden was, in his view a major obstacle for growth. He had only met his mentor three times, but was very happy with him so far. The mentor had long experience of working within the Swedish industry.

One of the mentees from China really wanted her business to grow and believed in her idea to sell the concept of Swedish industrial design in China. She had a part-time employee, but thought it was really hard to find the right people to hire and invest in - according to her, a major obstacle to growth. The man had the right training and could speak the language but he had no experience which meant she had to teach him. That meant she had to invest time and energy on him, while there was a great risk that he found another job, and she must start over.

*He has good qualifications. I would invest in him, but I am not so strong right now and I have to think about the consequences if he finds another job ... then I have to find a new person, so it is not so easy.*

She also tried to use the trainees to get started with the development of her business, but felt that the salary they received by the state was too low for them to want to stay in her company.

*As soon as they get a more well-paid job, they disappear. Now I have an intern, a graduate student. I do not understand how they can survive here in Sweden. They receive SEK 230 per day. It goes without saying that they cannot remain here at my company as an intern when they get so little. If they received more pay by the state, I would be a bit safer.*

The English mentee had a consulting business within a particular area in Sweden. From the beginning, he had not so much a job but instead he took courses in accounting. He worked hard and said he always knew his business would succeed:

*I really believed in my idea and knew that my proposals would be good for the Swedish businesses.*

His biggest customer was a large Swedish company, and his mentor had helped him to find more customers. She had therefore contributed to the company's growth, thanks to her he had succeeded in increasing sales. He was very happy with his mentor, and with the new perspectives he got on his business. He had no staff and felt quite alone in his work. But he would not hire someone; he had bad experiences and saw it as too great a risk. He would rather be equal partners with someone who complimented his specialist competence, and thus expand the business. He pointed out that since we had a good safety net in Sweden it was not particularly risky to start a business.

The Finnish mentee was the only entrepreneur who said that she left a safe profession to pursue her *dream*. She really believed in her business idea, which included health and gardening for rehabilitation. She devoted herself also to gardening planning, had a flower shop and was planning to give courses. She had been very well served by her mentor who helped her business to grow by coming up with good ideas that led to cooperation with other small business owners. She really needed an employee to help with gardening, but found it difficult to get right people. She said:

*It's really easy to start a business in Sweden, but it is difficult to run the company. It is difficult to make money and to hire people. It is a matter of doing the job well. You have to get quality. It is hard to find.*

She wanted the business to grow because she thought we “should live closer to nature for our health’s sake.” She wanted to spread her philosophy of life, but primarily, she merely wanted to make enough to be able to survive on her dream.

The Turkish mentee had already two partners. Their business idea involving services via the Internet, but the business idea was still under development. They had tested and modified the business model several times, and had been forced to reshape the business. The mentor, with a background in sales, had been invaluable when it came to focus its operations on the right things. The mentor had helped him to decide what was commercially viable. The company was currently in a delicate situation; they were faced with an important crossroads and must decide the company’s direction. The times had changed since the dotcom boom, he said - if he had known what he knew now, he had not started the business. He himself

came here from Turkey to study at a Swedish university and had been able to get a job. The reason he started the company, however, was partly that he felt that it was less risky to start their own business than to seek and get a job at a company. The other road, to look for jobs, was more difficult in view of the language. He regretted, however, nothing at all, but thought that he learned an awful lot, not least, he felt that he developed his personality:

*I have become much more social and a much better salesman. Before the start I had not so easy to make contacts with other people, now I'm much better at communicating. This means that you develop.*

Through the mentor and Almi, he had also gained access to a large network and many valuable contacts. He felt he received much help through the Swedish state:

*There are good opportunities in Sweden, you get much support.*

More funding cannot the state provide, we are already doing so much, he thought. But if he could wish for anything, it would be the best help if the state could subsidize the recruitment of people with specialist knowledge, type IT specialists, it was what his company would need.

The Polish adept ran a travel agency from her home. She had various kinds of training and had worked both as an employee and as an entrepreneur in the catering industry. She had also worked with marketing in their previous jobs. She started the travel agency when she lost her previous job, and she had now had a male mentor for about nine months. Unfortunately, her firm had been affected quite heavily by the financial crisis and the recession, which has meant that people spent less money on travel. In addition, there were still many prejudices about Poland as gray and dull, she said, which made the sale “a bit slow right now.” The mentor had a business which he ran solo in a different sector. She really liked her mentor and did not think they needed to be in the same industry for the relationship to be effective, but felt instead that they learned much of their differences. Her mentor had contacts and knew how to get in contact with potential customers, which had been of great benefit. The mentor’s contacts had not led to tangible business yet, but it was also due to the recession, she thought. She thought it was hard to tell if her business would grow, but her mentor through his contacts had tried to help her to make her known to different companies. As a small business, you are cautious about hiring, most entrepreneurs have started as employees and *it takes time to adjust to self-employment and to the business life*, she pointed out with emphasis. The key benefit of mentoring relationship had hitherto been to have someone to talk to, and this was invaluable, she said.

The woman from Brazil was very satisfied with her mentor who had been a big help in her contact with Swedish authorities. She had a service with some 10 employees who she had to lay off because of tax debts. She believed in her business idea but was now forced to cut back on activities. In order to save the business she needed a bank loan. She had sought loans from Almi but was turned down because of her tax debts, and was bitter at the lack of help. This woman was very energetic, and committed to helping their countrymen.

Almi’s IFS Advisers Raymonda Saad says:

*My clients are a powerful force, they like to participate actively in society and not be a burden. They're constantly finding new paths. (Almi, Annual Report 2008, p. 36).*

The above is also my perception of the entrepreneurs I have interviewed. The mentees generally saw no real problems or risk having to start and run a solo business in Sweden. They had the attitude that if it would fail, they would still have learned a lot from doing it. A mentee from the Middle East put it this way:

*I always take risks. But it's that I offer my time and myself. There is no question of borrowing a lot of money and running giant companies; it is my time that I give.*

All of them wished to increase their turnover, and mentoring contacts have led to increased sales in at least three cases, but growth in terms of employment of the staff was something that was considered difficult and risky.

### *Collectivist vision and alternative motives for entrepreneurship*

The Asian and South American mentees were accustomed to a more collectivist view of society, which clearly influenced their views on entrepreneurship. They dreamed of helping other people from their home country that lived in Sweden, rather than just adding all their time at their own companies and its own supply.

One of the Asian mentees was very active in various projects, a real “entrepreneurial spirit”, as Moe and KK-Stiftelsen's definition of the *social entrepreneur*:

*Social Entrepreneurs are everywhere. You may have met them as firebrands in the cultural festival or village development group, but you might as well meet the entrepreneur in the public sector, in the industry or in research. / ... / Often acting community contractor at the intersection of the traditional sectors - between voluntary and commercial, between the public sector and market, between academia and the outside world. The most innovative challenge the sectors of our society. Through their activities, questioning the concept of market and profit they give a clear signal that is neither dependent on benefits nor profit-maximizing (Moe 2009, p. 9, my translation).*

The Chinese mentee did not identify with the “contractor” (entrepreneur) in the classical sense, she said:

*I really don't know if I really am a contractor. I dream about being able to help as many as I can. I think I will be able to live on my business, but right now I feel most responsible for my countrymen. This also applies to the immigrant women from other parts of the world I have met and who are unemployed. I understand much better how Swedish society works, and I have so many more meaningful assignments to do. But I have to sort my thoughts and see what to do; I must of course also be able to survive.*

For her part, she would have liked working in a large company of IKEA's size.

She had several more or less moral missions that she was more engaged in and thought was more important than her private company. She wanted to work for and with other immigrants and Swedes:

*Sweden makes a lot for the disabled and it is good but many of them cannot work. Immigrants can and really want to work but have a much worse situation. They have many skills but no job. I'm thinking of starting a business for social services, but it is difficult to get a foothold.*

She felt that her mentor did not understand her and her collectivist vision and willingness to help others rather than doing business with the purpose to maximize profits. The woman had not said to him straight out that she did not really want to run a business alone. Her communication problem with the mentor she expressed as follows:

*My mentor is expecting next year's business plan. And I have not even told my mentor that I would rather help others than making money. To have your own business and make money – it's not my goal. He bothers me every single time when he asks: "Have you received any new orders?" We've gone through the activity plan and we have made a budget and I should be able to earn at least a million next year ...*

For the driven entrepreneur a business seemed to be a way to quickly get a platform from which they could reach - and get into the society. A female mentee, said:

*I cannot imagine a better way for personal development than to start a business. I'm interested in challenging myself. I registered the company just a year after I came here. I started to work at a small company. But for me it is natural to pursue my own. It may take immigrants 5 years to learn the language and to learn Sweden, to learn the process. For me ... I have learned so much by doing this; much more than I have learned in school. It is much quicker to get into the community if you start a business. The industry I have chosen also means that I always develop myself, I am nourished by it. You have to find the proper area.*

One mentee was very dissatisfied with Sweden that she felt was very individualistic. She described Sweden as a country where you ignore each other and in which solidarity is merely for show for us to look good in the eyes of the world, while it did not actually exist. She experienced Sweden quite inhuman. She felt that she helped others all the time. She helped other foreign-born, who had difficulty understanding the Swedish culture and language, with authorities and with their work.

A female mentee felt that the Swedish safety net is defeating self-employment.

*In Sweden, I believe that not many want to start their own business in order to ... I think of course that you get much help here in Sweden when compared to my country, but if you compare starting a business to be unemployed at home and take the A-cash welfare benefits, you almost become unmotivated. ...*

*Desire for more practical and effective help*

Almi's fifth point in the mentoring program is: Provide training before mentoring begins where you go through goals, clarify responsibilities and establish mutual expectations of mentoring.

The results from this study suggest that this goal has not yet been reached. It is quite clear that the mentees have different perceptions of the mentoring program, seminars and meetings. The European mentees feel they have been very good, while the overseas adapters believe that operations are inefficient and/or contain mostly empty words. Europeans feel that they received valuable advice and perspective, while some of the others have to say that they neither received concrete information or assistance.

The Finnish mentee have been at all Almi's seminars and think that you get many new ideas:

*You get many new insights and think "aha, so you can make it!"*

Almi's program has given her many useful tips and knowledge regarding marketing.

The overseas mentees felt that Almi's activities were marked by much talk and little action. They did not think that Almi's seminars had given much. One seminar would involve, for example "the art of getting paid" but according to a highly educated Asian mentee nothing was said during the seminar about how to actually do to get paid. They never came to this point. However, the seminar came back again and again in Almi's program, and she continued to go because she thought she would get the information eventually, but it never came.

An overseas mentee mean that Almi should have done better research on what kind of help would be most effective for entrepreneurs, and that they should have been more careful when choosing their delegates.

*There is plenty of money for this, but it has not been used as effective as it could have been. They do seem to have thought it through properly. They should have done more research on what kind of assistance is most effective when it comes to helping entrepreneurs. In addition, more than half of the participants involved in these projects are just there to get a refund. There are only two or three in a group of 10 who are interested seriously. They should be more careful when selecting participants. You must be able to make proper assessments. They should only help those who really have the potential and motivation to succeed. Otherwise it will be nothing. The mentor program should have been better if they had focused more on quality. It need not have been so many, but rather quality.*

The mentoring program has not quite lived up to the non-Nordic mentees' expectations. We must also consider what conditions these mentees have with them when they go into this process. What provision do they have to understand Almi's western philosophy - that you should not help by providing the "right solution" to the problems, but by helping the mentee to find the solution herself?

### *Discriminatory Context*

Research shows that it is important to investigate the condition of immigrants' employment in a *structural context*, namely in the social, economic and political context of their work (NUTEK, 2007a, p. 3). The context is important if one is to understand the foreign-born entrepreneurs' situation.

There are many reasons why foreign-born start businesses, and it is not always their first choice. A major reason for immigrants' businesses is that they are forced into it because they have difficulty finding work; they suffer discrimination in the labor market. The entrepreneurs I have interviewed gives some impression of this, and it is needed to bring it into discussion in order to understand them.

The respondents do not complain very much that they are discriminated against; nine out of ten mentees feel that Sweden as a country is great, and are active in trying to help people. For many of them it has been easier to start their own businesses than to seek and obtain employment. They have simply adapted to the situation, more or less successfully.

The adjustment in the direction of entrepreneurship does not detract from the image that many still are interested in developing their business. However, a more common approach - which, in this context can be understood - is that they first and foremost are concerned with their own and their company's immediate survival. The input may also partly explain why the foreign-born entrepreneurs are not always burning just for their *company* as much as they burn for other things, sometimes suggested in this study. "Burn" it is many who do, most shows commitment to do good things, most have views of both the one and the other, and seems generally like to contribute to their fellow citizens and society. Perhaps you should use a broader term than just *entrepreneurs* to describe many of them, such as the above concept: *social entrepreneurs* (Moe 2009).

It would be extremely difficult for Almi to see through these drivers and attempt to discover whether their energetic engagement is for the firm's real growth, or if it concerns something else.

## Conclusion

The biggest and most obvious value of the mentoring program is that these entrepreneurs get someone to talk to about their business, someone who gives them new perspectives on the company and its problems. This is described by mentees as something very valuable. If this is something that in turn also leads to growth in these businesses, we (still) do not know. Perhaps the presence of mentors available will increase the desire to start a business in Sweden. For me, this seems likely. I am sure it helps to not be forced to bear all the problems and risks as the self-employment means alone. Almi's mentoring program has, in my opinion all the prerequisites for becoming a real success.

What we also can see is that European mentees are generally more satisfied than the overseas mentees with Almi and their mentors, and with the help they received with business development and business contacts. European mentees are more knowledgably as to what

they should ask for and expect, whereas it seems as if the overseas business men do not always understand what they are offered, which has created disappointment.

The philosophy that mentors should support the “entrepreneurial thinking” and ask questions but not give any final answer has been appreciated by Europeans, while the overseas mentees felt that they had not received much real help. To refrain from providing complete answers and solutions is something that is supported by research where it is generally accepted that a mentor should ask questions rather than giving answers (Ortiz-Walters 2009). However, this is research provided by “western researchers”, researchers that have a “western perspective” on pedagogy, training and education. By “western perspectives” we mean people who are raised in western culture and who therefore are formed by this culture and these norms, according to Hofstede's cultural theories and models.

The highly educated overseas adapters consider themselves to *not* need help with a kind of abstract “business thinking”, but would first have the right business contacts and get into the right business networks rather than discuss business ideas and plans. Young and Perrewé (2000) show that while mentors appreciate tangible business results, mentees prefer to have more social contacts and personal and social support:

*For there is clear evidence that mentors value career-related behaviors exhibited by protégé and that protégé, on the other hand, value social support behaviors exhibited by the mentor (and Young Perrewé 2000, p. 625).*

According to Young and Perrewé (2000) this is probably due to mentors having less time and more responsibility and that a mentee is just an additional task and responsibility of a mentor - that they therefore have a more practical approach to their mentees. But as the mentee is placed in a more precarious situation, and in these contexts is a novice, he or she needs, according to the authors, more social support in the real practical tasks, projects and objectives, as requested by some of our respondents. Europeans and those who do not have a business education, however, really appreciate all the help with the abstract “business thinking”. Foreign entrepreneurs who come from all over the world have very different conditions and very different needs indeed.

Almi must prepare the overseas mentees better. Almi's activities and mentor programs should focus more on identifying these different conditions and needs. For these reflections are supported in the research:

*Swedish authorities are not good at taking into account the individual situation. “A general conclusion is that the work should focus on strategies that adapt to the individual, taken into account different assumptions and conditions” (NUTEK, R 2007b, s. 55, our translation).*

The mentees have different needs and also different aims to participate in the mentoring program. One must be realistic and realize that the foreign-born entrepreneurs are not always passionate about their business, but that they might see it as the only way to get into the Swedish society. Almost all had tried to find jobs before they started their businesses. These entrepreneurs show like any other small business owners quite little interest in profit maximizing and in growth: it is not those reasons why most of them have started their

businesses. Many of them are more interested in other values, of being able to work with what interests them, or to learn to understand the Swedish society. This is not to deny that they are energetic and passionate about something. Almost all burned to somehow contribute to society and their countrymen.

## Proposal

### *Improvements in Almi's mentoring program*

Experiences affect future expectations and preferences with regard to mentoring, and by more clearly focus on these Almi can develop mentoring relationships and program in a better way (Young and Perrewé 2000).

Almi should put more energy into the preparations for the recruitment of mentees. They should pay more attention to where people come from, and to the ability of different people to really grasp the “western approach” Almi advocates - not to give ready answers and solutions but to give something else. What is it this “something else” more specifically? What does it mean to get help to identify your problems and solutions yourself? What benefits does it provide? This should be clarified.

The mentees should also be given training in how to communicate in a business context, that is to say, they should get help to learn the business language, and also how to articulate what they actually need and want from the mentoring program. It is not certain that they can formulate their needs from the beginning. The European woman knew exactly what *she* wanted, not a rational “expert type” - she wanted a personal coach, and made sure she got it. She knew what she could and should expect. How can Almi convey the cultural skills needed for the mentees to be able to make a conscious choice of their mentor?

### *A new reverse mentoring program: Stand on both legs!*

Entrepreneurship is also a means of increasing integration into Swedish society, it is said that the...

... *entrepreneurship's role should be seen as part of the integration process.* (NUTEK 2007b, p. 61.)

Some research has been devoted to study what the mentors get out of his mentor, which proved to be a revitalization of their own careers, new ideas, social status and personal satisfaction. Mentees can thus act as catalysts for mentors, as mentors can increase their creativity and ingenuity (Ortiz-Walters, R., 2009, p. 28; Young and Perrewé 2000, p. 615).

Successful mentoring involves, according to the previous research, a dialogue where both parties learn something of importance. Thus, a good mentoring relationship implies that

both get something of value to the relationship. Ideally, mentoring leads to mutual rewarding and learning (Richard OC, Isamil KM, Bhuian SN, Taylor, EC 2009, Ortiz-Walters, R. 2009, p. 27). In fact, the mutual development are considered to represent “the Hallmark of mentoring” (Allen, Eby, and Lentz, 2006, p. 568; Ortiz-Walters, R., 2009).

Good mentoring requires that both parties approach the relationship as beginners and that both must be open to and determined to learn something new. This is a lack in Almi’s mentoring program today in which all formal work is devoted to see the foreign-born adepts as the receiver and the Swedish-born mentors as the transmitter. From the political side, it is considered important that ...

*... the entire Swedish population will see entrepreneurship as an attractive alternative to a job (NUTEK 2007a).*

So, it is requested that all Swedes learn something new. What can Almi do so that native Swedes will also become beneficiaries of the expertise of the immigrants, of their knowledge and contacts? Almi’s mission is also to bring renewal in Swedish industry in addition to create growth.

*Almi’s mission is to promote the development of competitive small and medium-sized enterprises and encourage new businesses in the objective to create growth and renewal in Swedish industry. (Almi, Annual Report 2008, p. 10.)*

But the foreign-born entrepreneurs’ ideas are not valued:

*Foreign-born ideas are considered "odd" in the business structures and are therefore not valued. The Swedish culture is crowding out other competencies (NUTEK 2007b, p. 45).*

Today’s global business world means that no nation can isolate itself. The foreign-born entrepreneurs should not only incur the role of beneficiaries in the form of “mentees”, but they should also occupy the role of mentors for the native Swedes and the Swedish business community. The foreign-born can take advantage of their specific experiences in developing new business concepts and introduces new products and services in established industries. They have also managed to attract both native “Swedes” and “immigrants” (NUTEK 2007a).

*These people can, through their foreign contacts also help to improve dealings between the Swedish and international business (NUTEK 2007b, p. 2).*

As the mentoring program is now designed, the foreign-born are again relegated to the role of (grant) recipient. The Swedish-born acts as “experts” and foreign-born as “novices”. While it is both important and useful to the foreign-born entrepreneurs to get help to learn about the Swedish economy of a Swedish-born mentor. But this also consolidates the roles in which the norm is to be a Swedish born; where the Swedish way means to be the Knowledgeable with a capital K.

The mentor program consolidates and re-produces unilaterally the picture of the “Swedish born” as the “norm”, rather than equality and reciprocity. One can therefore say that the model and ambition from the perspective of integration is limping a bit, that it only stands on one leg. To remedy this, Almi should create a mentor program in which foreign-born become mentors for the Swedish-born entrepreneurs with business interests abroad. Finally, it is our suggestion that it is important to take note of the word “reciprocity”, when it comes to mentoring, and the ambition of both parties in a mentoring relationship to learn and be part of the relationship - as a beginner.

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