

**HD Dear Economist...****BY** By Tim Harford**WC** 246 words**PD** 31 May 2008**SN** Financial Times (FT.Com)**SC** FTCOM**NGC** Financial Times - Print and Online**GC** CTGFT**LA** English**CY** (c) 2008 The Financial Times Limited. All rights reserved

**LP** My employer has just instituted a new mentoring scheme and as a relatively new recruit I'm eligible. I can't make up my mind whether this is an important opportunity to learn or a colossal waste of everybody's time. Any thoughts? Ben Harmison

Dear Ben,

**TD** Some new research by **Jonah Rockoff**, an economist at Columbia University, is possibly of interest to you. Rockoff studied an acclaimed mentoring programme for New York City teachers. He adjusted for confounding factors - such as the fact that duff teachers may get more mentoring help, making it seem that mentors reduce teaching standards.

Rockoff found some evidence that the programme encouraged teachers to stay in their jobs and improved the achievements of their students. If his results apply more widely, they suggest that the thing you are most likely to learn from a mentor is how to operate in your particular company, rather than picking up transferable skills.

But the effects seem rather modest. Why, then, is mentoring so popular? Rockoff finds that teachers are convinced that their mentors have helped their teaching skills, even if the effect is not obvious from their students' results. Overall, I'd suggest that you go for this mentoring scheme. It will make you look co-operative and you might even learn something - but even if it is useless, you'll still convince yourself it was time well spent.

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