

The value of cross-cultural mentorships in tech

In over 20 years as a working professional in the tech industry across Europe, one of the most consistently rewarding experiences of my career has been the mentor-mentee relationship.

Temps de lecture : minute

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As a mentee, I had the chance to speak to someone who stood where I wanted to be, and who gave actionable advice on how to get there. As a mentor, I now enjoy the privilege of speaking with some of the most exceptional entrepreneurs in Europe.

That's why it came as no surprise to me that the annual *State of European Tech* report identified mentorship as an essential component of Europe's flourishing startup ecosystem. You'd be hard-pressed to find a top EU tech professional who hasn't, at one time or another, relied upon the advice of a mentor. As Europe's startup landscape continues to grow, we're likely to see more cross-cultural, inter-European mentorships than ever before.

But how do you navigate these relationships—and make the most of them? Below I'll discuss some common challenges, and offer ways that you can make the most of such a rewarding professional relationship.

Cultural expectations and professional etiquette

One of the first things you'll encounter in any multinational relationship is

contrasting cultural expectations.

My first bit of advice: keep an open mind. Most of the time, I believe, we're a lot more similar than we think. That being said, there will be moments when differences may be more apparent: a differing attitude to small talk before a meeting, or to formalities in an email. When these smaller problems do arise (and most of the time, these are problems that deal with how we relate to the world, not each other), take a beat or two to consider them. Always assume good intent.

Trust each other to have respectful, open conversations. When differences do arise, tackle them up front and discuss how you can both manage them in the future. These talks don't have to be overtly confrontational, or particularly lengthy, but it's better to nip it in the bud rather than let frustrations pile up.

Don't be afraid to share

People often confess to me that they're scared to share their ideas or thoughts in a professional context out of concern they might be stolen. Whilst I sympathise with this view, I remember a conversation with Ukrainian space engineer Igor Hanin that changed my worldview profoundly with the simple idea: "A cell lives as long as it divides."

The true value of what you can offer lies in what you share—your ideas, experiences, resources and knowledge. Sharing accelerates the journey from idea to reality. Don't be afraid to share small thoughts or burgeoning ideas with your mentor: so much of the real value they can offer you is helping you bring these to life. A fresh, cross-cultural perspective on an idea you jotted on a napkin may bring change you never anticipated.

On friendship

Don't listen when people say you shouldn't be friends with your mentor. My position is squarely the opposite—the best mentor is a good friend with a sympathetic ear. Entrepreneurship consumes vast amounts of your time even when it's going well, and sharing that journey with someone you value, respect and genuinely enjoy spending time with can be transformative.

Managing geographical differences

Working with an international network means that often a mentor will be in an entirely different country. You may be calling from a beach in Barcelona to a coffee shop in Helsinki. How to manage this? Establish clear communication guidelines, and follow them.

Figure out a method of communication that works for both of you. This can be on the granular level, discussing what platform you'll use to stay in contact (email, WhatsApp, Slack) - or in a broader sense, how the two of you prefer to stay in touch. Is it a question of a call when things are going wrong? Monthly check-ups? These don't have to be hard and fast rules, but you'd be surprised how many issues can be solved by making sure channels of communication are clearly established early on. Set your boundaries and expectations and stick to them.

Make the most of human connection

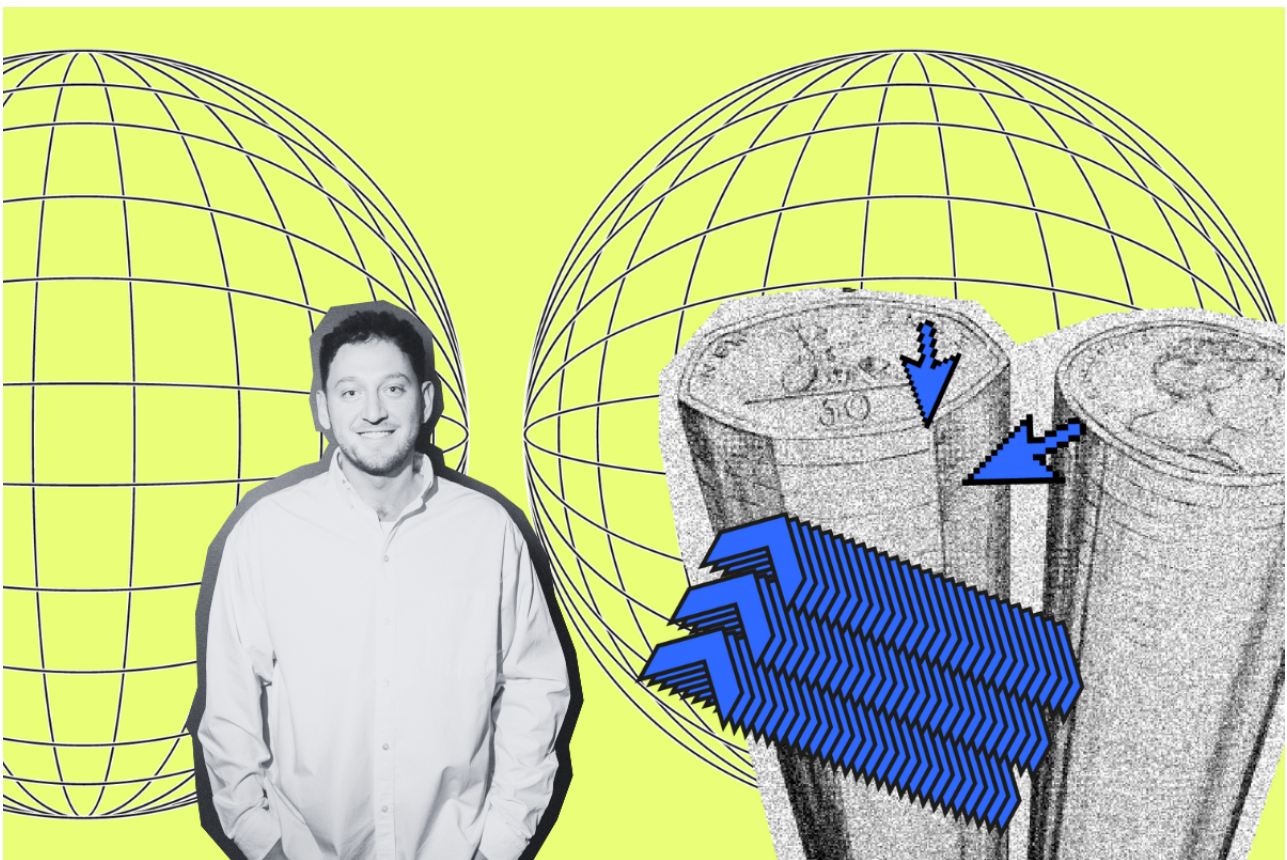
In a CV and LinkedIn-driven culture, it can be easy to see people as a depersonalised list of achievements. What's so valuable about mentorship is that it puts you in touch with the real, complex human being behind those accolades.

Don't feel as if you have to impress, or try to hide difficulties you might be

facing from your mentor. Be open and honest: you'd be surprised how many problems are universal, and transcend geographical borders. Often the perspective another culture offers may bring new ways to tackle an issue, or frame a problem. Mentors offer more than just a static body of knowledge. They're not some chatbot regurgitating information that's already out there; they're there to share a genuinely singular perspective moulded out of past experiences.

That's the real value of these relationships: the opportunity to speak to an actual person. Lived experience is something no LLM can replicate. If you can remember that, you'll find that a mentorship really can be transformative for your career.

Serhiy Tokarev, Co-Founder and General Partner at Roosh and Roosh Ventures, for Maddyne



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Article by Serhiy Tokarev