

**LABTA Matchmakers Strive For Comfortable Relationships
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LABTA Matchmakers Strive For Comfortable Partnerships

The matchmakers at Los Angeles BTA (a.k.a. the Mentor Committee) are in countdown mode this month, working to meet one more in a series of deadlines they've set for themselves to create the LABTA Mentor Network. Operating under the common banner "Be a Gateway to Shared Knowledge," the Mentor Committee has two primary goals: one, a mentor program to enhance each member's professional development; the other, a buddy program to help new members get the most out of the Association — and vice versa.

Both add new options to the list of services the Association offers its members. "We have many other educational opportunities," says Mentor

Committee Director Sherry Koopman, citing the LABTA's monthly meeting programs and roundtable discussions, educational seminars and Breakfast with the Board of Directors. The mentor and buddy programs will require a very small investment of participants' time and offer a flexible schedule for private and individual instruction. Ironically, the time that the programs

will save for their participants has been bought with a great investment of time on the part of the committee. Led by Koopman and co-chair Monica Lowry, the members (Melinda Anderson-DeRegil, Lisa Flint, Jean Pierre Gaspar, Carolyn Hubay and Jan Stewart) have worked since last winter on the details.

Along the way, they've had their own mentors/advisors — current and past

LABTA presidents Carole Ann Bakeman, Margarita Diosomito and Marite Vella.

"It's taken a huge amount of energy," says Lowry.

This month's deadline is focused on the mentor program. Using information from program registration forms distributed and returned during June "Mentor Month," committee members are matching the expertise of more than 60 mentors

with the requests of almost 30 mentees. The form meticulously documents information about each applicant's expertise or need for help. It includes five category headings: Travel Career Advancement, Travel Management, Hotel Industry, Airline Industry and Ground Transportation. Each category has a list of at least nine appropriate subjects for selection, such as contract negotiations, benchmarking and RFPs, as well as safety and security, systems, rates and reports. The subjects under "Travel Career Advancement" are almost all unique to the category, from time management to liability issues to per diems. Members are also asked for personal preferences as to industry, gender and location of the

person with whom they will be matched. The program itself makes no distinction between Allied and Direct members but those signing up to be mentors and mentees may limit their choice of counterparts if they prefer.

That's a lot of variables and it means Koopman and Lowry will need a lot of volunteers to fill everyone's requirements. Realistically, we'll need about 20 percent to 35 percent of the members to volunteer, Lowry estimates.

By mid-June, with nearly 100 people signed up, it looked like they had made it. Koopman, though excited by the response, wasn't ready to claim success, noting that the inventory of mentor expertise still had to be tabulated.

Still, the two co-chairs were excited and optimistic, largely because they had been careful to design a program that would not devour volunteers' time. Training would not be necessary: We're matching need with knowledge

that's already there, points out Koopman. Members were told from the beginning that they could expect to spend as little as 30 minutes a month on the program. Enthusiasm will probably push some mentors past that, but it will be their choice, says Lowry. Those who volunteer for the program's Day-in-the-Life mentoring format will probably be among the first to expand their investment.

The buddy program, on the other hand, has been estimated at a 10-minute-per-month investment for participants. Its aim is to welcome new members and get them into the Association's mainstream as quickly and

smoothly as possible. Like the mentor program, it's based on one-to-one relationships. Each new member receives a letter of welcome and introduction to the Association, its officers and committees — and to his or her assigned

volunteer buddy. The buddy will call the new member on meeting days as a reminder, maybe offer a ride, answer questions and introduce him or her to other members.

And it will telescope naturally into another Mentor Committee project; fostering volunteerism. Again time has been a major concern. The

subcommittee's members have spent a great deal of their own time recruiting volunteers, dissecting the jobs that need to be done in the organization and estimating the time needed for each — right down to the five minutes it takes for a faxing job. Even then, says Koopman, would-be volunteers are assured that it's okay to say no.

It will be fairly easy to gauge the success of the buddy and volunteer recruitment programs. Measurement of the success of the mentor matches will be ongoing

and personal, says Koopman. And she does expect there to be some fine-tuning needed: What didn't the profile address? How well did the matching work? Does the program need more structure rather than less? But she's certain her committee has designed a solid foundation for the future.

xWe feel that we're creating a legacy for LABTA; one that will last and won't need to be recreated next year.x

xWe have some really good role models who show what you can get out of LABTA from putting into it,x adds Lowry.