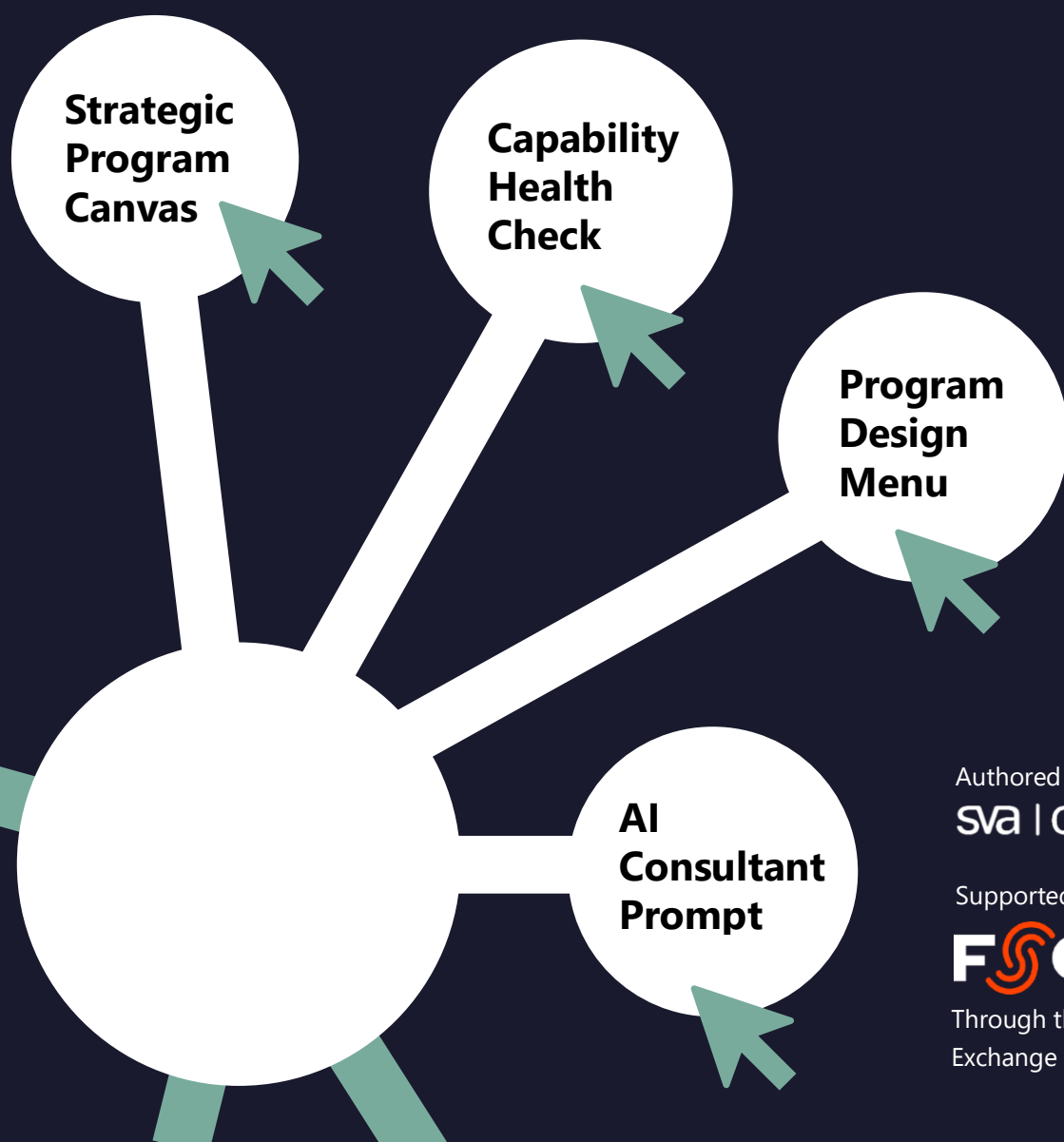


Guide to Mentoring & Networking for Digital Talent

Practical digital tools to support your organisation to develop, improve and sustain mentoring and networking programs and activities, drawing on successful approach used by Australian employers, community organisations and non-profits.



Authored by:
sva | consulting

Supported by:



Through the Digital Knowledge
Exchange

Acknowledging the sector input that has informed this guide

Supported by Future Skills Organisation (FSO) through the Digital Knowledge Exchange (DKX) initiative and developed by Social Ventures Australia (SVA), this guide is designed to support Australian employers to deliver quality mentoring and networking programs that encourage valuable, diverse talent to enter the digital sector – and stay.

SVA reviewed effective mentoring and networking programs to inform this guide. The resulting frameworks and tools were developed in consultation with subject matter experts, program implementers, and a diversity of organisations with digital workforces.

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About this guide

This guide is a practical playbook designed to remove the barriers to launching and running mentoring and networking programs. It provides a clear, step-by-step roadmap for anyone looking to pitch and build a new initiative or strengthen an existing one.

What's inside



Diagnostic tools to help structure an initiative that authentically matches your organisation's purpose, context and current capacity.



Practical guidance on applying universal design principles so that inclusion is built into the program from the beginning.



Step-by-step prompts, tools and language to help secure leadership buy-in, clarify roles and responsibilities, and build a more sustainable program.



Case studies of Australian mentoring and networking programs that illustrate the diversity of designs and share insights and lessons.

How to use this guide

This guide emphasises that any organisation, regardless of its size or current capacity, can build an effective program.

You do not need perfect conditions or a large budget to begin. A useful program can start small, provided it has a clear purpose, appropriate safeguards, practical support for participants, and a commitment to learning and improvement.

This guide is designed to be used flexibly to meet different organisational goals. Choose the approach below that best fits your needs:

- **Scan for insights:** Read about Australian case studies to understand real-world program designs and outcomes. This is ideal for inspiration on proven models.
- **Take what you need:** Use specific tools, universal design principles, or measurement frameworks, to improve your current program. This is ideal to troubleshoot or improve specific program elements.
- **Build methodically:** Follow the 'roadmap to success' which details five steps to designing, launching, and evaluating a mentoring or networking program. This is the most comprehensive path that ensures your initiative is structurally sound and developed intentionally from the beginning.
- **Leverage AI:** Use the appendix of this guide and the master prompt to rapidly generate a draft program framework using an AI tool. This is the fastest route to speed up the planning process.

The workforce challenge: *Why mentoring and networking programs are needed*

Australia's technology sector faces a significant workforce challenge, with a projected requirement of 1.2 million tech-related jobs by 2030. Recruitment is an important part of this challenge, but it is not enough on its own. Organisations – defined throughout this guide and its resources as community groups, non-profits, and employers of digital talent – also need to support people to build sustainable careers once they enter the sector, particularly people from under-represented groups, including women, First Nations peoples and people with disability.

Without ongoing support, organisations face the costly frustration of losing the professionals they worked so hard to attract. Australian industry data reveals that women, for example, leave tech roles mid-career at almost twice the rate of their male peers.

The value of mentoring and networking

While highly complementary, mentoring and networking programs have distinct primary functions. Mentoring focuses on deep, targeted, individual guidance between senior and junior talent, whereas networking focuses on broad, lateral connection-building across the wider organisation and industry.

Well-designed mentoring and networking programs deliver practical value to both the participant and the organisation by providing career support, emotional wellbeing and strong internal networks.

Mentoring and networking programs help address the workforce challenge by:

- **Reducing** turnover and retaining the digital talent you've worked hard to hire.
- **Connecting** isolated talent to fast-track onboarding and build internal networks.
- **Nurturing** career development through active sponsorship and professional guidance.
- **Building** team confidence, driving productivity, and empowering participants to contribute.
- **Boosting** leadership capability and coaching skills among senior staff.

To achieve these results, programs must be deliberately designed, resourced, and embedded within the organisation. This guide provides the practical tools to structure and govern your initiative for maximum effect.

Why mentoring and networking works

The clear benefits and business case

Mentoring and networking programs support retention and people development to strengthen organisations. It also makes commercial sense. At a practical day-to-day level, mentoring and networking programs provide organisations across Australia with significant value through:



Retaining valuable talent: The conservative cost of turnover of a mid-level digital professional is between 50% to 150% of their annual salary (factoring in recruitment fees, onboarding, and lost productivity). Mentoring can actively disrupt turnover, thereby supporting the diverse talent you fought hard to hire stays and thrives.



Boosting leadership capability: Mentoring benefits both mentors and mentees. Learning to be a mentor can help senior staff build their leadership capability, by teaching them how to support another's growth and development, how to provide feedback, and how to create psychological safety.



Breaking down barriers: Strategic networking connects isolated talent across teams or departments, fast-tracking how quickly participants learn the unwritten rules of your organisation.



Nurturing career development: Mentoring and networking programs can help participants progress their careers, gain promotions, increase internal career progression, and improve productivity, as well as give under-represented talent the confidence to contribute their ideas.



Compounding impact: The true return on investment from these programs goes beyond any single career – the outcomes for individuals, organisations, and the wider digital sector support each other. When you actively develop a culture of mentorship and networking, it accelerates individual success, which can directly boost your productivity and ultimately strengthen Australia's entire digital economy.



Outcomes for individuals

Participants:

- Inter-personal, leadership and networking skills development
- Increased capacity, confidence and connections
- Greater access to information, opportunities and role models
- Improved career navigation and goal clarity
- Better support for and access to early career paths
- Higher intention to enter, retain and progress
- Improved compensation and career progression or promotion
- Stronger sense of belonging and wellbeing

Mentors (mentoring programs only):

- Leadership, mentoring and coaching skills development
- Stronger and more diverse professional connections
- Greater peer learning, access to feedback and mutual support



Outcomes for employers

- Improved retention and engagement (particularly for underrepresented groups)
- Improved performance and collaboration (interpersonal and leadership skills)
- Stronger culture for inclusion, learning and leadership
- Strengthen capacity to develop diverse leaders and talent



Outcomes for the wider digital sector

- Stronger participation and retention in the workforce
- More developed talent pool and reduced workforce constraints
- Improved sector value proposition
- Greater cross-jurisdiction and cross-employer sector collaboration
- Stronger capability and productivity across the economy

Outcomes for individuals, employers and the wider digital sector.

The roadmap to success

The pathway to start and strengthen mentoring and networking programs

Designing a program can be straightforward. Many of the organisations featured in this guide started with a small pilot and grew from there, using an initial 'proof of concept' to build support and learn along the way.

Step 2

Plan for inclusion

Learn the four universal design principles to ensure your program is safe and accessible from day one.

Step 1

Establish your goals

Includes Program Canvas

Define the exact challenge you are trying to solve and who you are trying to support.

Whether you are launching a networking circle or a structured 12-month mentoring initiative, this guide can help you move from concept to reality in five simple steps.

Keep an eye out for the interactive digital tools embedded in Steps 1, 3, and 4 to help accelerate your planning.

Step 3

Create the enabling environment

Includes Capability Health Check

Assess if you have the time, resources and leadership support to launch.

Step 4

Build your program

Includes Program Design Menu

Select your scale, matching style, and ground rules.

Step 5

Implement, review and adapt

Launch your program, gather feedback, and continuously improve.

Effective program design is an iterative process. Revisit Steps 1 through 5 regularly to capture new learnings, adapt to changes, and strengthen your approach as your initiative grows and matures.

Learn, adapt and grow

Step 1: Establish your goals

Are you trying to:

- Help early-career talent find their feet at work?
- Increase staff retention?
- Improve progression into leadership roles for mid-career participants?

Depending on your goals and your target audience, your program choices will look different. Start by answering two fundamental questions with your team:

- **Why launch a mentoring or networking program?** *What specific workforce or community challenge are we trying to solve?*
- **Who needs to be involved?** *Who will participate, who has the skills to support them, and which senior leaders will champion the initiative?*

See how Deadly Coders thought about their goals and target participants, and what this meant for their program on page 12.

Take action: Map your approach

Before jumping into the logistics of your program, you must align on your core purpose. To structure your initial brainstorm, use the interactive [Strategic Program Canvas](#) digital tool.

1. **Align on the basics:** Work through the tool linked above to define the challenge you are solving and the cohort you are trying to support. Use the prompts to document your initial guardrails and basic enablers (like time and coordination) you will need. This can work well as an individual brainstorm, or as a team think-tank or workshop session.

Now your canvas is complete and you've set your goals, move on to tackle "*How you'll get there*" (page 15).

2. **Determine your approach:** decide if your cohort needs a mentoring (deep, 1-on-1 guidance), networking (broad connection-building) or hybrid approach.

Key insight

**DEADLY
CODERS**



Approach: Community partnerships

Target cohort: First Nations Professionals

Defining the 'who' through strategic partnerships

Baidam Solutions (an Indigenous-owned IT security provider) partnered with Deadly Coders (a community organisation focused on igniting digital skills in First Nations youth) to build a proactive, collaborative pathway centred on early connection and long-term support. They understood:

- When setting the goals for mentoring, identifying who you want to support is just as important as what you want to achieve.
- For highly specialised sectors like cybersecurity, waiting for diverse talent to organically apply for senior leadership roles is often too late – the barriers to entry begin much earlier.

How they define their approach:

- **Broadening the talent pool:** Instead of defining their “who” as existing industry professionals, they expanded their goal to include the next generation. By partnering, they successfully combined Deadly Coders’ grassroots access to First Nations students with Baidam’s industry expertise. This allows them to build digital literacy and career confidence before these individuals enter the workforce.
- **The ‘shared value’ goal:** Baidam provides industry pathways and support, while Deadly Coders provides the established community trust and educational framework, ensuring the program’s goals authentically align with both corporate and community needs.

Step 1
Establish your goals

Step 2
Plan for inclusion

Step 3
Create the enabling environment

Step 4
Build your program

Step 5
Implement, review and adapt

The takeaway for your program

As you establish your goals, ask yourself if you are trying to solve a workforce problem that an external partner is already equipped to handle. If your goal is to reach a highly specific or under-represented demographic, partnering with a trusted third-party business or organisation can help you appropriately and effectively connect with your target audience.

Choosing between mentoring and networking

While mentoring and networking can be distinct programs, they can also be highly complementary. You can build your initiative around one of these core approaches, or blend features of them together to suit your needs:

- **Mentoring** – deep, targeted, individual guidance
- **Networking** – broad, lateral connection-building across a wider ecosystem.

To help you decide which pathway is right for your organisation, the table below outlines exactly what each approach practically aims to achieve in the workplace.

Mentoring	Networking
• Establishes structured relationships between more experienced leaders and emerging talent. • Targets specific career goals in a culturally safe and inclusive environment. • Builds capability, confidence, and career readiness. • Drives direct knowledge transfer, skill development, reflective practice, and inclusive collaboration.	• Connects diverse talent across the wider business ecosystem. • Breaks down team barriers to build networks and internal influence. • Exposes early-career staff to the broader organisation. • Unlocks visibility, internal influence, and informal learning. • Fosters peer-to-peer support often in informal settings.

In practice, many programs often blend elements of both mentoring and networking together. Examples of blended programs include:

- **The “partnering + mixer” model:**
 - Provide mentees with a dedicated 1-on-1 mentor for deep career coaching.
 - Bring the entire cohort together once a month for a social networking event to build a peer-support community.
- **The group model:**
 - Assign one senior digital leader to a “pod” or network of four junior participants.

- Blend the targeted advice of a mentor with the peer-to-peer safety of a networking circle.
- **Sponsorship programs:**
 - Pair a participant with a senior leader who gives advice and actively advocates for them behind closed doors.
 - Blend a 1-on-1 relationship like mentoring with the strategic access of networking.
 - Leverage the sponsor’s internal influence to help participants achieve promotions and access opportunities.

Sizing up the right approach for your goals

Choosing between mentoring and networking ultimately depends on what your organisation is trying to achieve. Use the breakdown below to size up which approach best aligns with your goals, capacity, and the needs of your participants.

	Mentoring	Networking
<i>Helps to:</i>	Fosters personal and professional growth through highly personalised support, direct knowledge transfer, and guided reflection.	Helps participants build connections across the business and learn informally from others. Fosters peer-to-peer support and creates mutual comfort across diverse groups.
<i>Appeals to:</i>	Participants navigating major career transitions, and under-represented talent needing active career sponsorship in a culturally safe space.	Early-career talent needing broad exposure to the wider business, as well as dispersed or remote participants who may feel isolated.
<i>Might suit:</i>	Organisations wanting to build internal leadership pipelines, close specific skill gaps, or supporting diversity targets at senior levels. Structurally, it requires the capacity to manage long-term (6–12 month), one-on-one tailored pairings and track developmental milestones.	Organisations wanting to rapidly integrate large cohorts (e.g. graduates, trainees), improve collaboration, or connect remote workers. Structurally, it fits organisations looking for scalable, lighter-touch formats such as monthly mixers, lightning talks, or digital communities.

Step 2: Plan for inclusion

Adapt universal design principles

The most effective approach is universal design – creating systems that are naturally accessible and usable by *everyone* from the very beginning, without the need for special adaptations.

Universal design means removing hidden barriers – looking for where you can fix the *environment* rather than expecting the participant to adapt to a rigid organisational mould or ask for special treatment.

See the Humans of Purpose Academy and Generation Australia case studies on pages 19 and 21 for two very different examples.

Whether you are aiming to retain women in tech, support First Nations talent, or onboard neurodivergent participants, applying these four universal design principles will ensure your program is safe, equitable, and effective for everyone.

1. Co-design: Ask, don't assume

Before finalising your program structure, ask the intended participants what could work for them. Use a quick survey, an informal focus group, or an open invitation to ask them about their goals, strengths, aspirations, preferred meeting formats and matching needs.

2. Universal accessibility: Keep it simple

When building your program, complex language and jargon create barriers to participation. Ground your program design by finding opportunities to:

- **Simplify your program guides:** Replace dense policy documents with clear, plain-English, dot-point materials for your mentor briefs and participant handbooks. This actively supports neurodivergent participants (such as those with dyslexia or ADHD) and increases engagement from time-poor senior leaders.
- **Structure your sessions clearly:** When scheduling mentoring meetings or networking events, explicitly outline the objectives, dates, times, locations, and agendas in the calendar invites. Removing ambiguity around *how* the program

operates reduces anxiety for all participants, allowing them to focus entirely on building skills and connections.

3. Two-way learning: Mutual exchange

Frame your program as a mutual exchange. Step away from the “deficit model” – the idea that diverse staff need to be “fixed” to fit the organisational mould.

Inclusion requires mutual exchange. Remind your mentors and senior stakeholders that they have just as much to learn from mentees and participants about modern workplace culture, different ways of working and thinking, and building inclusive environments, as they have to pass on.

4. Structural empathy: Recognise life outside work

Practicing "structural empathy" means actively designing your program to accommodate life's barriers or obligations that participants face, rather than ignoring them. Inclusion means recognising that your participants have different resources and external obligations.

- **Time & flexibility:** Accommodate participants who need to adjust meeting times due to caring responsibilities, family, or cultural leave. Building flexibility into your program schedule ensures everyone can engage fully without added stress.
- **Financial accessibility:** Plan for different levels of financial resources among your participants. You can actively include early-career talent and those with less disposable income by ensuring the organisation absorbs the costs of networking events, or by providing cost-free alternatives (such as in-office coffees or virtual meetings).

Take action: Apply universal design

- 1. Consult:** Before designing the program, test your initial scope with your intended participants. *How do they see the problem? What would make them want to genuinely get involved in a program? What do they think success looks like?*
- 2. Embed two-way learning:** Train your mentors to listen and learn, not just give advice. Make it clear their role is not to “fix” participants to fit the organisation, but to learn from their unique perspectives to help build a more inclusive and effective workplace.
- 3. Audit and reframe:** Review any existing relevant materials that will be used by participants – documents, emails, agendas – to remove corporate jargon and replace dense paragraphs with clear, accessible dot points. Commit to maintaining this plain-English standard across all future program communications.
- 4. Design:** Work through the later sections of this guide to understand additional examples of how inclusion can be built directly into the design and delivery of your program (see Step 4).
- 5. Advocate:** Document the key requirements of participation so these can be shared with program sponsors and supervisors – they need to understand what they need to support to enable participation.

Key insight

HUMANS OF PURPOSE ACADEMY

Approach: Designing for Trauma-Informed Psychological Safety & Agency

Target cohort: Intersectional Talent / Women+ (Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence)

When planning for inclusion in Step 2, expanding your definition of "psychological safety" to include trauma-informed practices can be highly beneficial, particularly when supporting participants who have faced many structural barriers.

Humans of Purpose is a social enterprise providing a community platform with holistic digital skills training and employment pathways for women and non-binary individuals who are survivors of domestic and family violence (DFV).

Humans of Purpose offers a practical example of how to build these specific, human-centric guardrails into a development framework. Through its Academy Hub, participants access a supportive e-learning platform offering well-being and digital skills training, community connection, mentoring, and pathways into meaningful employment.

How they support their cohort:

- **Restoring participant agency:** A core element of trauma-informed design is ensuring participants feel in control of their environment. Humans of Purpose achieves this by designing their Academy so participants lead their own progression. Rather than a set program dictating the schedule or learning milestones, each participant is supported to actively guide the pace, boundaries, and direction of their development.
- **Setting boundaries to prevent being overwhelmed:** To protect the energy and capacity of participants who may be navigating complex personal circumstances, the Academy invites women and non-binary individuals to learn and grow at a pace that feels safe and sustainable. Attendance is encouraged but never enforced; if someone misses a session, the response is grounded in care rather than judgement, checking in

to ensure they are safe and supported. This flexible approach reduces pressure, prevents being overwhelmed, and honours the reality that healing and skill-building are not linear.

- **Maintaining clear professional scopes:** The Program Lead, facilitators, and mentors are trained to provide structured, professional support while respecting privacy and personal boundaries. Their role is to guide learning, build confidence, and strengthen digital and workplace capabilities - not to explore or assess personal circumstances. Once a participant indicates they are ready for work, the Academy begins a tailored employment pathway, including a personalised learning and development plan, potential internship opportunities within the Humans of Purpose Agency, and connections to aligned employment partners.

Key insight



Approach: Designing for Structural Empathy & Wraparound Support

Target cohort: First Nations Professionals and people with disability (PwD)

Effective mentoring for technical skills and career progression works best when program design recognises the broader life context participants are navigating. Generation Australia, a non-profit organisation dedicated to training and placing people into life-changing careers, sees this first-hand. Through its work with First Nations talent and PwD, Generation Australia recognises that strong professional development outcomes are supported by access to the right wraparound supports, resources and conditions outside the workplace. This represents 'Structural Empathy' in practice.

How they build structural empathy:

- **Wrap-around pastoral care:** Generation Australia's model acknowledges the barriers caused by the housing crisis, health issues, or a lack of internet connectivity by employing dedicated mentors who provide trauma-informed "pastoral care" to actively address these external life barriers before focusing on workplace KPIs.
- **Specialised cohort support:** While their broader programs assist individuals facing general disadvantage or unemployment, Generation Australia integrates dedicated specialist support into their model by deploying staff and mentors who are specifically trained and specialised in working with First Nations talent and PwD.
- **Building peer safety nets:** Rather than relying solely on senior leaders, they actively transition mentor-led cohorts into self-sustaining peer alumni networks. This ensures participants have ongoing, culturally safe support systems – and financial/time flexibility – long after the formal program ends.

Step 3: Create the enabling environment

Ensuring organisational readiness

Now that you have defined your vision and the people you want to support, what do you need to do to get the program off the ground?

You can start with what you have. A program does not need to be perfect, heavily funded or organisation-wide from day one. What matters is creating the right conditions for success: clear roles, enough time, leadership support, basic resourcing, and a shared understanding of what you are trying to achieve.

The myth of perfect readiness

Industry practitioners consistently emphasise that it is highly effective to “start small”. You can launch a targeted, low-risk pilot with just **a small group of willing early adopters**. Gathering success stories from a pilot is often the best way to secure the budget for a larger rollout in future years.

For example, see the case study of EmpowerHer (page 39), where CommBank ran a short pilot program for women in tech roles with a limited budget and significant volunteer time, to demonstrate a proof of concept.

The 3 enablers you actually need

Effective programs need active troubleshooting, scalable support and coordination, not a “set-and-forget” approach. To ensure your program is effective, make sure your organisation has these three enablers in place before you launch:

- 1. Dedicated hours:** Mentoring and networking cannot be viewed as an “add-on or after-hours” activity. For employers, managers must authorise staff to participate during paid business hours so that employees do not feel penalised for attending. For community programs, scheduling must respect participants' existing external commitments where possible.

- 2. Leadership support:** Having a senior champion is necessary. When leadership signals its importance and allocates resources, participants feel safe dedicating their time to it. Who this is depends on your organisation and the scale of the program. For a practical example of how to actively equip your executive team with the cultural capability needed to champion diverse talent, check out the Red Earth Key Insight found below.
- 3. An allocated coordinator:** You do not necessarily need a full-time new hire to coordinate a mentoring or networking program, but you do need an experienced point-of-contact who has the capacity to match mentors and mentees, troubleshoot relationships, and make sure the program stays on track.

Build vs. partner

When assessing your readiness, you might realise your internal team currently lacks the capacity or specific cultural expertise to fully support your target cohort.

You do not have to build everything in-house. You can partner with external entities such as community organisations, peak bodies or diversity specialists.

See the Key Insight of Red Earth Talent (page 26) and Case Study of Corporate Culcha (page 28), for two examples of providers who partner with organisations on mentoring and networking.

While an external partner can bring an approach, platforms, external mentors and networks, your organisation will still need to do some important work. This includes defining your goals and target cohort, securing enablers for participation, building senior sponsorship, and fostering an internal culture that supports your goals.

A dedicated external partner can provide specialised guidance and resource frameworks to help your organisation navigate specific cohort challenges, including:

- **Building capability:** Ensuring the safety and success of your participants while your internal managers and program leaders are still developing their own skills.
- **Trauma-informed support:** Designing safe emotional guardrails, protecting participant energy, and establishing healthy professional boundaries.
- **Wrap-around pastoral care:** Helping program leaders understand and support the participant's whole reality rather than focusing strictly on immediate program or work outcomes.

- **Compounding external life barriers:** Safely managing structural, non-workplace challenges that directly affect engagement, including housing stability, health issues, or internet connectivity constraints.

Take action: Assess your readiness

To evaluate your organisation's current capacity and identify potential gaps, use the interactive [Capability Health Check](#) digital tool.

1. **Evaluate:** Work through the tool to honestly assess your current capability to run a mentoring or networking program and determine if you have the three essential ingredients: dedicated time for participants, an allocated coordinator, and active leadership support.
2. **Review:** The tool will generate a custom summary report highlighting your strengths and vulnerabilities. The results are a starting point, they are best used as a prompt for conversation and decision making – not the 'final answer'. Discuss the results with your team and key stakeholders and determine a plan for next steps.
3. **Take action on your results:** Use your data and discussion insights to address operational gaps *before* you design your program. Does your score suggest you should start with a smaller pilot? Do you need to spend more time building executive buy-in? Or, if you lack specific cultural expertise, does it make sense to partner with an external community organisation rather than building everything in-house? Now is the time to make these important decisions about your organisation's capability.

Key insight



Equipping leaders to drive inclusive cultures

Approach: The Power of External Partnerships

Target cohort: First Nations Professionals

When creating the enabling environment, securing leadership support goes beyond simply obtaining budget approval. It requires actively equipping your leadership team and program supervisors with the cultural capability needed to effectively support diverse talent. Red Earth offers a powerful example of how to build this capability by focusing on the "wedge in the middle" – providing dedicated coaching and mentoring for the *leaders* themselves, ensuring they are prepared to guide and sponsor First Nations professionals.

How this approach builds capability:

- **Shifting the focus to leadership:** True inclusion often requires shifting away from the assumption that diverse talent needs to adapt to fit the existing organisational mould. Instead, organisations can focus on equipping their leaders with the specific tools and coaching needed to manage the 'people aspects' of driving an inclusive strategy.
- **Creating safe spaces for leaders:** Middle managers and executives often need a confidential, supportive environment to unpack their own blind spots, learn about cultural nuances, and ask questions without the fear of saying the wrong thing. Mentoring your leaders provides this essential psychological safety at the top.
- **Building top-down accountability:** When leaders are actively coached and engaged in their own inclusion journey, they are better positioned to hold one another accountable. This top-down modelling creates a structurally supportive environment that filters down to benefit the entire workforce.

Case study



Indigenous Workforce Development, Training and Mentoring

Approach: The Power of External Partnerships

Target cohort: First Nations Professionals

When creating the enabling environment for diverse talent in Step 3, organisations can decide whether to build a program internally or partner with external experts. Corporate Culcha – an Indigenous-owned consultancy that builds cultural capability and supports First Nations workforce development – provides a helpful case study for occasions when partnering might be an effective route.

Corporate Culcha has partnered with ANZ since 2013 to build cultural awareness for a more culturally safe workplace, leading to the establishment (from 2023) of a mentoring program for new First Nations participants. For ANZ, choosing to collaborate with an external provider offered an effective avenue to integrate deep community knowledge alongside their existing internal frameworks, fostering a highly relational, two-way learning environment.

How this partnership supports their cohort:

- **Access to yarning circles:** Through Corporate Culcha, the program incorporates Yarning Circles as a core networking mechanism. This draws on established community practices to create a relational web of support, facilitating the sharing of knowledge and lived experience from "elder" mentors to newer mentors, and from mentee to mentee.
- **External sounding boards:** Partnering provides mentees with an independent, culturally safe space to discuss complex dynamics, such as navigating how to balance their workplace responsibilities with their community and cultural obligations.

- **The value of multi-year investment:** Operating for over a decade, this partnership highlights how long-term collaboration allows a program to mature. Building knowledge and transferring context iteratively over many years has helped establish deep mutual trust and sustained impact.
- **Holistic goal setting:** The program encourages participants to set a mix of both professional and personal goals based on a social-emotional wellbeing framework. This approach acknowledges the mentee's whole reality, actively supporting them to balance their workplace responsibilities with their cultural and community obligations.
- **Active coordinator support:** The program does not rely on a "set and forget" model; instead, the coordinator conducts regular, proactive check-ins with both mentors and mentees. This hands-on triage ensures that any matches needing extra support are identified early and that momentum is safely maintained.

By committing to a long-term external partnership, the program has cultivated a structurally supportive environment where diverse talent is valued for their lived experience, providing a strong foundation for retention and progression.

Helpful considerations for your 'Build vs. Partner' strategy:

- **Consider community partnerships:** If your internal team has limited capacity or is looking to expand its cultural inclusion, collaborating with specialist organisations can help connect your participants to established, culturally safe networks (like Yarning Circles) that complement your internal efforts.
- **Explore reciprocal learning:** When briefing senior leaders to act as mentors, consider framing the relationship as an opportunity for two-way learning. This encourages mentors to actively listen and learn about different cultural perspectives and systemic workplace experiences, rather than simply imparting career advice.
- **Build for the long term:** Sustainable programs often grow through iterative learning. Long-standing partnerships can provide the stability and consistency needed to build trust and refine a program's cultural safety over time.

Step 4: Build your program

Making informed design choices

You have defined your vision, embedded inclusive principles, and confirmed you have the operational ingredients. Now, it is time to design your program.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” design for mentoring and networking. To navigate this, it is helpful to break down the structure of mentoring and networking programs into three layers (see diagram below):

- **Building blocks:** The core steps every program must navigate (e.g., recruitment, matching, measurement).
- **Design choices:** The range of options available for each building block, ranging from lightweight and agile to structured and systemic. No design choice is inherently ‘better’ – an effective design is one that is ‘fit for purpose’.
- **Inclusion features:** The specific evidence-backed practices you should embed into your chosen design to ensure it remains safe and equitable for under-represented cohorts.

See how the Australian Disability Network and Women4STEM designed their program frameworks, matching mechanics, and operational boundaries on pages 32 and 34.

Track A: Designing a mentoring program

Mentoring is relationship-based and targeted. Your design choices should focus on clear purpose, careful recruitment and matching, role clarity, ongoing support, and appropriate closure.

Track B: Designing a networking program

Networking is broad and connective. Your design choices should focus on accessibility, psychological safety, and active facilitation.

Select the type of program you plan to build below to begin:



Decision tree for choosing and planning a mentoring or networking program

Take action: Design your program

You do not need to invent a program structure from scratch. A strong program is one that is fit-for-purpose, safe for participants, and realistic to sustain. To build your custom approach, use the interactive [Program Design Menu](#) digital tool. In this tool, you will be guided to:

- 1. Choose your track:** Start by selecting whether you are building a targeted Mentoring Program (Track A) or a broader Networking Program (Track B).
- 2. Select your design options:** Work your way through the four building blocks. Pick the practical approaches that best match your organisation's current size, budget, and capacity.
- 3. Embed the inclusion features:** Regardless of which menu options you select, you must apply these foundational practices to ensure your design remains safe, equitable, and accessible for diverse participants.
- 4. Document and adapt:** Once you have made your selections the tool will generate a custom Program Blueprint. Print or save this document to share with your leadership team or executive sponsors of this program and guide your implementation in Step 5. Revisit this menu during your regular learning cycles to review your approach and change if necessary.

Note: The options presented in these menus are drawn from proven industry practice, but they are not exhaustive. Use them alongside the case studies in this guide to inform a design that works for you.

Case study



Career Mentoring Program

Approach: Universal Design, Practical Matching & Enablement

Target cohort: People with disability (PwD)

When building your program mechanics in Step 4, operationalising accessibility requires deliberate planning. The Australian Disability Network (AusDN) provides a highly tested example of how to do this effectively. Running their Career Mentoring Program for over 20 years and supporting thousands of mentor-mentee pairs, AusDN has refined a successful, 'universal design' approach to matching and enablement that organisations can adapt for their own internal initiatives.

AusDN's program connects job seekers and employees with a disability to business mentors across a network of corporate partners. Their model proves that building an inclusive program doesn't require a rigid, one-size-fits-all set of rules; rather, it requires flexible mechanics that allow participants to connect authentically.

How they structure their program mechanics:

- **Matching for human connection:** While matching is heavily dependent on career goals and industry experience, AusDN's detailed application process actively asks participants about their hobbies. Finding shared external interests, such as a recent pair who bonded over a mutual love for converting campervans, can bypass professional awkwardness and create psychological safety and authentic engagement.
- **Redefining mentor training:** A standout feature of AusDN's mandatory preparation training is how it equips mentors to navigate disability confidently. They explicitly teach mentors the critical difference between *medical privacy* (understanding that a specific medical diagnosis is private and irrelevant to the relationship) and *workplace*

adjustments (understanding what the mentee practically needs to participate comfortably and successfully). This clear boundary removes the common fear among corporate mentors of "saying the wrong thing."

- **Mentee-led engagement:** The program is explicitly designed to be mentee-led. Rather than expecting the senior mentor to act as a top-down sponsor who drives the agenda, mentees are empowered and guided to lead the 16-week engagement, setting their own pace and defining what they want to achieve.
- **Universal design principles:** The program operates on the core principle of 'asking, not assuming'. If a mentee doesn't yet know what their career goals are when applying, the flexible design allows their initial program goal to simply be "establishing my goals."

Helpful considerations for building your program:

- **Look beyond the resume for matching:** Consider incorporating questions about hobbies, personal interests, or preferred communication styles into your intake forms. Using these human elements as matching criteria often results in warmer, more sustainable relationships.
- **Train for adjustments, not diagnosis:** When training your mentors, clearly differentiate between asking for medical information (which should be avoided) and asking about required adjustments (which is necessary and supportive). Teach your mentors to focus purely on what the individual needs to succeed in the meetings.
- **Empower the mentee to lead:** Clearly establish role expectations during the onboarding phase. Guide your mentors to step back and allow the mentee to drive the scheduling, agenda, and goal-setting process.

Case study



Mentor She

Approach: Industry Mentoring Network

Target cohort: Female Technical Talent (mid-to-senior career)

Mentor She is a highly customised, 12-month mentoring program run by Women4STEM, a volunteer-led, non-profit industry network. Aimed at mid-to-senior career retention, the program was launched to provide female technical talent with access to an external network of mentors across the broader Australian digital sector, helping them navigate career transitions and leadership pathways.

Running a massive, cross-industry mentoring program entirely through volunteers presents significant operational challenges. To ensure a high-quality experience without burning out their team, Women4STEM deliberately limits their cohort size (around 50-60 pairs per intake) and leans heavily into digital infrastructure and innovative matching events.

To create a safe, scalable, and highly effective mentoring initiative, Women4STEM utilised several key design features:

- **“Mentorfest” chemistry sessions:** Recognising that matching people purely based on paper CVs often leads to awkward or failed partnerships, Women4STEM runs a “Mentorfest”. This acts as a speed-dating event where prospective mentees and mentors can meet, chat, and test for personal chemistry before locking in their preferences.
- **Digital infrastructure for scale:** To manage the administrative burden, Women4STEM developed their own custom matching data formula and digital infrastructure. This system safely handles data collection and preference algorithms,

freeing up the volunteer team to focus on the human elements of the program. For organisations looking to replicate this efficiency without building custom tools, there are off-the-shelf mentoring software options available (such as Mentorloop).

- **Strict time boundaries:** To attract high-calibre, senior industry mentors, the program strictly enforces a “one hour a month” commitment rule. By ensuring the scope of the relationship is tightly bound, they drastically lower the barrier to entry for busy tech leaders.

By utilising technology and chemistry-based matching, Women4STEM consistently delivers high-impact mentoring pairs with exceptional completion rates. Their model proves that external industry networks can successfully manage complex, multi-employer mentoring programs without requiring massive administrative or HR teams.

Key insights for others starting this journey and building internal buy-in:

- **Test for chemistry, not just job titles:** A mentor and mentee might look like a perfect match on paper, but if their communication styles clash, the relationship may fail. Facilitating a low-stakes “speed dating” or chemistry-check event before formalising matches ensures a much higher success rate.
- **Set rigid boundaries to attract senior talent:** *“The minute you ask for too much time, you lose them”*. If you want in-demand technical leaders to participate, you must protect their time. Clearly stipulate that the commitment is just one hour a month, and ensure the mentee takes responsibility for driving the agenda.
- **Leverage technology:** If you are scaling a program beyond 20 pairs, manual spreadsheets become a liability. Invest in dedicated mentoring platforms to handle the algorithmic matching, scheduling, and feedback surveys so your coordinators can focus on program strategy rather than administration.

Step 5: Implement, review and adapt

Keep improving as you go

Launching your program is an important milestone. Once it is underway, check what is working, support participants, listen to feedback, and make practical adjustments.

Implement

As noted in Step 3, managing three key enablers is key to effective implementation: an allocated coordinator, protected time for participants, and sustaining leadership support.

The coordinator is the heart of the program: Their role is to keep the program safe, focused and moving forward. They proactively oversee the program from start to finish by:

- Establishing clear program boundaries and expectations – such as, clarifying time commitments and roles and responsibilities for all participants.
- Checking in regularly with mentors and networking facilitators to offer support.
- Sustaining momentum in networking circles, ensuring events don't fizzle out after the first session.
- Stepping in to recalibrate expectations if mentees or emerging talent become overwhelmed or fail to drive the relationship.

Protecting participation: Execution often stalls because “business as usual” gets in the way. Coordinators must work with line managers to defend the protected work hours promised to participants. This means ensuring line managers reinforce the program's value and encourage active participation.

Maintaining leadership support: To prevent the program from becoming a temporary “flavour of the month,” actively manage your executive sponsors by:

- **Selling early wins:** Share quick, qualitative “success snaps” and positive feedback to keep leaders engaged. Don't wait for a 12-month report.
- **Collaborating on friction:** Set a brief, regular meeting cadence to share updates on success stories, pain points and to identify new internal champions.
- **Respecting time:** Keep sponsor briefings high-impact and concise (e.g., strict 1-hour sessions) to ensure busy senior executives attend and stay bought-in.

Track your progress

Measuring your program's progress is important because it helps you catch problems early, ensure your participants feel supported, and evidence the program's overall value to your senior leadership, program sponsors and organisation.

You do not need expensive software or complex evaluation frameworks to achieve this. An effective approach is to collect simple, accessible data across two different horizons: **early metrics** to monitor day-to-day health (months 1–6), and **long-term metrics** to demonstrate ongoing value (months 6–12+).

Examples of early and long-term metrics are provided in the table below. It is critical that the metrics you use to track your program ultimately link back to the foundational goals of your program (established in Step 1). Take time with your team to review these goals and ensure that you deliberately select the specific survey questions, focus group topics, or long-term data points that directly test if you are achieving what you set out to do.

Early metrics <i>Lightweight data used to monitor immediate program health, participant safety, and baseline engagement.</i>	Long-term metrics <i>Commercial and structural data to prove organisational value, maintain leadership alignment, and secure ongoing funding.</i>
• Pulse check: Send a simple three-question survey asking questions like: <i>On a scale of 1-10, how valuable was your connection this month? How can we support you better?</i> • Attendance: Ask participants to confirm if their scheduled meetings actually took place or count how many people show up to group networking events. • Spotting early problems: Keep track of how many people drop out or ask for a new mentor in the first 90 days. A high number is a clear warning sign to pause and adjust.	• Keeping your people: Compare the 12-month retention rate of your program participants against the rest of your organisation to see if your program encourages people to stay. • Growth: Track how many participants received a promotion, moved to a new team to gain experience, or took on a leadership role within a year of completing the program. • Overall happiness and belonging: Use the annual staff survey to see if program participants report higher job satisfaction or a stronger desire to stay than non-participants.

For a practical look at how an employer tracked these types of milestones using internal data, see the EmpowerHer case study (page 39).

Review and Adapt

Once you have your metrics, you must actively review the results and adapt the program based on what you learn. This is an ongoing process of listening and improving.

- **Look for patterns, not just numbers:** If your early metrics show that meetings are constantly being cancelled, do not just write it down – take action. This might mean talking to managers or participants to understand the barriers.
- **Move the goalposts for inclusion:** Success looks different for everyone. As you review your results, remember that for diverse cohorts, a massive win might simply be building baseline interpersonal comfort or gaining the confidence to speak up in a team meeting, rather than a promotion.
- **Retake the Health Check:** After your program's first cycle, revisit the [Capability Health Check](#) resource. Retake the assessment with your team. Use the practical success stories from your pilot to address remaining organisational gaps and secure the executive buy-in required to scale up next year.

Take action: Launch, measure and adapt

- **Launch an initial pilot:** Launch a pilot program to test your framework, evaluate your matching mechanics, and gather initial insights.
- **Align metrics with your goals:** Refamiliarise yourself with the Step 1 goals of your program. Think carefully about these targets when choosing the metrics needed to prove the program is achieving its purpose.
- **Track early and long-term progress:** Use lightweight early metrics, like a quick monthly pulse check, to monitor day-to-day health and step in quickly if pairs face challenges. Over time, combine these quick check-ins with long-term metrics, such as existing company retention and career growth figures, to evaluate lasting success.
- **Adapt and secure buy-in:** Use the data and personal success stories you have collected to measure the overall value and impact of your program. Present these metrics to your executive team to prove the program's value, refine your design based on feedback, and secure ongoing funding for a broader rollout.

Case study



Commonwealth Bank

EmpowerHer (Commonwealth Bank)

Approach: Sponsorship program

Target cohort: Female technical talent (Data, Cyber, Engineering, Strategy, Risk)

EmpowerHer is a **sponsorship program** launched by CommBank for female talent across their data, cyber, engineering, risk and tech strategy divisions. CommBank initiated the program in response to an opportunity to support the retention and career development of women in Technology. Women remain underrepresented in technology roles, making it essential for organisations to actively support, develop, and retain the talented women already contributing to the industry.

In response, CommBank deliberately chose a sponsorship program over traditional mentoring. As the program lead noted, *"women are often over-mentored and under-sponsored"*.

Mentoring and sponsorship share many similarities – both involve facilitating trusted one-to-one relationships that support an individual's development and growth. However, while a mentor typically provides guidance and advice, a sponsor helps increase visibility, broaden professional networks and advocate for career opportunities.

The program was structured as a tightly scoped, seven-month pilot program to explore the potential of sponsorship to support career development initiative in Technology.

Key design features of this pilot included:

- **Targeted matching:** 20 female leaders were paired with Executive General Managers outside their direct reporting line, aligning their career aspirations with the experience and networks of their sponsors.
- **Role clarity and training:** Both parties completed a one-hour training workshop. Participants were supported to establish effective sponsorship relationships, while sponsors received guidance on their role and responsibilities.
- **Leveraging internal expertise:** To support participants' development, CommBank drew on the knowledge and capabilities of existing internal teams and expertise to deliver targeted workshops on interview preparation, professional branding and leadership self-assessment.

EmpowerHer pilot established clear, measurable objectives over a 12-month period, and delivered strong, positive outcomes across each of its objectives.

- **70% of participants achieved a vertical or lateral move**, exceeding the original target.
- 25% of participants were promoted to general manager roles.
- EmpowerHer achieved an average participant satisfaction score of 4.7/5.
- Participant attrition was limited to 5%, well below the target objective.

Support for the initiative was built through a phased approach. Launching with existing resources, the team initially drew on internal expertise and support from colleagues across the organisation. By delivering these strong results through the pilot, the program team secured dedicated sponsorship and funding.

This expansion led to a new cohort launch in April 2026, extending the program across additional locations and business areas. The initiative now supports participants across Australia, India, and CommBank's venture arm (x15), backed by executive sponsors from across the organisation.

Key insights for others starting this journey and building internal buy-in:

- **Start with a clear and specific objective:** CommBank focused on supporting the retention and progression of senior women in Tech. Being clear on your purpose and the value you are seeking to create can help build a strong case for investment and support. Defining clear, measurable objectives from the outset and articulating the definition of *done* is important.

- **Test and learn before scaling:** Starting with a focused pilot can help organisations gather insights, refine the program design and understand what is most valuable for participants before expanding the initiative more broadly.
- **Make participation easy and accessible:** When engaging senior leaders, it is important to design programs that fit within existing commitments and workloads. CommBank kept training and briefing sessions focused and practical, with sponsor training delivered in a one-hour format to support participation and engagement from senior leaders.

Appendix: Using this guide with AI

AI tools such as Copilot, Gemini, Claude, and ChatGPT can help you interpret and adapt the materials in this guide to your specific workplace context. They can help draft communications, tailoring the *Strategic Program Canvas*, planning your mentor training, and breaking through the “blank page” block.

However, this guide is designed around deeply human concepts like structural empathy, cultural safety, and active advocacy. AI outputs should always be reviewed by humans – particularly in relation to workplace policy, confidentiality, and inclusion.

How to use this guide with AI

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Upload the PDF of this guide to your secure organisational AI platform.	Tell the AI about your context (e.g., your organisation size, participant demographics, and specific diversity goals).	Ask the AI to help you draft rollout plans, adapt the Design Menus, or create workshop agendas.

Disclaimer

Using AI with this Guide is entirely optional. AI tools can occasionally generate inaccurate content, reflect biases or miss important organisational context, therefore outputs should be treated as a starting point for planning rather than definitive HR, legal or organisational advice. Always apply human judgement and comply with organisational protocols on AI use to protect confidentiality and data security.

Human review and organisational judgment remain essential. AI cannot replace the active empathy of a human coordinator.

Master prompt

Here is an example prompt to help set up your AI. Simply copy and paste this text alongside a copy of the guide:

You are assisting a program leader to implement a mentoring, networking, or sponsorship program for digital talent, using the attached guidebook as your primary reference source. Your role is to guide me step-by-step through the core tools in this document:

- **The Strategic Program Canvas (Step 1):** Ask me clarifying questions one by one to help me answer the four core questions: The Core Problem, Target Participants, Supporters & Partners, and Champions & Sponsors.
- **The Capability Health Check (Step 3):** Act as a supportive sounding board to assess our operational readiness. Help me evaluate if we truly have the "Three Enablers" (an allocated coordinator, protected time during work hours, and active leadership support) before we start building.
- **Program Design (Step 4):** Help adapt the guide's Building Blocks, Design Menus, and Inclusion Features to our organisation's specific context, constraints, and capacity.
- **Implementation (Step 5):** Draft practical materials, kick-off agendas, and communications, while identifying execution risks (such as "business as usual" overriding protected time).

Prioritise practical, realistic, and inclusive advice. Do not invent organisational policies or legal requirements. Ask clarifying questions if you need more context about our Three Enablers (time, coordinator, leadership support) before recommending a program design.

Eight practical prompts to get started

The hardest part of using AI is knowing what to ask. Once you have uploaded the guide, copy and paste any of these prompts to tackle specific stages of your roadmap:

1. Defining your goals (Step 1)

"Help us fill out the Strategic Program Canvas. We are trying to address the high attrition rate of mid-level female tech talent. Draft a clear problem statement and define what early success might look like."

2. Testing your capacity (Step 3)

"Review the 'Three Enablers' in the guide. We have strong executive support but zero dedicated budget and our coordinators are time-poor volunteers. Suggest practical workarounds to ensure we don't set this up to fail."

3. Navigating the design menu (Step 4)

"We want to run a six-month agile networking pilot for our cyber team. Recommend specific, lightweight choices from the Step 4 Design Menu that fit a time-poor workforce."

4. Building structural empathy

"Based on the guide's inclusion features, how could we adapt our mentor matching process and meeting cadence to be more accessible for neurodivergent digital talent?"

5. Training for Sponsorship vs. Mentorship

"We are running a Sponsorship program. Draft a strict 1-hour briefing agenda to teach our executives how to be active sponsors (advocates) rather than just passive mentors providing advice."

6. Defending boundaries (Step 5)

"Draft a plain-English email from our CIO announcing this initiative to line managers. It needs to firmly defend the 'protected time' boundary so participants aren't silently penalised for attending."

7. Active triage (Step 5)

"Our 30-day pulse checks show that mentees are overwhelmed and not driving the relationships. Draft a tactful email I can send as the coordinator to recalibrate their expectations safely."

8. Moving the goalposts for success (Step 5)

"Suggest five inclusive, qualitative success metrics we can use to evaluate our pilot that focus on 'baseline interpersonal comfort' and 'confidence in meetings' rather than just tracking immediate

Contributors

This resource was developed in close consultation with key subject matter experts, on-the-ground program implementers, and a diverse range of leading digital employers and community organisations.

Working groups & validation partners

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- Code Without Barriers
- Women4STEM

Enterprise employers & industry leaders

- ANZ
- Baidam Solutions
- Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CommBank)
- Microsoft
- Tech Council of Australia

