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If Coaching is Good, then E-Coaching is

Author: Rossett, Allison; Marino, Gerald **Source:** T + D 59, no. 11 (Nov 2005): p. 46-50,53 **ISSN:** 1055-9760 **Number:** 929621811 **Copyright:** Copyright American Society for Training and Development Nov 2005

Coaching is becoming more integrated into work and life through laptop and mobile systems.

GOVERT, WHO LIVES in the Netherlands, is about to talk via instant messaging (IM) to his Montreal-based coach. She is helping Covert plan a performance review for a difficult employee.

Maria in Los Angeles is finishing up an online module that familiarizes her with new tax regulations. It's the "homework" assigned by Dr. Su, who is mostly her coach, but is also her audit instructor. Online tutorials and occasional emails supplement weekly phone coaching sessions with Dr. Su.

Alan in Miami emails the final draft of his speech to Martin, his coach in Minneapolis. The speech, a presentation to the board of directors of his growing community bank, is the result of four exchanges with Martin in the past two weeks. For this final review, unlike prior communications that have been via mail, Martin and Alan will meet online, and Martin will watch Alan pilot the delivery of this speech. How will he watch? Both will go to a website to see and hear each other via web cameras and headsets.

This is far from a complete picture of coaching circa 2005. Not even close. But it does give you a visual of how technology has broadened the way teaching has touched the world.

Want to drop a few pounds? Get a coach. Want to motivate employees? Get a coach. Want to monitor progress toward retirement? Get a coach. Want to become more creative, less dependent, or stop pulling your hair? Get a coach. Are you ready for a special date with a special person? That's right, get a coach, in person or online. People with needs, many kinds of needs, are turning to coaches. Coaching is big for matters from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Coaching is good

Although there are few empirical studies establishing a link between coaching and improved performance, it is hard to doubt that coaching delivers benefits. It fosters relationships, feedback, care, conversation, collaboration, answers, and bonding between veterans, experts, and novices. So how could coaching be anything but good for individuals and organizations?

Influence is, of course, at the heart of the matter. City University of Hong Kong Assistant Professor Christina Sue-Chan and Dr. Gary P. Latham's 2004 paper revisits the 1955 work by behavioral scientists Monroe Lefkowitz, Robert R. Blake, and Jane Srygley Mouton. The paper found an increase of 35 percent in the likelihood that individuals would follow the lead of people who wore markers of authority, in this case, a suit and tie. MetrixGlobal's 2001 study on executive coaching found that 60 percent of respondents identified specific financial benefits from experiences with coaches. Productivity and employee satisfaction were most affected by coaching.

A 1997 study conducted by Gerald Olivero, K. Denise Bane, and Richard E. Kopelman identified dramatic benefits. When training was followed by eight weeks of one-on-one executive coaching to complete a project chosen by the "coachee," a fourfold increase in productivity resulted.

What is coaching?

Coaching, of course, is about purposeful interactions between a coach and the person or persons being coached. Jeanne

Strayer and Allison Rossett, in a sales coaching project for a global real estate firm, parsed coaching this way:

Great coaches are trainers, demonstrating, for example, sales negotiation skills, asking the neophyte to try a new strategy, and then providing feedback on the neophyte's efforts at making a listing presentation. Great coaches are integrators, taking the new agent to the places where real estate people talk about the business, compare properties, eat lunch, and take seminars. Great coaches are motivators, tending to the new agent's persistence by boosting confidence and reminding why this is a good business to be in.

In prior years, new real estate sales people picked up their skills by attending classes and practicing with videos. This project moved learning beyond the classroom and into the field via a coaching relationship with an experienced sales person. When Strayer and Rossett studied the impact of the structured coaching program, they found statistically significant results based on what mattered here-sales.

Such outcomes have made coaching a popular intervention with executives. Sue Reynolds, CEO of Community HousingWorks, a non-profit housing corporation, says, "My coach created a mirror I could look into to see myself and my actions. There was no other way to do that in my situation."

Employees like coaching too. Stephanie Beyer of Carlson Companies likes the objectivity and focus provided by an external coach. "I could be honest with my coach, and I knew it wouldn't come back to me on a performance review," she says. "This helped me explore areas for development without worrying about how it would affect my status. Consequently I experienced significant growth that I wouldn't have had individually or even with an internal coach."

"The email follow-up reminders of my weekly goals and the commitments I made to my coach kept me on track and helped me prepare for my next coaching session," she adds.

Enter the telephone

Famed executive coach Marshall Goldsmith thinks the phone is a good way to coach. "A common belief is that feedback or coaching is a very 'personal' activity and that it is much more effective if done in person (as opposed to by phone)," he says. Research conducted by Goldsmith and others in eight organizations supported coaching by telephone.

Linda Miller, executive coach and global liaison for coaching with The Ken Blanchard Companies and coaching.com, has been successful coaching clients she has never met. "I have had several clients that have worked through very challenging situations via phone conversations and email contact. With many clients, the entire coaching relationship and experience was developed over the phone or online without any face-to-face interaction."

Enter the Internet

E-coaching moves the process online and expands the possibilities. Some e-coaches call what they do "distance coaching," "distance mentoring," or even "telementoring." What's interesting here is that online experiences and tools are the fundamental way of supporting the coaching relationship, not an afterthought.

Today most coaches use electronic means to communicate, if only to set up or alter an appointment. But an e-coach goes further, typically using the Internet strategically. In some cases, the entire relationship happens online-using IM with voice and even video to sharpen personnel selection questions or to shape a job search effort.

Executive coach David Facer, of ActivatePotential.com, supplements his in-person coaching with IM and email threads. "When I'm in the office, my instant messaging program is open to my coaching clients. Sometimes I've conducted an entire coaching session via IM. The email discussions create a thread that can be saved and reread in sequence to see the patterns and themes we discussed."

Coaching.com's Miller ticks off an online coaching platform that commences with computerized assessment, then provides job aids, reminders, chats, and archiving, and also allows both coach and client to monitor progress. She said, "We are on the phone during the coaching sessions, and we have access to online assessments, goals, and previous coaching call information, along with a multitude of resources. Having these at our fingertips allows us to see the progress that's been made, deepen the learning that occurs during coaching, and think about how to apply concepts more effectively."

There are definite benefits associated with e-coaching:

Location scarcely matters. Experts in Bahrain and Boise can enlighten managers in Boston and Bangladesh. Bangladesh? Yes, there too. In 2001 Li-Bin Wang and Tim Wentling studied an e-coaching program that included the developing world. In this World Bank of Asia project, they found that online coaching improved transfer of training for

participants from 18 countries in Asia, South America, Africa, and Europe. After a three-week training program, participants were then coached online for six months. They found that online coaching was able to provide resources, build relationships, problem-solve, motivate, and create⁵⁹, no. 11 (Nov 2005): p. 46-50,⁵³ interactions between the coach and the person being coached. Even though some participants traveled over an hour to a cyber café for their online coaching sessions, results were positive.

Coaching online lingers, as messages transform into valuable assets for subsequent reference. Toronto-based executive coach Jerome Shore combines online technology with personal contacts. Shore points his clients to proprietary online modules at coachingclinic.com for homework assignments. Woven between phone and face-to-face sessions, the modules ask for reflection. Shore says, "Clients use the modules to prepare for coaching sessions and save them to refer to later. It really helps keep their key issues in front of them over the length of the coaching program...and even after they have finished."

Coaching matches needs and resources. Have a specific question? Reach out through a search engine and database for the right person or idea. Steve Schuller, vice president of organizational development and staffing for Wyndham International, says, "It [Wyndham's Creating Connections program] works like match.com to connect mentors with protégés, allowing employees to personalize their mentoring experience in a way that's meaningful for them while producing measurable results for the company. We found it to be much more effective in developing successful mentoring relationships and in helping participants to maintain them through the program's scheduling and reminder capabilities."

Coaching expands the role of the manager and supervisor. Many studies have pointed to the contributions managers make to transfer of training and performance improvement. How? They do it when they coach on the job. From a supervisor's vantage point, and with deep knowledge of unit goals, effective managers help individuals set aligned goals, remove obstacles to performance, maintain confidence, and match resources to needs.

Coaching goes where the action is. New police officers in California are coached by field training officers. Neophytes have been in instructor-led classes, of course. But it is the field training aspect that brings lessons to the streets, where time, speed, and judgment come into play, and where an experienced officer's perspective is appreciated.

Technology scales support and expertise. Valuable experts and expertise can be in more than one place at the same time through e-coaching and archives that collect their smarts. Miller reports that The Ken Blanchard Company's platform allows them to coach several people in a company simultaneously. By tracking results and major themes within the coaching sessions, Miller and her colleagues can "coach the organization as well as the individual."

Technology makes coaching more affordable. In-person coaching can be expensive. Fees for the personal touch, travel, and time away from the job add up. E-coaching, however, reduces costs, while providing encouragement, information, and connection to networks of people and content. Here's an example. A week at a sports performance center like Carmichael Training Systems starts at \$2,000. Their classic online coaching package can be had for \$49 per month with an advanced option at \$499.

Just flip on the computer?

Is it a matter of turning on the computer and pairing a coach with someone in need of one? Not quite. More is involved, of course.

The success of an e-coaching program is based on those elements that make any coaching program successful, plus a few that are unique to the technology.

Does the coach want to coach? Coaches must be willing participants in the partnership. As university professor and management consultant Peter Drucker has noted, knowledge workers cannot be compelled to do their best work. Coaches must perceive and receive benefits, financial or otherwise. In 1988, Tenneco Automotive instituted pay-for-mentoring, where a portion of bonuses earned by managers were linked to their performance in hiring and promoting women and minorities. After five years, the percentage of women in all areas of management grew significantly. Rossett and Strayer's successful real estate coaches were volunteers for their roles, were honored for their efforts, and received compensation when protégés closed sales.

Does the individual want to be coached? Beyer reported, "The first coaching program we put our staff through involved people we thought would benefit from coaching. We had a 50 percent success rate with that approach. The second program consisted only of volunteers-people who came to us and asked for help in advancing their careers. This group was motivated and had significantly better results from coaching."

Allison Rossett is coaching doctoral candidate Rebecca Frazee as Rebecca narrows the focus for her dissertation. They are online, using Macromedia Breeze.

One of the authors signed up for an online diet coach. She then hopped a plane. For the next three weeks, regular computer-generated messages from her coach were ignored. She continues to bypass them to this day. No urgency. No commitment. No results. Coaching technology can encourage persistence on assignments-but only when the target is eager.

Is this the right time? Paul Michelman, in a Harvard Business School Working Knowledge article, identified times of change as fertile for coaching. Receptivity to coaching might be increased after a promotion, when confronting a stretch assignment, or tackling a new task or challenge.

Is this the right match? Wyndham creates matches based on employee's interests and work challenges. Lori Shook, a coach based in Aix en Provence, France, and a trainer for The Coaches Training Institute of San Rafael, California, emphasized the interpersonal dimension. She believes that there must be "chemistry" between coach and client. "We emphasize to our coaches that they must be flexible. They must communicate and coach the client in a way the client wants and relates to. And we always tell potential clients to try out a few coaches to see which one best fits their learning style."

Were high-value messages delivered? In ASTD's Infoline publication, "Coaching and Feedback," Barbara Darraugh says "Feedback is the heart of coaching." Sue Reynolds described her experience this way, "My coach had a gift to see the underlying issue I was facing. Sessions were like pit stops around ongoing issues. And she was good at helping me see what I was and was not good at." It turns out that expertise counts in coaching, and, according to Sue-Chan, Latham, and others, experts deliver even more than peers in satisfaction and outcomes.

Are the parties accountable for achieving goals? Focus coaching on real challenges and tangible deliverables. Olivero and his colleagues attributed the coaching productivity gains reported in their 1997 study to goal setting and accountability associated with presenting their efforts to peers and management.

Do they know the technology? Andrew Wadsworth, a professor at the University of Illinois, avoids introducing new technology into coaching. "People being coached, especially executives, are so busy that they don't have time to be trained, so you need to use their communication channel of choice to quickly establish trust and credibility and launch the coaching process."

Do they leverage the technology? E-coaching can be more than emails and archived messages. Live visual contact, text messaging, note taking and synchronous conversation can advance a relationship and task progress.

Is progress monitored and applauded? Are goals being achieved? What happens when the effort is advancing? When it does not? How does the organization show that coaching is honored? Several decades ago, F.F. Fournies of Fournies and Associates surveyed 35 companies and found spotty support for coaching. As participation in coaching has increased in the new century, has the organizational climate advanced?

Not everyone is keen on it

Not all coaches believe that e-coaching works. Some doubt that trust and credibility happen at a distance.

Michael Beck, an experienced executive coach from XLeaders.com, prefers to coach by phone. He believes that coaching by email or IM leads to misunderstandings: "Much of the emotion is left out through text-only communication and you miss the vocal inflections through digital channels. Voice communication makes it easier to build rapport and adds fluidity to the conversation. It also allows an experienced coach to 'hear' what's not being said. I find it's hard to get that flexibility and those insights through most online channels."

Wadsworth favors initial personal contact to establish trusting relationships. In the World Bank project, that connection was achieved through an intense three-week workshop before e-coaching began. Coaches and peers formed relationships during that time together in the workshop and that bond held over thousands of miles and limited communication channels.

Today, with improved and more accessible communications, he believes effective coaching requires at least an initial videoconference or face-to-face meeting.

Into the future

The future will bring more e-coaching. Matchmaking will happen online as companies with many and far-flung employees establish pairings by needs and interests, no matter where people are located.

The technology will make it possible to seek metrics on engagement, use, and satisfaction, as coaching is ever more

integrated into work and life through laptop and mobile systems. Medical information, for example, will appear on mobile devices as chips embedded in patient's charts coach health workers about allergies, drug interactions, or the latest research on a disease.

Tom McGee, vice president of Triple Creek Associates, predicts that coaching and mentoring will move to the desktop. "People will be able to find the tacit knowledge embedded in the organization by searching the coaching and mentoring database, much like they search a codified knowledge database today," he says.

FRED, STEVE, and Alice are all intelligent software agents. FRED helps employees coordinate their learning experiences. After filling out task and interest profiles, FRED makes recommendations. STEVE (Soar Training Expert for Virtual Environments) assists as students learn procedures for working complex machinery. As an intelligent agent, Steve not only demonstrates technical procedures, but he monitors students as they perform procedures, and through voice recognition technology, he listens to their questions and responds.

And Alice patiently coaches English language learners for \$10 per month.

Self-coaching, with some support and history in the social psychology literature, will be boosted by technology systems that prod more exercise and better time management habits. Are you ready to have your salespeople motivated by their personal digital assistants? How about an online personal agent who knows you enjoyed 375 extra calories yesterday? Are you ready to consider the importance of timely attention to performance appraisals when nudged by an e-buddy?

Is the advance of e-coaching a good thing? We think so. Tailored support, guidance, feedback, and examples can be there when you need them, on-the-spot and on-time. That's better than waiting until whenever for whomever, holding your question or concern captive to somebody else's calendar.

Coaching Resources

Resources with more information about the benefits of e-coaching.

Alice, online language coach, www.alicebot.org.

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Allison Rossett, a professor of educational technology at San Diego State University, is the editor of *The ASTD E-learning Handbook* and co-author of *Beyond the Podium: Delivering Training and Performance to a Digital World*. Rossett is a member of the ASTD Board of Directors; arossett@mail.sdsu.edu.

Gerald Marino is performance consultant and managing director of The Marino Group in San Diego. He will graduate from San Diego State University with a Master's of Arts in Educational Technology in December 2005; gem@marinogroup.com.

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