



# EMCC Research Review

Issue 9: Coaching outcomes

## Introduction

Dear Reader,

In this issue of the EMCC Research Review, we will turn our attention to coaching in the workplace – a topic we have so far neglected, largely due to the author's obsession with mentoring...

We start out with a very recent meta-analysis of the effects of coaching conducted by de Haan and Nilsson. The study includes no less than 37 randomised controlled trials (!) and thereby offers a solid scientific foundation for the effects of workplace coaching.

Second, we turn the billion-dollar industry of executive coaching. While the quantity and the methodological rigour of the literature on this specific topic is quite a bit lower, the authors, Athanasopoulou and Dopson, give us a thorough and comprehensive overview of the field.

The final study marks a recent development in the field, namely unpacking boundary conditions of the efficacy of coaching interventions. Drawing on a sample of 161 coachees, Jones, Woods and Zhou investigate the effects of 3 contextual factors in workplace coaching, namely format (face-to-face, telephone/video, or blended), whether the coach was internal or external, and the complexity of the coachee's job. Their study offers interesting insights into the effects of coaching under various circumstances.

Across the board, the studies in this review paint quite a consistent picture: Workplace coaching works. It is not the end-all solution to all organisational ills, but when done properly, coaching is likely to drive both well-being and productivity improvements.

I hope you enjoy reading the current issue.

Sincerely

Content writer

Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark

## Workplace coaching in general – does it work?

*Study: What can we know about the effectiveness of coaching? A meta-analysis based only on randomized controlled trials*

By: Erik de Haan & Viktor O. Nilsson

*Published in: Academy of Management Learning & Education, 2023, pp. 1-21*

### **Introduction**

This study is a meta-analysis, meaning an analysis of all the published, quantitative studies of coaching, that live up to the quality criteria set by the authors. We therefore get a quantitative summary of the existing literature and an overview of what we know and what we need to know more about. The paper stands out by including only randomized controlled trials (RCT), which is regarded as the “gold standard” for experimental intervention studies. RCT is a method in which participants are randomly assigned to either an intervention group or a control group. Data is gathered on both groups before and after the intervention process, and the result are analysed statistically.

The strength of this method is twofold. First, it mitigates the effects of self-selection. In coaching research this is important because people that are particularly coachable and interested in personal development would be likely to self-select into the study, which makes it difficult to parse out whether the measured results stem from the intervention or personal factors. Secondly, having a control group ensures that we have a “business as usual” bases for comparison. This allows us to detect if the effects are the results of the intervention or some common contextual variable. For example, let us assume that we are interested in measuring the effect of coaching on job satisfaction. So, we do a coaching intervention in a company, assigning a sample of employees to a coaching program lasting 6 months. Let us assume that the results show the participants experienced a significant increase in job satisfaction after the 6 months period. Can we then say that the increase is caused by the coaching intervention? Well, not quite. It may be that everybody else in the company experienced an increase in job satisfaction as well because business is going well. RCT’s control for this.

## **What did the researchers do?**

The researchers gathered all RCTs investigating workplace and executive coaching in the widest sense. Specifically, they included studies pertaining to work-related, career, life and executive coaching. Studies of coaching in healthcare settings with patients as coachees were left out, as they are not really comparable to general workplace coaching. Studies of youth mentoring and peer mentoring were also excluded from the dataset.

In total, the study includes data from 37 studies.

## **Main Findings**

- At the broadest level of analysis, the conclusion is that coaching works and the effects are moderate in size
- More specifically coaching had a positive impact on well-being, workplace skills, preparedness, and goal attainment
- The impact tended to be higher on self-reported scores compared to observed and objective measures
- Coaching had significant positive effects on employees, students, and the general adult population.
- However, the effects were insignificant for leadership coaching after a statistical correction method called a “Bonferroni correction”, the technicalities of which are outside the scope of the present review
- Both certified external coaches and internal coaches had positive impacts, whereas student coaches did not
- To achieve the effects, between 4 and 8 coaching sessions seems to be enough – more sessions do not increase the effect
- Females benefitted more from coaching

### **Why is this interesting?**

At the broadest level the study is interesting because it shows the coaching is likely to have a positive impact. Given the enormous amount of money and other resources spent on coaching, this is a rather reassuring conclusion. Indeed, meta-analyses are always interesting in their capacity to summarise the state of the literature. This analysis is particularly interesting because of the rigour of the included studies, all of them being RCTs.

Also, it is quite interesting that the effect of leadership coaching was the smallest, even insignificant after statistical corrections. While workplace coaching has often been seen as something rather elitist exclusively for the managerial elite, this study suggest that the effects are likely larger when coaching is implemented on employees. However, we will return to this issue, when we look at the next study.

Given the gender inequality issues most workplaces face, it is quite interesting to note that females benefit more from coaching, which suggests that it could be a small remedy to that end.

Finally, an interesting aspect of the study is that the positive effects, although being statistically significant, were also moderate. Thus, Workplace coaching will probably not save the world, nor will it fix dysfunctional workplaces.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

The first thing to do is to consider coaching as a possible tool in the people management toolbox. Then consider which outcomes you are interested in improving and find valid ways of measuring them. The study suggests that relying only on self-reported data might inflate the effects somewhat, so consider which observed or objective measurements you want to include in your assessment.

The study also shows the importance of selecting coaches who are certified or accredited. Given that anyone can label themselves as coach, accreditations offer some security as to the level of quality and impact.

## **Drawbacks**

While meta-analysis are quite useful in summarising the existing literature in field of research, they are not without limitations.

As it is always the case with meta-analyses, the results rely on the quality and availability of papers in the field. This, however, is mitigated to some extent by only including RCTs. There is also the risk of publication bias, which means that the publication of studies is biased by the results obtained in the studies, typically in favour of studies that find significant effects. The authors conducted a funnel plot analysis to test for this, and found that the overall effects might be slightly exaggerated due to publication bias.

In addition, a large quantitative study such as this will necessarily leave out important aspects of the coach-coachee relationship, meaning that relationship specific aspects that drive the effects are left out. Therefore, the study allows us to conclude that coaching in general is associated with a range of positive outcomes, which is a comforting conclusion. Why this effect happens and how to improve them is still an open question.

Finally, it could be considered a weakness that a fairly large portion of the included studies are built around student samples. Not that student coaching is irrelevant, but the direct transferability to an actual workplace setting might be limited.

## **Executive coaching specifically – does it work?**

*Study: A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most?*

*By: Andromachi Athanasopoulou & Sue Dopson*

*Published in: The Leadership Quarterly, 2018, vol. 29, pp. 70-88*

### **Introduction**

This study zooms in on executive coaching by reviewing the existing literature on the topic. They define executive coaching as a “*targeted, purposeful intervention* that help executives develop and maintain positive change in their personal development and leadership behaviour.”

An important point to consider here is that the coaching process should have an effect on the sponsoring organisation’s bottom line, which is a quite central part of the authors’ review.

### **What did the researcher do?**

The authors chose to include only studies in which the coach was external to the organisation, which is arguably the most common set-up. The researchers first investigated the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the 110 identified studies. Then they used a subset of 84 studies to investigate Executive Coaching outcomes and contextual variables.

### **Main findings:**

Overall:

- The most frequently used coaching methods were the Cognitive-behavioural approach, Solution-focused coaching and Positive psychology/strengths-based coaching, however the authors were not able to do direct comparisons between these in terms of efficacy. They all brought positive effects

Coachee specific outcomes:

- Reduced stress/anxiety and increased work and life satisfaction
- Improved time-management and adaptability
- Improved goal-setting and self-awareness
- Improved skills in communication, management and development of others, also as evidenced by others
- Improved team-player skills
- Increased commitment to the organisation and an increased feeling of being valued
- Better at forming cross-functional relationships

#### Organisational outcomes:

- Increases in employee job satisfaction, productivity, leadership effectiveness and sustaining a coaching culture

#### Coach outcomes

- Coaches experienced self-actualisation and fulfilment
- They also obtained new knowledge and improved their coaching skills

#### Pitfalls:

- In cases of severe executive derailment coaching is likely ineffective
- Lack of agreement among stakeholders as to what success implies
- Some coachees do not see the value of coaching
- Overly ambitious goal-setting can lead to lower productivity
- It seems that in small and medium-sized companies, the effects are larger on personal attributes than on organisational outcomes
- Coaches rarely gather structured evaluations and rely mostly on informal feedback
- Coaches could need help in coping with clients' resistance to coaching

#### **Why is this interesting?**

First, the study is important because executive coaching is big business. Based on this review, it also seems to work, although it is not quite the panacea it is touted to be.



It is also quite interesting that all the key stakeholders, i.e. the coachee, the coach and the organisation, are likely to gain from executive coaching interventions.

The study is also interesting because it points out a range of potential pitfalls, such as lack of alignment on the desired outcomes, coachee resistance and cases in which coaching is simply not the right intervention.

A final important point of the review is that a striking minority (3 out of 84 studies) considered all three stakeholders involved, namely, the coach, the coachee and the organisation. Future research in coaching should therefore take a more holistic view of the interventions.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

First, the study indicates that executive coaching can be a valuable means to achieve both organisational and personal ends. To increase the chance of success it is important to define criteria for success up front and ideally collect some baseline data on these measures to serve as a benchmark. It is also important that coachees see the point of the intervention and is committed to the process.

Finally, although there is no shortage of executive coaches in the market, it can be very difficult to figure out how to separate the wheat the chaff. Luckily, organisations such as EMCC do a lot of work to ensure high ethical and quality standards among its members.

### **Drawbacks**

Unlike the meta-analysis above, this review study does not offer firm quantitative conclusions. Therefore, it is quite difficult to establish the magnitude of the observed effects.

Another drawback is of course that the review cannot be better than the studies included. And while the scientific rigour in the field of study is increasing, there are still some shortcomings.

## **Boundary conditions for workplace coaching effects**

Study: Boundary conditions of workplace coaching outcomes

By: Rebecca J. Jones, Stephen A. Woods, & Ying Zhou

*Published in: Journal of Managerial Psychology, 2018, Volume 33, Issue 7/8, pp. 475-496*

### **Introduction**

The authors seek to investigate the impact of a number of design features of coaching interventions on well-being and effectiveness. The specific features under investigation in the study were whether the coach was internal or external, and the whether the format was strictly face-to-face, telephone only or blended, i.e. face-to-face combined telephone or video. The also investigate another feature which is job complexity.

### **What did the researcher do?**

The sample in the study comprised 161 coachees aged 20-70 years with a mean age of 41 years. About 62% were female and 56% of the participants were in non-management positions, the remaining were spilt between middle-, top-, and line-management with roughly half of them being middle managers.

The majority, about 70% had an external coach and only 16% had an internal coach; the rest did not report it. Most relationships were face-to-face (~46%), while roughly 32% were telephone based and about 13% used a blended format.

Well-being and personal effectiveness were self-assessed using surveys. The complexity of the role was assessed using a proxy for occupational complexity developed by the US department of Labor.

### **Main findings:**

- Well-being was higher for coachees with external coaches than for those with internal coaches
- Well-being was significantly higher for the blended format compared to face-to-face and just telephone

- Quite interestingly, the effectiveness of coaching on well-being and personal effectiveness was not dependent on job complexity. That is, coaching had the same positive effects regardless of the complexity level
- For those working in complex jobs the positive effect was higher when they external coaches compared to internal

### **Why is this interesting?**

The sheds light on some of the contextual factors in coaching and therefore help us gain a more nuanced perspective on how and when coaching is the most effective. By showing that different coaching intervention designs have different outcomes under different circumstances, the authors add important nuances somewhat simplifying coaching outcome literature.

It is also quite interesting that external coaches were generally more effective than internal coaches. The fact that everyone seemed to benefit from coaching, regardless of job complexity, is quite interesting as well.

### **How can you put this into practice?**

The simplest practical recommendation from the study is this: If you want to increase employee well-being and perceived personal effectiveness, then hire an external coach. It does not matter how complex the employee's job is, the effects will most likely be positive. Ideally find a coach who work with a blended format, that is, both face-to-face and remote. It is likely as effective as face-to-face or more, and it is more flexible in terms of planning.

One major consideration, again, is that it can be quite difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff when finding a coach, since anyone can call themselves a coach. Therefore, it highly advisable to find a coach with certification from a trusted organisation.

### **Drawbacks**

Although the study is quite insightful, some of the measures used in the study warrant a cautious remark. The use of self-reported measures of personal effectiveness is always

somewhat tricky. Ideally, one would measure it using a productivity outcome, although these are tricky as well. Moreover, the measure of job complexity might not be entirely accurate, since it based only on occupation. The same occupation may be more or less complex depending on local circumstances.

Finally, the study is conducted in a cross-sectional manner, meaning that the data was gathered at one point in time – in this case after the coaching intervention. Such retrospective evaluations always have drawback, most critically that we cannot track participants development over time on the outcome measures.

## Conclusion

The first conclusion, we can draw, is that workplace coaching, whether executive or otherwise, generally works. The findings are most robust for well-being outcomes, but the evidence is also quite strong when looking at productivity measures such as perceived personal effectiveness and improved skills.

Currently, coaching tends to be a privilege offered exclusively to organisational executives or middle managers. Indeed, the result of from Athanasopoulou and Dopson's study showed that is quite likely to work. However, the positive outcomes of coaching are not limited to individuals in highly complex jobs. Therefore, expanding the use of coaching to a broader spectrum of the organisation could be meaningful, given that costs are kept in check. Based on the current review we might even call for a "de-elitification" of workplace coaching.

However, it important to remember that the effects were moderate. Coaching is not a panacea, that will solve all organisational issues.