**Why e-coaching, why now, and why not?**

Given that in 2012 "only 41% of coaching was conducted face-to-face, 31% of coaching was delivered through telephone, 14% with the help of webcams and Skype, 11% in the form of e-mail coaching and 3% as video conferencing in high-definition quality" (Sherpa quoted in Geissler, Hasenbein, Kanatouri & Wegener, 2014, p.165), as the use of the internet continually proliferates, it is necessary for coaches to become familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of e-coaching.

**COACHING RESEARCH:**

While there is still some disagreement surrounding the understanding of what e-coaching encompasses, Geissler et al. define e-coaching as "coaching mediated through modern media and argue that e-coaching is characterised by replacing face to face communication with modern media" (2014, p. 166). Such modern media may include audio communication e.g. telephone or Skype audio, video communication e.g. Skype video or web-conferencing, synchronous text-based communication e.g. Skype chat, and asynchronous text-based communication e.g. e-mail. Furthermore, Geissler et al. define e-coaching tools, which may supplement the above e-coaching modalities, as text-based tools, pre-prepared pictures, videos and audio-documents, as well as virtual reality platforms.

Geissler et al. implemented an e-coaching study with a participant pool of 14 clients, who were either self-employed consultants or managers of companies or public organisations. The e-coaching combined three sessions of telephone coaching with an internet-based program that consisted of sets of questions that clients answered in writing either synchronously or asynchronously. The first set of questions helped clients to identify and clarify both a result goal (what they wanted to achieve), as well as a learning goal for the coaching. Subsequent sessions then involved written answers to eight pre-set coaching questions which guided the client to reflect on steps planned in the previous session and their progress towards the result and learning goals. Each set of questions was recommended to be completed as self-coaching by the client, which could then serve as preparation for a subsequent telephone session.

With varying degrees of intensity, about 50% of clients found it easier to concentrate on the coaching topic, as a result of only being able to hear, and not see, the coach. Notably, about 50% experienced the opposite, finding it more difficult to concentrate on the coaching topic, as a result of only being able to hear the coach. A similar approximate 50/50% result was reported by clients in relation to feeling more secure in emotionally difficult situations as a result of not being able to see their coach. Furthermore, about 50% thought it would have been helpful to see the coach when needed, whereas, less than 50% thought that it would have been helpful to see the coach always.

Significantly, 86% of clients thought it was helpful to reflect on the questions before the coaching, and 100% agreed that documenting answers supported the effectiveness of the coaching program. In addition, 100% of clients confirmed that the e-coaching program described in this study stimulated self-reflection and dealt constructively with emotions, and 79% reported that they felt emotionally secure. Also, 100% were convinced that it was possible to speak about psychologically profound aspects in the coaching relationship and that a trustful relationship could be built, and 86% reported they were touched emotionally. Finally, the average goal achievement outcome, as a result of the e-coaching intervention, was rated at 8.1, with the lowest participation goal achievement rating being 5 and the highest being 10.

**IN PRACTICE:**

The findings of Geissler et al.'s study, particularly with its near equal contrasting experiences of the same thing, reminds us of the uniqueness of each client and highlights that this uniqueness also applies to the chosen modality of coaching:

* **Some clients will be able to concentrate better on the coaching topic, as a result of not being able to see their coach, however, some clients will not.** While you may be able to ask questions in your intake questionnaire about learning preferences that help you to determine whether face-to-face coaching will be more or less effective than phone coaching, the best way to find out which modality works best for each client is to encourage each client to try each modality once and reflect on the experience afterwards. If face-to-face coaching is not possible for you or your client, although not the same, video coaching may be used as the next best alternative.
* **Some clients are more emotionally secure when they can't see their coach, some are not.** Again, the only way to know this, is to ask your client to experience each coaching modality once and then to reflect on the differences.
* **Some clients feel the need to see their coaches sometimes.** This reminds us that even though the chosen modality of coaching might be suitable for a particular client, it may not be suitable for the same client in every situation. It also suggests that we need to have the option of face-to-face coaching, where possible, and where it is not, the option of video coaching.
* **Most clients find it helpful to reflect on questions before a coaching session.** There are however some clients who find questionnaires tedious and laborious, and if this were the case for a particular client, it would be wise not to include pre-questions in their coaching program. Once again, the process of trying each coaching modality once, reflecting on its usefulness and determining client agreement/disagreement on which media or combination to use is recommended.
* **Documenting answers in writing makes a coaching program more effective.** As the findings of this study suggested, this was always the case. Although in coaching relationships there can be exceptions, if our clients are filling in session prep forms or session reflection forms the process of documenting insights that emerge from powerful questions may be supported by encouraging the client to take notes during their sessions. Offering your client a session worksheet provides a structure, especially if your client doesn't already have a preferred way to take their coaching notes.

As the use of the internet is expanding exponentially, it is important for coaches to understand how it can be used to better support our clients. Of course, you may also decide, after experiencing it (I wouldn't recommend deciding before experiencing it!) that a certain modality does not work for you as a coach. Therefore, it may pay to be specific about which modalities you will and won't use as part of your coaching practice. This way you ensure that your clients know the options available to them before they request coaching with you.

Reference:

Geissler, H., Hasenbein, M., Kanatouri, S., & Wegener, R. (2014). E-Coaching: Conceptual and Empirical Findings of a Virtual Coaching Programme. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, 12*(2), 165-187. Retrieved October 20, 2014, from [http://ijebcm.brookes.ac.uk/documents/vol12issue2-paper-12.pdf](http://ijebcm.brookes.ac.uk/documents/vol12issue2-paper-12.pdf%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

Translating coaching research into coaching practice,

Kerryn Griffiths (PhD)
Global ReciproCoach Coordinator