Less is More: The Executive Coach's Experience of Working on the Telephone

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Abstract

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis of one-to-one interviews with six practicing executive coaches, who were asked to describe their experience of using the telephone for contracted coaching sessions. Findings suggest that the modality can offer a powerful, highly flexible and creative tool. They also indicate that the coach's satisfaction with the medium is complex and dynamic, and may bear a relationship to the practitioner's awareness of, and proficiency in working with the differing benefits and challenges of the aural space.   Potential implications therefore emerge for the coaching profession as a whole and providers of education and development specifically.

Key Words: telephone coaching, executive, leadership, virtual coaching, distance coaching

Introduction

Distance coaching is increasingly being adopted in the workplace (Frazee, 2008) and in executive coaching in particular (Ghods, 2009). Empirical studies suggest that the telephone may be the most commonly selected (Berry, 2005), or at least one of the most commonly selected (Frazee, 2008) virtual tools in employee development. However, research on the topic has not kept pace with practice, and despite empirical indications of client satisfaction with the medium (Ghods, 2009), the practitioner press questions the validity and efficacy of the modality as a coaching intervention.

As an executive coach, my interest in the topic has been triggered by a growing awareness of a 'disconnect' between my long-held assumption that telephone coaching is a poor relation to face-to-face working, and my recent experience of several powerful telephone sessions with individual clients. Exploring the issue informally with other coaching professionals, I began to uncover a set of common responses, which can be summarised by the following:

Telephone coaching is either:

- Not 'do-able' (often based on an assumption that technology acts as a barrier to the human connection) *or*
- 'Second best' to face-to-face interventions - therefore only adopted as a contingency plan when geographical distance, or lack of resources (time, funding etc), i.e. practical obstacles to face-to-face working, demand an alternative solution *or*
- The 'same as' face-to-face coaching, and therefore wholly interchangeable

A minority of coaches that I questioned, however, spoke persuasively of the power and potential of the medium, often suggesting that it could offer 'added value' to face-to-face methods.

Corporately, though, the above assumptions seemed to be strongly internalised, and the degree to which telephone coaching was offered to executives appeared to be at the mercy of such beliefs. Burr (1995: 56) terms these assumptions "the prevailing discourse"(s), i.e. "practices which form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p.49), which are solidly and often unconsciously constructed by individual and collective cultures. As a result, it seemed that the application of the modality sometimes 'hit the spot' but at other times limited - or wholly denied - the power of a coaching intervention. These discourses appeared to obscure 'what lay beneath' and I became keen to explore the *actual experience* of practitioners.

Executive development is a key area of interest and resources for coaching (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010) and therefore, I argue, an important and valuable focus for this study. However, it is hoped that the findings will also have relevance for other coaching contexts. I have chosen to define the concept of executive coaching in 'inclusive' terms, that is, coaching with any client "who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation" (Kilburg, 2000, p.65). I define telephone coaching as: 'The use of the telephone for explicitly contracted coaching sessions between a practitioner and a client'.

The next section offers an overview of the literature. This is followed by a brief outline of the methodology used, a description of the key themes that emerged in the study, and a discussion of the findings. The conclusion includes implications for practice and professional development.

Literature

A review of the literature reveals a paucity of research on distance coaching. Empirical studies that incorporate telephone use in organisational contexts comprise several unpublished doctoral dissertations, i.e., those by Charbonneau (2002), Berry (2005), Frazee (2008) and Ghods (2009). Of these, however, only Ghods (2009) focuses specifically on executive coaching by telephone, and the only one qualitative thesis (Charbonneau, 2002) explores the issue of media selection with leadership coaches. Whilst all the studies offer encouraging indications of participant satisfaction with telephone coaching, they afford little insight into the coach's *experience* of the medium. Closer inspection also reveals more complexity. The coaches in Charbonneau's (2002) study, for example, found the telephone helpful for providing consistency, accountability and follow-up for executive clients, but less effective for working with 'sensitive' issues, behaviour change, or sharing feedback. These practitioners reported an overall preference for face-to-face over telephone working, despite the advantages they identified.

Is telephone working 'good enough'?
This complexity is further compounded by a less nuanced debate in the practitioner literature as to the appropriateness and efficacy of the medium as a coaching tool. Speculation stands firm in the face of several encouraging industry sponsored studies, which have concluded with Berry (2005) that there are no significant differences between face-to-face and telephone coaching (Young & Dixon, 1996; Goldsmith & Morgan, 2004). However, both the latter may well incorporate a commercial bias, and Goldsmith & Morgan's (2004) lack of robust methodology prohibits an accurate analysis of which component of the programme resulted in which outcomes. Nevertheless, similar findings are reflected in the more established mental health literature (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen & Day, 2005) where two empirical studies have identified comparable outcomes between audio, video conferencing and face-to-face sessions (Day & Schneider, 2002) and between video conferencing and audio (Glueckauf, Fritz, Ecklund-Johnson, Liss, Dages & Carney, 2002).

More agreement exists regarding the 'practical' advantages of telephone coaching. Both the empirical (Ghods, 2009) and practitioner literature (Hussain, 2010) identify a range of benefits, including ease of access, familiarity and relative acceptance of the medium in relation to other computer mediated communication (CMC) tools (Rossett & Marino, 2005), and opportunities for immediate feedback, spontaneity and focused discussion (Frazee, 2008). These benefits are empirically evidenced in the therapeutic field, where accessibility (Reese, Conoley & Brossart, 2006) and the ability to build strong partnerships and heighten motivation and efficiency (Djadali & Malone, 2004), are identified as key advantages. The psychological literature also offers more insight into the value of the virtual space through its exploration of the impact of the 'disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2002), which allows clients to self-reveal more quickly (Day & Schneider, 2000). Indeed, studies have found that clients have experienced a greater power balance in the relationship which, in turn, enhances a sense of intimacy (Spiro & Devenis, 1991) and offers greater accessibility to therapeutic services due to the absence of visual indicators of social status, race or ethnicity (Day & Schneider 2000).

The most virulent debate occurs, however, around the implications for the helping process arising from the absence of visual cues. Whilst there is common acknowledgement by both coaching and psychotherapeutic practitioners that the absence of these cues may induce anxiety in the client and a consequent lack of trust in "a stranger who is only a voice" (George, 1998, p.106), for many coaches, this indicates an immediate, and for some, an insurmountable hurdle (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010). There is also common and often vague speculation (in the coaching press) that the "more heavily psychology-based" (Clutterbuck, 2010, p.15), (or in the therapeutic literature) experiential and physically grounded approaches, such as Gestalt, are not appropriate (Rosenfield, 2003; Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, 2004). However, these claims are contradicted by psychotherapeutic research, where studies have demonstrated the telephone's efficacy in long-term work (Spiro & Devenis, 1991; Donnelly, Kornblith, Fleishman, Zuckerman, Raptis, Hudis, Hamilton, Payne, Massie, Norton & Holland, 2000).

Telephone coaching: a different approach?

What does emerge from a reading of both the coaching and mental health literatures is a suggestion that the medium demands a different approach from face-to-face working to ensure its efficacy. Charbonneau (2002) found that effective telephone coaches compensate for an absence of visual cues and Bobevski & Holgate's (1997) study of crisis helpline calls suggests that clients particularly valued counsellors who were vocally proactive. Whilst these skills are beginning to be acknowledged in the coaching practitioner literature (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010), it is in the therapeutic press where their centrality is explored. Effective telephone work is dependent upon the quality of the helper's listening skills (Rosenfield, 2003; Payne, Casemore, Neat & Chambers, 2006; Saunders, 2010), and an ability to offer a higher level of 'containment' for the client (Sanders, 2007). Most particularly, the coach needs to focus quickly on developing and sustaining rapport, trust and ownership of the process (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010). The psychological impact of change may also be the source of much expressed resistance to adopting new ways of working for coaches (Harrington, 1999). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that clients experience the most significant adjustment to the medium in their first meeting, and that this process is often swift and successful (Ghods, 2009).

There are, however, indications in the literature that telephone coaching may not suit everyone (Pulley, 2006), and that some practitioners may feel uneasy when working "with so many unknowns" (Rosenfield, 2003, p.95). Two empirical coaching studies indicate that client satisfaction may indeed be related to the media preference of both parties (Charbonneau, 2002; Berry, 2005), whilst Sanders (2007) suggests that our expectations are a key factor in influencing our engagement with the

medium. One coaching practitioner argues that decisions regarding media selection "need to be rooted in the context of the relationship rather than in general comparisons of one process versus another" (Clutterbuck, 2010, p.11). Indeed, evidence from Charbonneau's (2002) study suggests that the 'fit' between each participant and the adopted medium and "the fit between the coach and the client as people" (p.122) may both be crucial for client satisfaction and successful outcomes.

A review of the literature highlights an apparent conflict between research indicating that the telephone offers a range of benefits for leadership development (Charbonneau, 2002; Berry, 2005; Ghods, 2009), and a 'prevailing discourse' of uncertainty and suspicion in the professional coaching press, mirroring the assumptions above. This study therefore seeks to illuminate this disconnect by extending our current understanding of telephone coaching with more in-depth, qualitative evidence regarding the *experience* of practitioners themselves.

Methodology

For this study I adopted a phenomenological approach, which, as Willig (2008) suggests, may be the most appropriate method to explore the nature of 'experience'. It also best reflects my constructionist position. After exploring several approaches within this paradigm, I chose an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, which is "committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009, p.1). Most importantly, IPA also

recognizes that a researcher's understanding of participants' thoughts is necessarily influenced by his or her own ways of thinking, assumptions ... these are seen as a necessary precondition for making sense of another person's experience. In other words, understanding requires interpretation (Willig, 2008, p.69).

As an approach developed within psychology, IPA is well placed to investigate the psychological aspects of related disciplines (Smith *et al.,* 2009), offering opportunities for in-depth interrogation of an individual's 'lived experience' (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Its emphasis on small participant samples, open research questions and the notion of 'understanding', both "in the sense of identifying or empathizing with and understanding as trying to make sense of" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.54) facilitates the building of rapport and detailed exploration. This in turn enables complexity to be surfaced and captured (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and similarities and contradictions explored (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), both between participants and within each individual. Crucially, IPA also challenges the assumption that "an interviewee can tell it like it is" (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p.10) by foregrounding the importance of unspoken and unconscious communication and the role of intuition in the interpretative process, potentially leading to "an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself" (Schleiermacher, 1998, p.266).

Data collection and analysis

I adopted purposive sampling to access a homogeneous group of six practising executive coaches, plus a 'reserve' participant, each of whom had experience of working with specifically contracted telephone sessions. Keen to avoid attracting only advocates of the medium, I emphasised the importance of wishing to capture unsuccessful as well as successful experiences. The coaches were accessed through 'gatekeepers' of professional organisations (such as Association for Coaching). Each participant had between eight months and twelve years coaching experience. Five were independent coaches, collectively working across a range of sectors and one was employed as an internal Human Resource consultant.

I conducted semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate form of data collection for IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Preceded by a pilot interview, the further six interviews took place in April/May 2012. They ranged from 55-120 minutes duration and were audio-recorded. All were face-to-face, with the exception of one telephone interview with a participant who is partially sighted and found travelling particularly challenging. Each recording was transcribed verbatim, and analysed following IPA guidelines set out by Smith *et al*. (2009) to surface emergent themes, theme clusters and finally three Super-ordinate themes.

Limitations

With hindsight, I could have been more specific in my original call for participants by ensuring that each coach had sufficient experience on which to base their responses, e.g. by stipulating a minimum length of experience in telephone coaching, and confirming that the coaches' experience was current, or recent. Whilst it appeared from the information shared in the interviews that all six coaches regularly conducted contracted sessions, the request for their respective length of experience was retrospective. On reflection, it seems that although this information varied from eight months to twelve years experience, such a range appeared to add to the 'richness' of the data rather than detract from it, unconsciously prioritising an element of variability over homogeneity (Smith *et al.,* 2009).

Findings

The following represent the key themes that emerged in the analysis:

Theme 1 Less is more: The power of the aural connection
Theme 2 The impact of the physical environment on the virtual coaching space
Theme 3 The coaches' adaptation to the medium

Theme 1 Less is more: The power of the aural connection

All the coaches remarked on a sense of increased focus and pace when working on the telephone, due to the lack of visual cues. Some also felt that the nature of the virtual space facilitated a more rapid development of rapport and trust - and thus of disclosure:

> *We can get down to working on the issues we need to very quickly on the phone…. I'm just a stranger…. yet we can establish that rapport and that communication and the understanding very quickly   (Coach 6)*

This in turn can facilitate a deeper exploration with the client in comparison to face-to-face working:

> *The intimacy allows you to get to the essence of that other person. You start hearing things that they are really, really passionate about…. it just seems more powerful on the telephone   (Coach 1)*

Indeed, these three coaches experienced the medium as a *more* powerful tool than face-to-face working. Three of the coaches also commented on the potential advantages afforded by the anonymity of the medium. Specifically, two coaches spoke of the potential 'equalising' power of the telephone, where a range of social indicators are "obscured from view":

> *People can't make judgements about me and…. there is less risk of me making judgements about them that might get in the way of the process   (Coach 5)*

For this coach, who has a visual impairment, the medium potentially frees both parties from the discomfort that he anticipates, and sometimes experiences in the client's response to his "carrying a white cane".

Whilst all of the coaches appreciated specific strengths of the medium, for some, the absence of visual cues presented particular challenges. Three coaches spoke about how this dynamic affected their confidence at times, though the level of uncertainty experienced by each varied significantly. For two coaches, not being able to see the client's response felt frustrating and anxiety-making:

> *Maybe I feel more responsible when I've got somebody on the phone.... I'm always questioning am I doing this right...? Am I doing enough for this person? Face-to-face I don't really have those thoughts (Coach 3)*

For Coach 4, in particular, this sense of loss was emphasised when the medium appeared to limit his use of certain visual and key kinaesthetic techniques, such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), which formed part of his core repertoire. Half the coaches also noted the initial challenge of building rapport on the telephone:

> *Getting to know someone on the phone.... creates in me a higher level of stress.... more focus is required.... after that we'll generally settle into a rhythm....*

> *It definitely is holding their uncertainties.... I didn't realise so much containing goes on early on.... all the things I have to hold (Coach 6)*

However, three of the coaches described the disadvantages of working without visual cues as minimal in comparison to the advantages. Indeed, at times, the coaches' experience of intuiting and trust in verbal cues seemed to vary widely:

> *I like to use humour.... putting people at ease.... I have this smile on my face. And if only they could pick up the cue that, you know, I'm not, being stupid. For all I know.... they've got a big smile on their face [too] (Coach 4)*

> *Ah ha. I can hear a smile in your voice.... I didn't even have to see it. It is there. Beaming down the phone line (Coach 5)*

These findings are significant because they offer new indications of the telephone's potential to deepen and accelerate the learning process in executive coaching. Whilst supporting research in the coaching field that the medium offers opportunities for focused discussion (Frazee, 2008), they specifically highlight evidence of the enhanced pace, depth, intimacy (Djadali & Malone, 2004), inhibition reduction (Reese *et al.,* 2006) and a decrease in the potential power differential between practitioner and client (Spiro & Devenis, 1991) afforded by the medium, only previously identified in the mental health literature. This study also illustrates how the dynamic of 'anonymity' may impact critically on the *coach's* feelings of acceptance by the client, (i.e. not simply the coachee's feelings of acceptance by the coach), in addition to reducing potential discomfort on the part of the client in relation to such issues as disability, thus shifting the focus from individual difference to an emphasis on the process. The findings do suggest that some coaching approaches, such as NLP, may be difficult to adopt on the telephone. However, the results also counter suggestions that the medium is unsuitable for more overt psychological orientations (Clutterbuck, 2010), instead leaning towards therapeutic evidence that telephone interventions are suitable for in-depth and, perhaps, longer term work (Spiro & Devenis, 1991; Donnelly *et al.,* 2000).

This study is also significant because it offer new insights into the complex nature of the aural coaching space. For the majority (4) of the interviewees, the challenges identified in telephone coaching were either experienced as minimal and/or manageable. For the minority (2), the advantages identified were offset by the challenges of working with a higher level of uncertainty, a hurdle acknowledged by counselling practitioners (Rosenfield, 2003), which evoked a sense of loss, frustration and anxiety. Indeed, the anxiety expressed by three of the coaches underlines anecdotal insistence in the therapeutic field of the need for greater 'containment' in the virtual space (Sanders, 2007), not only, implicitly, for the client, but also *for the coach*, who may need to manage and contain *their own* anxiety as part of the process. For those coaches who struggle with a higher level of uncertainty induced by a lack of visual cues (in this study, those with least experience), their accounts hint at a concern for their own performance and reputation, in addition to their concern for the client. Indeed, the correlation between experience and anxiety concurs with evidence that such self-doubt is generally more common in less experienced coaches (de Haan, 2008), and that a key capability of highly effective (and commonly experienced) executive coaches is an ability to hold uncertainty (Dagley, 2010).

Theme 2   The impact of the physical environment on the virtual coaching space

This was the most unexpected theme that emerged in the coaches' descriptions, focusing as it did on the impact of the practitioners', and often the clients' *environment* (i.e. the physical context in which telephone coaching took place) on the quality and potential of the virtual space.

Specifically, five coaches identified the significant advantage that the medium offers regarding choice of, and control over, their immediate working environment (commonly 'working from home'). Half the coaches specifically appreciated the greater freedom of location afforded by telephone working, most particularly Coach 5, whose visual impairment made travelling difficult. However, for all these coaches, the key advantage was the lack of distraction and sense of comfort afforded by the medium:

> *It's definitely about being in the right space…. I find it a lot easier actually to coach my private clients…. when I'm home…. than I do when I'm at work. Because I can…. be in the space…. and there's no distractions   (Coach 3)*

These coaches appreciated the impact of this 'customised' physical space on their sense of preparedness, mindfulness and ease:

> *I just get in the zone. And the bit after when I can sort of stay in the same place…. the same mental place and make my notes   (Coach 2)*

Three of the coaches valued the opportunity to lay out papers and models whilst working on the telephone, thus extending their ability to use a greater range of resources and further develop their 'toolkit', whilst two others spoke of opportunities to move around or take notes. However, the potential dangers of these activities were also raised. Coach 2, for example, described note taking as his "safety net", enabling him to manage his anxiety around forgetting some crucial detail. However, he identified that this often resulted in an overload of information:

> *I need to trust in my own resources…. the phone…. allows me not to do that quite so much (Coach 2)*

The freedoms of the virtual space, therefore, appear to carry different responsibilities. Indeed, four of the coaches emphasised the importance of also contracting with the client to ensure a private space for themselves, away from workplace distractions.

Three coaches highlighted striking examples of how the client's choice of their coaching environment enhanced the ease and depth of the work. One coach gave an example of a client scheduling a telephone session whilst working from home:

> *"Can you just hang on a minute? [she said] I need to get under the duvet". So she was in a nice, comfortable space as well! (laughs)   (Coach 2)*

Another invited her clients to move physically, doing 'perspective work' for example, around a kitchen table. She spoke eloquently of the impact of executives moving outdoors for the coaching session, where such a physical shift can deepen the quality of their exploration:

> *They may actually book you in at lunchtime when they can actually step outside the office. I've had people who have been walking the South Bank…. that environment is very different for them and so what comes out of coaching can be very, very different…. [for instance] "I'm looking at the Thames and it just feels like a bridge over troubled water"   (Coach 1)*

This was the most surprising finding of the study, evidencing the previously un-investigated potential of the medium to optimise the *psychological* quality of the coaching space, to enhance the coach's performance, and to maximise creative opportunities in coaching through flexibility of use. It also highlights the telephone's potential to offer a more inclusive working environment for coaches with a disability, for example.

These findings add considerably to our understanding of the possible opportunities afforded by the medium in enabling coaches - and their clients - to exert more choice and control over their working environment. This can facilitate both parties' comfort and/or privacy and may, therefore, offer opportunities for more preparedness and mindfulness on the part of the coach, and a deeper exploration of issues for the client, building upon the potential for the 'disinhibition' effect (Suler, 2002). The quality and effectiveness of the coaching process may also be enhanced by facilitating freedom of movement for both parties – taking advantage of the flexibility afforded by the 'mobile' handset - encouraging the coach and the coachee to 'play' with the process. Indeed, the example of perspective work given by Coach 1 challenges common speculation in the therapeutic literature that physically orientated approaches are not appropriate in telephone work (Rosenfield, 2003; Rochlen *et al.,* 2004) - at least in the coaching process. Significantly, such use of the medium may therefore 'mitigate' against a lack of visual cues by extending the coach's toolkit in different and unique ways. Again, experienced coaches may feel more confident in experimenting with approaches unfamiliar to them (Dagley, 2010).

However, the flexibility of the medium may paradoxically undermine the effectiveness of the coaching process, where coach or client falls prey to distraction, in the 'unseen' space. The modality, therefore, appears to demand a high level of commitment from both parties and a commensurate level of self-awareness and ability to work with 'resistance' on behalf of the helper (Groman, 2010).

Theme 3   The coaches' adaptation to the medium
All coaches felt that, in terms of outcomes, telephone and face-to-face coaching offered comparable, if different, interventions. Three of the coaches expressed a preference for telephone work, relating this to their respective lack of need for visual cues, and/or an ability to creatively

'compensate' for them (as Coach 1 above). A fundamental component in their choice of media was also a sense of 'fit' with their personal skills and strengths:

> *I do like uncertainty, so to me uncertainty, complexity is a very intriguing space…. and I'm good at holding all that   (Coach 6)*

In contrast, two coaches expressed a preference for face-to-face work, both in response to the practical challenges they experienced arising from the absence of visual cues, but also arising out of what Coach 4 described as a deeper, more oblique need:

> *Even though I pick up the cues verbally that things are going well, there's a kind of felt need in   me that…. that is not being met   (Coach 4)*

For these coaches, the medium undermined their sense of expertise, though they both acknowledged that their lack of satisfaction was related to their experience of the *process* rather than lack of comparable outcomes.

However, all the coaches, with the exception of Coach 5 (who had nearly forty years experience in generic telephone work), spoke of a necessary journey of adaptation from face-to-face coaching (the basis of their training) towards establishing a sense of ease and confidence with the medium. Whilst one coach (Coach 1) encountered few difficulties when adopting the telephone at the very beginning of her career, three others described initial resistance to the modality. For them, their emerging insight into the complexities of the medium had subsequently initiated a significant and unexpected shift, often triggered by practical necessity, and followed by periods of continued practice and formal or informal reflection and learning:

> *It's probably become my main form of communication. Maybe before I would have said, no, I need to see people face-to-face…. before I did the [virtual] programme…. So that's a change for me (Coach 2)*

Specifically, these coaches developed capabilities that included an increased emphasis on pro-activeness and contracting, an ability to intuit verbal cues and silences, and to work with uncertainty. For Coaches 3 and 4, however, adaptation felt more partial and cautious - a 'work in progress': It may just be experience, because obviously I've been coaching face-to-face for longer (Coach 3).

Interestingly, the coaches' professional response to the medium bore little relationship to their response to the telephone in their personal life. Three of the coaches described feeling ambivalent about the medium outside work, whereas professionally, they experienced it to be "a great enabler…. a real freedom thing" (Coach 6). Conversely, Coach 4, who struggled with the telephone's 'limitations' as a coaching tool, warmly described the experience of talking with his daughter on a home speakerphone: "It can feel as if she's in the room".

All the coaches indicated that they experienced no significant differences in outcomes between telephone and face-to-face working, supporting findings in both the coaching (Berry, 2005; Ghods, 2009) and therapeutic fields (Day & Schneider, 2002). Indeed, the majority of the interviewees in this study report that telephone coaching offers greater opportunities for expanding and deepening the learning process. This contrasts sharply with the only qualitative research on telephone coaching (Charbonneau, 2002) where executive coaches perceived face-to-face coaching to be more effective than working on the telephone, and more suitable for 'sensitive' issues.

This finding also supports suggestions in the practitioner coaching literature that telephone working does not suit every coach (Pulley, 2006), concurring with Charbonneau (2002) on the importance of 'fit', most particularly here between the coach and their preferred modality. However, it offers a different perspective to Charbonneau (2002) in suggesting that this lack of 'fit' does not ultimately appear to hamper successful outcomes, but rather undermines a sense of comfort *with the process* for some coaches (a 'felt need'). This sense of 'fit' also appears to be related to the skill-set of the individual coach. Those who felt their strengths lay in managing uncertainty and intuiting verbal cues, for example, seemed to gravitate naturally to the medium. However, whilst there appears to be a correlation between the lack of visual cues and levels of anxiety experienced by some coaches, the meaning of the visual connection for each individual is less clear.

These findings concur with Charbonneau (2002) in suggesting that telephone coaching may require a different approach from face-to-face work to ensure its efficacy and, as commonly recognised in the psychotherapeutic literature, that effective telephone practitioners may need to develop specific skills to compensate for the lack of visual cues (Bobevski & Holgate 1997; Rosenfield, 2003; Payne *et al.,* 2006; Saunders, 2010). Indeed, what is particularly striking about the participants' responses in this study is the degree to which their individual sense of satisfaction with telephone coaching relates to an appreciation of the differences between face-to-face and telephone interventions. Those who reported a conscious endeavour to develop their awareness and appropriate capabilities were more able to utilise the strengths of the medium. These findings, therefore, suggest that it is a recognition and appreciation of the strengths *as well as* the limitations of the modality that facilitates their ease and expertise, i.e. what Caulat & de Haan (2006) refer to in audio group facilitation as moving from a " 'deficit-orientated' position (where [participants] focus on what they *don't* have in the audio setting) to a positive mindset where they learn to discover what they *do* have, such as the voices, silences and intimate connections…" (p.28). This study also supports evidence in coaching that participants' acceptance of virtual tools grows with increased familiarity (Ghods, 2009), resonating with Harrington's (1999) proposition on the role of resistance. Whilst two of the interviewees described few difficulties when encountering the medium at the outset of their working/coaching careers, the other coaches reported a clear reluctance to engage in telephone work once they had trained in, and established a face-to-face practice.

This study, therefore, challenges speculation in the practitioner literature that decisions about media selection need to be primarily guided by the nature of coaching relationship rather than by the medium itself (Clutterbuck, 2010). Instead, it offers indications that coaches' ease of working with the telephone may be crucial in this context, and more strongly related to their awareness of, and ability to work with the complexity of the aural connection, than to the nature of the relational connection. It is also noted, however, that there does not appear to be an expressed link between each coach's relationship with the telephone generally in their lives, and their satisfaction with telephone coaching. This further serves to suggest that the two experiences hold very different meanings for each individual coach, and that their personal response is coloured by more than a simplistic 'comfort level' with the medium, supporting Sanders' (2007) constructionist view.

Conclusion

This study highlights new evidence that suggests that telephone coaching can offer a powerful, highly flexible and creative intervention in executive development. All the interviewees felt it to be comparable to face-to-face coaching in terms of its efficacy, and half experienced it as a *more* powerful and effective way of working. Findings also suggest that telephone coaching can offer unique opportunities to optimise the quality of the physical setting for participants and thus the quality of the virtual learning space, highlighting previously un-evidenced potential for coaches (and

clients) of the impact of exercising choice of, and control over their respective physical environments (e.g. by 'working from home'). This study demonstrates that telephone coaching can therefore *extend* choice for participants, rather than diminish it, a phenomenon that has particular relevance for issues of inclusion, (such as disability, for example). The sense of anonymity afforded by the medium may also appeal to a range of clients. The telephone is therefore potentially *more than a distance coaching tool*. Whilst not appealing to every coach, it may be a preferred modality for some, regardless of considerations of geographical location, time or cost.

The analysis also suggests that telephone coaching appears inherently 'different' from face-to-face work and may require specific capabilities to optimise its effectiveness. A key to optimising the medium's advantages may lie in an active appreciation of, (and ability to work with) its strengths and challenges, that is, its intrinsic *differences*, as well as the similarities it shares with face-to-face work. This finding therefore raises significant implications for practice and the provision of educational opportunities for practitioners. Findings also suggest the importance of raising awareness of the medium's possibilities *at an early stage* in the coach's training.

In an expanding virtual (and international) workplace, distance coaching is becoming an increasingly central tool in the executive's developmental framework, and if speculation in the coaching literature (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010) is to be believed, will continue to do so. The accounts in this study offer compelling invitations for the profession to further its understanding of telephone coaching, both practically and theoretically, and communicate the possible strengths and complexities of the medium in the corporate world. Developing such awareness can *create* - as well as inform - and, therefore, extend choice, and replace common assumptions with a greater clarity of the potential of the modality.

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