Academic Paper

Flipping to digital: The coach's perspective on the limited adoption of technology in coaching

Marc Innegraeve ✉ (Vlerick Business School, Belgium)
Jonathan Passmore (Henley Business School, University of Reading)

Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis transformed the coaching practice overnight from a face-to-face to online practice. This study explores the impact of how coaches are using technology and their experiences in the digital coaching environment. The study adopts a reflexive thematic analysis using semi-structured one-to-one interviews with nine executive coaches. Several key findings emerged. First, coaches use technology mainly to perform remote coaching. Second, technology was crucial in the survival of many coaching businesses through the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, there are concerns about the risks associated with digital coaching. The paper suggests actions which coaches and professional bodies can take to mitigate.

Background and context

The use of technology within coaching has gradually been increasing, firstly with phone (audio channel only) coaching, the gradual use of audio and video calls using platforms such as Skype and later Zoom, and the rapid adoption of these mediums since COVID-19. Furthermore, most coaches indicated that their use of technology would continue in the post-pandemic environment (ICF & PWC, 2020; Sherpa Coaching, 2020; Passmore, 2021). The evidence from the continued growth of digital coaching platforms such as BetterUp, CoachHub and Ezra and the continued migration of coaches to Zoom and other online audio-video communication apps suggests that digital coaching has become the most popular medium for coaching delivery in the 2020s. However, little is known about the coach experiences and the concerns and risks associated with online coaching delivery. This study explores coaches' views on technology and how it affects their coaching. There are different elements to this question. First, the study explores how coaches use technology to interact with clients. Second, how do coaches perceive and experience their use of

technology in these interactions with clients? Third, how does technology impact the effectiveness of their coaching and the relationship with their clients? Finally, how do coaches perceive the ethical challenges and confidentiality issues associated with using technology?

Relevance and impact

While both the incidence of and governmental responses to COVID-19 have diminished, the digital transformation of the coaching profession continues and is expanding. Digital coaching providers have, over the past four years, become the leading providers of coaching at scale in the industry while clients, leaders and managers in organisations similarly shifted their thinking, becoming comfortable with online meetings and enjoying the benefits of working from home.

These changes reflect broader technological change in the world of work, and some would argue that the coaching profession is only at the start of digitalisation (Isaacson, 2021). Coaching platforms are predicted to grow during 2023, although the nature and speed of growth reflect economic factors across the global economy (Bersin, 2023). Furthermore, online tools like Miro or Mibo became available to support coaches during their sessions. At the same time, clients too have started to use apps for self-coaching, such as HeadSpace or Rise, and continual technological innovation have brought sensor-based technology (e.g. Fitbit, iWatch), avatar platforms (such as CDR-U), virtual reality (VR, such as MeetinVR), and artificial intelligence (AI) driven by products such as ChatGPT into manager awareness. This study explores the impact of technological change on coaches and how coaches seek to manage its impact on them and their clients.

Literature review

Terminology and definitions

As an emerging area of practice, terminology and definitions in this space are fluid and often confusing (Diller & Passmore, 2023). A multiplicity of terms have been used to describe the same technologies: 'Virtual coaching', 'distance coaching', 'e-coaching', 'remote coaching', 'digital coaching' and 'technology-enabled coaching' are only a few of the terms found in the literature used to describe 'digital coaching' (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2010; Ribbers & Waringa, 2015; Pascal et al., 2015; Kanatouri & Geissler, 2017; Kanatouri, 2020). Diller and Passmore (2023) highlight these issues and have sort to synthesize the literature and define the terms in order to ease future research and debate. They have suggested that the term 'digital coaching' should be used for human-to-human conversation enabled by digital communication devices and offered a formal definition:

"'Digital coaching' is a technology-enabled, secure, synchronous, collaborative conversation, using audio and video communication channels between a human coach and a human coachee".

The role of technology in coaching

Through the literature, we identified seven different use cases for technology in coaching: coach selection, business management, supplementing face-to-face coaching in between or before coaching sessions, supplementing face-to-face coaching during coaching sessions, digital coaching, self-coaching, and evaluation. Pascal et al. (2015) present five potential impacts of technology in coaching and, based upon the input from Kanatouri (2020) and Lancefield et al. (2019), we have split two of those five, supplementing face-to-face coaching and replacing face-to-face coaching each time in 2 different use cases. Supplementing face-to-face coaching has different use cases for when it happens during sessions versus before or in between sessions.

Replacing face-to-face coaching can apply to just the channel used for coaching, resulting in digital coaching. However, it could also involve replacing the coach itself, resulting in self-coaching applications.

The choice to build further on the structure proposed by Pascal et al. (2015) was made to stay close to the working experience of coaches. This structure is based upon the five-stage coaching model of Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008), the actual activity of coaches. Other models started from a technology perspective (Kanatouri, 2020) or a return-on-investment perspective (Isaacson, 2021), which is more abstract if coaches are not familiar with technology. The above-mentioned authors all focus on the potential use of technology. Information on the actual use of technology by coaches is usually limited to the type of digital coaching in use, i.e. via audio-video platform, telephone or other channels (Sherpa Coaching, 2020; ICF & PWC, 2020).

Introducing technology in coaching offers a broad spectrum of benefits to stakeholders. Three elements are essential from the coach's perspective, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 period. First, throughout various business sectors, technology has been vital in the survival of businesses. A review of 53 studies performed in 2020 on the effect of COVID-19 in different business sectors showed that this was specifically true for small businesses (Abed, 2022). As most coaches are independent professionals, technology is expected to play a significant role in the survival of coaching practices (Passmore, 2021).

Second, Isaacson (2021) describes five ways technology improves the return on investment for coaching. However, these are potential improvements; not all will benefit the self-employed coach. In those five, an increase in efficiency offers the most apparent benefit, as it could improve their business model. In addition, technology can help coaches become more accessible to current and new clients, described by Isaacson (2021) as having an increased impact.

Third, Kanatouri (2020) describes the potential of asynchronous technology, like e-mail, voicemail or other, to increase the frequency of coaching interaction. Increasing this frequency positively impacts the coaching relationship and could benefit the coaching effectiveness (Gregory & Levy, 2012).

Both Isaacson (2021) and Kanatouri (2020) share a positive outlook on the use of technology, with a focus on potential use and benefits. The structured interviews included benefits and drawbacks to ensure a balanced view of how coaches experienced this.

The effectiveness of technology-enabled coaching

Current research suggests that digital coaching is as effective as face-to-face coaching. However, the number of empirical studies on the success of using technology in coaching is limited, and the studies that diverge cover phones, AI, digital and other tools. These studies can be divided into three main types: meta-analyses (Jones et al., 2016), studies that assess the effectiveness of technology-enabled coaching by looking at selected success criteria, like problem-solving or client change rate (Frazee, 2008; Poepsel, 2011; McLaughlin, 2013; Geissler et al., 2014; Ribbers & Waringa, 2015a; Michalik & Schermuly, 2023), and studies that look at the quality of the working alliance in technology-enabled coaching (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2011; Ghods, 2009; Passarelli et al., 2020).

Technology-enabled coaching using a telephone (audio channels only) has consistently been shown to have similar effectiveness as face-to-face coaching. Frazee (2008) used a mixed method approach with 20 e-coaches and 191 clients to demonstrate positive outcomes of a combination of methods, including telephony, added with e-mail, file-sharing and limited videoconferencing. Ghods (2009) did a quantitative study with 152 clients, each having six telephone coaching sessions throughout 4 to 6 months, and 252 multi-raters from the direct environment of these coaching

clients. In this study, they observed positive coaching outcomes from client self-rating and multi-raters and a positive impact on the working alliance. Berry et al. (2011) demonstrated no difference in working alliance between face-to-face and telephone coaching in a quantitative study with 102 coaches. McLaughlin (2013) reports positive outcomes from the coach's perspective, interviewing 7 coaches. Geissler et al. (2014) reported positive feedback on telephone coaching, blended with text-based communications, in a qualitative study with 14 clients. Jones et al. (2016) reported in a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of workplace coaching, drawing on the studies above, and confirmed there was no difference in the effectiveness between face-to-face coaching and blended coaching involving a mix of face-to-face and telephone coaching.

Although fewer studies are available, audio-video-mediated coaching has shown its effectiveness. Passarelli et al. (2020) did a study with ten coaches and 88 clients comparing the quality of the working alliance with telephone coaching, audio-video coaching, and face-to-face coaching. They show that the higher richness of the media increases the quality of the working alliance, and clients perceive less of a difference in richness between videoconferencing and face-to-face as they become more comfortable with using it. A few studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of text-based coaching, often supported by other forms of coaching (Poepsel, 2011; Ribbers and Waringa, 2015a).

Reviewing these findings, we can conclude that technology-based coaching in various forms - audio, video, text - can be as effective as face-to-face coaching if clients are comfortable using technology. This is supported by evidence from an experimental design study which compared face-to-face, digital coaching and blended coaching (face-to-face and digital). The results confirmed no reported difference between the outcomes or the coaching alliance from these different modalities. However, clients appeared to favour consistency, with blended being rated lowest in the coaching alliance (Michalik & Schermuly, 2023). Both Jones and colleagues (Jones et al., 2016) and de Haan and Nilsson (2023) made similar claims in their meta-analysis paper when comparing face-to-face and remote studies, which included multiple forms of remote coaching.

Ethical and confidentiality issues

Ethical issues in technology are usually identified when it's too late (Isaacson, 2021), and required measures to prevent possible unethical behaviour will always lag. One of the concerns is their reduced ability to read clients during online coaching sessions. Thomson-de Benoit and Kramer (2020) confirm this difficulty of assessing clients' emotions in their study on remote therapy during COVID-19 times. It makes it more difficult for coaches to assess when crossing the thin line between coaching and therapy.

There is also the risk of eavesdropping and coaching conversations being recorded without the knowledge of the coach or the coachee. Okereafor and Manny (2020) list several cybersecurity risks related to videoconferencing, of which two should be highlighted. The first concerns using insecure public networks, like the ones available in public bars, airports, and trains. A second risk is using unsafe devices that are not running the latest software, not using a VPN or do not run anti-virus software.

Ioane et al. (2021) report unawareness of cybersecurity risks and privacy issues with therapy professionals; a similar situation is expected with coaches. Many online applications for personal inventories, 360-assessments and mobile applications for coaching or behaviour change store personal data. Also, here, there could be concerns relating to ethical or confidentiality issues suggested by studies from the domains of therapy and healthcare. A study by Minen et al. (2018) showed that more than half of the smartphone applications destined to relieve headaches or migraines were sharing their data for targeted advertising, and over a quarter of the relaxation applications had no privacy policy. A similar study by Huckvale et al. (2019) found that of 36 smartphone applications for depression and smoking cessation tested, 29 shared data for

commercial purposes; however, only 12 of those disclosed that they did. Although no data are available, the situation for online tools and applications used or recommended by coaches could be similar.

Methodology

The starting point of this article explores the question: *How do coaches use technology, and how do they experience the use of technology?* Our research philosophy follows a subjective approach while taking a realist stance. Information is gathered from the reality of experienced coaches filtered through a critical lens. Our philosophical orientation is that of critical realism, leading specifically in this study to inductive reasoning using a qualitative methodology. The route taken in this study is that of flexible, reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Sampling

The research used purposive sampling (Oades et al., 2019). A set of criteria was set to determine the type of coaches needed for the interviews: experienced business or executive coaches with at least 60 hours of using technology in coaching in the last year. They preferably also had some form of coach accreditation or certification. Eventually, an interview could be arranged with nine candidates, showing a range in gender, country of origin, coaching experience, and experience using technology. Although we did not formally register the age of the participants, it is safe to say all participants were in the age group between 40 and 65 years old.

Table 1: Participant demographics overview

Coach	Gender	# Years coaching experience	Coaching qualifications	# Years of experience using technology in coaching
Coach1	Female	16	MSc in Coaching	3
Coach2	Female	25	No formal accred.	20
Coach3	Female	13	No formal accred.	1
Coach4	Male	18	MSc in Coaching	6
Coach5	Male	3	EMCC Sr. Prac.	1
Coach6	Male	7	MSc in Coaching	7
Coach7	Male	25	MSc in Coaching, ICF PCC	25
Coach8	Female	11	EMCC Sr. Prac. ICF PCC	6
Coach9	Female	10	ICF PCC	10

Data collection

All interviews were taken in September 2021 and lasted between 50 and 93 minutes. The COVID-19 crisis required that the semi-structured interviews be carried out remotely and recorded through the Zoom platform. This beneficially aligned with the topic of the interview. The interviews were divided into four sections covering a briefing to remind them of our purpose, a series of profiling questions, the research questions, and a closing section thanking the participants. The research questions covered their use of technology, for example:

> *How are you using these technologies with your coaching clients? Please think about your use of technology before, during, in between or after coaching sessions.*

The questions also covered the impact technology had on their way of working as a coach, for example:

> *How has the use of technology impacted you as a coach?*

How does the use of technology impact your use of approaches to coaching?

We also covered the effectiveness of technology-enabled coaching, as well as the benefits and challenges of using technology in coaching. A final topic was the ethical and confidentiality aspect of technology-enabled coaching. The interviews were semi-structured, leaving enough room for participants to bring in their views and topics. During the interview, participants were actively encouraged to add anything else they could see as being relevant.

Data analysis

As a guide to the data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis was used. The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai for the first transcription. Then the interviews were relistened to correct possible mistakes in the transcriptions. Each interview was at least twice listened to while being read, allowing thorough familiarisation – step 1 – with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Before coding, transcripts were adapted using conversation analysis transcription symbols (Rose et al., 2015: 339) and the recorded videos were reviewed to include transcription elements for gestures and facial expressions. The data were anonymised before complete coding was applied to every element in the data that could be relevant to the research question. This process started without any codes, and gradually a codebook was established as described in step 2 of the approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A name was given to every new code, as well as a succinct description. As much as possible, codes were given a name that could replace the sample in the data without loss of understanding. The description served as a definition of the code.

Some data got labelled several times with multiple, overlapping codes leaving a certain degree of freedom when data contained more complex nuances that were equally valid. At multiple times, the codebook was exported to generate potential themes, in line with step 3, before going through a new cycle of refining the codes on the dataset. Eventually, 133 codes were labelled, and in step 4, reviewing themes, earlier generated themes were reviewed to capture the dataset in a thematic map that would answer the research question. The researcher took the following guidelines into account in step 5 – defining and naming the themes – based on the work by Braun et al. (2015) and Braun and Clarke (2013).

A selected theme had to be meaningful in the context of the research question as a centralising concept that could be easily identified. Second, the theme had to be evident across enough data points. We considered the number of data items that could be found in the code and the number of interviews in which the codes that contributed to a theme were mentioned. Interesting ideas in codes with low numbers could contribute to a theme if a grouping factor related codes to each other.

We regularly cycled through the dataset and codebook to eliminate codes or data items when they did not relate to the research question, had very few data items, or were unrelated to other codes. This resulted in 5 themes, described in the next section. Our initial report, step 6, was our master's dissertation.

Findings and analysis

Table 2: Overview of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Zoom has become my best friend	During coaching sessions, the primary use of technology is to replace face-to-face coaching.
	Coaches have preferences, but mostly external factors determine choice of technology.
	Coaches use technology extensively in-between or before coaching sessions.
Technology saved my coaching business	My coaching business survived thanks to technology.
	Technology improves the coaching business model.
Digital coaching works, but coaches prefer face-to-face	Coaches experience a sufficient degree of effectiveness online.
	Most coaches do prefer face-to-face coaching.
Digital coaching can be challenging and boring	Technology enables clients to be more demanding.
	It's easy to let technology take the joy out of coaching.
	Technology can stand in the way.
Digital coaching creates ethical and confidentiality challenges	Ethics and confidentiality in a technology context were never an issue.
	Coaches are concerned about the ethical and confidential risks in a technology environment.

Theme 1: Zoom has become my best friend

This first theme concerns the technology used and how it is used, answering one of the main parts of the research question: "How do coaches use technology?" During coaching sessions, the primary use of technology is to replace face-to-face coaching. When coaches talk about using technology, they mainly refer to using videoconferencing platforms for digital coaching as a substitute for face-to-face coaching: *"Zoom has become my best friend" (Coach2)*. It is less common for coaches to use other types of technology during a remote coaching session. Some will use PowerPoint to share information or an online Word document as an alternative to a whiteboard. Coaches rarely use technology to supplement their coaching during digital coaching, and several coaches expressed their dislike for online whiteboards or mind-mapping software.

- Coaches have preferences, but external factors determine the choice of technology.

Either clients or the organisation that employs them determine the choice of platform. In some cases, the circumstances determine the choice of technology, for example, in remote locations with limited internet access where bandwidth is insufficient for regular videoconferencing applications.

- Coaches use technology extensively in between coaching sessions.

Coaches use technology in their business management. This includes all activities to run the coaching business, including accounting, marketing, and scheduling meetings with clients. They use technology to supplement their coaching in between or before sessions by sharing relevant information (articles, TED Talks, …), letting clients do online assessments (personal inventories, 360° …) or giving them homework. They also use technology to check in with their clients between sessions:

> *"I'm coaching them once a month or every other month, then so I always have a telephone session with them in between" (Coach1)*

Although some have already tried to experiment with using Avatars in coaching, coaches still need to adopt more advanced technologies, like AI-based or Avatar-based platforms.

Theme 2: Technology saved my coaching business

The main reason coaches use technology: COVID-19 would have stopped all coaching without technology.

- My coaching business survived thanks to technology

Until March 2020, most of the interviewed coaches had a practice based on face-to-face coaching, and their use of technology was limited. The start of the COVID-19 crisis stopped all face-to-face coaching:

"So, I have gone from using virtually no technology in March 2020, apart from phone and sending questionnaires and things, to all of my work in the last 18 months being done on platforms like this." (Coach3)

Many of the coaches reported that, without technology, their coaching business would not have survived the COVID-19 crisis. They all experienced a relatively fast transformation towards an online business model.

"Because up until the point where we couldn't have face to face meetings, I had an active coaching client base, and we were having meetings on a regular basis. Without technology that would have just stopped. It would have literally just come to a grinding halt. In the last 18 months, technology has been the heartbeat of the continuation of the coaching." (Coach6)

- Technology improves the coaching business model

Technology also brought other advantages, and most coaches were able to expand their market reach:

"It's opened up to me a set of clients whom I would never have accessed before." (Coach5)

There are other positive impacts on the business model, as technology can make the coaching business more efficient by saving time and money. Remote coaching eliminates travel resulting in coaches seeing more clients at a lower cost.

Theme 3: Digital coaching works, but coaches prefer face-to-face

COVID-19 has driven coaches towards digital coaching. An essential aspect of how coaches experience using technology is how it impacts their effectiveness as a coach.

- Coaches experience a sufficient degree of effectiveness online.

When discussing coaching effectiveness, the coaching relationship is the first thing to look at. Coaches learned to build their relationships online, as many of the coaches report:

"I don't see a difference. You know, when I'm with people online, I don't feel I am online. As I said, I really forget. If I am face-to-face or in front of a computer, I'm really with the person." (Coach9).

The second element of effectiveness is whether the coaches get results with their clients online. Again, all coaches indicated that they get sufficient results from remote coaching. Depending on the coach the level of result is positioned from lower, the same to even higher than with face-to-face coaching.

"I make an impact. I mean, my own personal evaluation, is just looking at somebody and I can do that as much in this in the environment, you know, as when (…) I've made a difference." *(Coach4)*

- Most coaches prefer face-to-face coaching.

Regardless of the effectiveness of remote coaching, most coaches perceive digital coaching as different from face-to-face coaching and have an emotional preference for face-to-face coaching. They still have the feeling that they would get more out of a face-to-face coaching session:

"Because I actually, and it's still true today, I still prefer to have the face-to-face contact if I can. (…) I think you get a little bit more if you're in the room with a person." *(Coach6)*

Theme 4: Digital coaching can be challenging and boring

The use of technology does not necessarily make coaching easier, for example.

- Technology enables clients to be more demanding.

Clients can take advantage of the flexibility that technology offers, and sometimes they do:

"I get a lot of text messages with, HEY, this has happened today; what should I do? But there's no engagement in the coaching process. So, I think because somebody can sit in a car and go, I'm having a shit day, I'm going to text (Coach2), she'll give me some advice." *(Coach2)*

"There was a period when I had to work at it, because I had a couple of clients who thought that because it was all remote, they could cancel at sort of five minutes notice, or even at minus five minutes notice." *(Coach5)*

Some clients put themselves in a situation during coaching, which makes it harder for coaches to engage their clients. Some clients combine multiple activities simultaneously, while others put themselves in a less optimal environment or switch off their cameras, giving their coaches fewer cues during the coaching session.

"I have seen a number of children and cats and dogs go across the screen, which I find hugely frustrating, not that it ... You know what I mean? I took a long time for me to go That's okay." *(Coach7)*

- It's easy to let technology take the joy out of coaching.

Digital coaching happens in a physically static position, facing a screen and usually wearing headphones. This requires much focus and can be de-energizing, compared to face-to-face coaching, where coaches – and clients – can more easily move and have a broader view:

"So yeah, so I find it mentally and physically more tiring. It's harder because you're not face to face, …, that's why I think it's more de-energizing because you're having to put so much into really being present, not being distracted." *(Coach3)*

Several coaches have expressed that, in some way or another, the use of technology negatively impacts the joy of coaching. It is not the coaching they signed up for. It made coaching more boring:

"There have been times where I've really just gone on, you know, I've had enough of it." *(Coach4)*

"I've had to work very hard, because I did find myself getting lazy at some point. And I had to pull myself up and say, NO, actually, I'm dealing with the person on the screen. They are as important as if I was dealing with them face-to-face." (Coach5)

Technology makes it easy for coaches to have back-to-back meetings from early morning until the evening. It's easy to overbook themselves if they have the clients for it. Certainly, at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, coaches worried about their business and were tempted to take on too much work to compensate:

"And of course, what you can do in this environment, is you can fill your calendar up. It's not like when I was in London coaching, I probably do one in the morning and one in the afternoon. And if I really wanted to stretch myself, I might squeeze one in the middle. But virtually, I can do a lot more (…) so I ended up doing too much." (Coach4)

- Technology can stand in the way.

The apparent reason when technology stands in the way of a coaching session: IT doesn't work! All coaches experienced their share of technology issues. However, technology can also stand in the way because of a lack of skills. Technology evolves quickly with many different products. Increasing complexity requires skills that need continuous updates.

"You could get awkward moments if clients are wanting or expecting you to use a certain technology and you don't know what they're talking about." (Coach6)

Theme 5: Digital coaching creates ethical and confidentiality challenges.

A final theme explores the impact of technology on the capability of coaches to maintain their standards on the level of ethics and confidentiality. Although most coaches never had issues, they are aware of the ethical and confidentiality challenges when using technology.

- Ethics and confidentiality in a technology context were never an issue.

Most interviewees responded that they did not experience any ethical or confidentiality issues.

"I don't see any confidentiality issues from a technology point of view. Not that I've experienced, you know, has there been somebody else sitting in a room? Listening? No one's ever asked, you know, is there anyone else around where you are? As a coach?" (Coach7)

- Coaches are concerned about the ethical and confidential risks in a technology environment.

Reduced ability to read clients poses an ethical risk. Coaches are concerned that it's more challenging to assess whether they should continue coaching or refer a client towards therapy. Some clients are not turning on their cameras during coaching calls or they switch their cameras off during the conversation, which makes it more challenging.

"Sometimes it's hard to really see and read emotion. For example, if you're thinking about where coaching stopped, and where you might say to somebody about therapy, or counselling. It's been harder to see how upset people really are, and what is really going on." (Coach3)

One of the concerns that some of the coaches experienced was potentially being recorded during the coaching sessions. The existence of a recording out of the control of the coach can become a confidentiality risk.

Coaches are also concerned about their clients finding a safe coaching space. Clients are sometimes surrounded by family, less often by colleagues. Some coaches report clients calling in from airports, trains or public places. A few coaches leave the judgement about finding a safe space completely to the client, as they see their clients as responsible people with the capability and the freedom to choose their environment.

> *"She's got a husband and two very young children. And her husband was at the desk next door to her, sometimes I could hear him. And although she had her earphones, he could hear what she was saying. So, I had to reconcile with myself that she was okay with him hearing what she was talking about." (Coach1)*

Coaches include these topics in their contracting to deal with these ethical challenges and potential confidential issues, as they do when face-to-face coaching.

Discussion

Expanding the use of technology

When coaches talk about the use of technology, they mainly refer to using videoconferencing platforms as a substitute for face-to-face coaching. The findings indicated that coaches are not yet using technology to its full potential compared to the possibilities described in the literature, and this does not appear to have changed over time, suggesting a need for education (Pascal et al., 2015; Lancefield et al., 2019; Kanatouri, 2020; Passmore, 2021). A first domain where coaches could expand their technology use is supplementing the coaching during coaching sessions. Some coaches mentioned that they could present richer content to their clients by sharing a PowerPoint or Word document. Kanatouri (2020) suggests using mind-mapping tools or whiteboards to structure content; however, our findings show that many coaches actively avoid these tools.

A second domain the interviewed coaches have not explored is using technology for evaluation. Technology makes it easy to gather client feedback, which could benefit coaches, specifically now that the modalities have changed. Coaches can use the feedback to monitor their clients' progress and for their continuous improvement as a coach.

A third domain the literature suggests is the opportunity to use technology for coach selection (Pascal et al., 2015). During the interviews, most coaches indicated that they expanded their reach as a coach, so indirectly, they have participated in a broader choice to their expanded spectrum of clients. While digital platforms have started to use AI-driven coach matching, similar steps could be taken by professional bodies or other coach registers, enabling potential clients to be matched with a selection of the best-fit coaches based on language, time zones, industry or experience preferences, training or qualification preferences and other factors.

Using technology to survive

The ability to switch to digital coaching has been key for the survival of coaching businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As in many business sectors, coaches who could adapt their strategies and business models in this crisis had the most chance to survive (Abed, 2022). Some of the coaches also reported improvement in their business by expanding their reach and saving time and money using technology. Isaacson (2021) indeed reports efficiency as one of the driving forces that could contribute to an increased return for coaches. For the moment, this higher efficiency comes from technology replacing non-coaching tasks by eliminating the need for travel, by increasing the ease of access and the flexibility of the coach.

Improving the effectiveness of technology-enabled coaching

The third theme in the key findings concerns the effectiveness of technology-enabled coaching. Coaches learned to build online coaching relationships with their clients and reported sufficient effectiveness to achieve results, but they still prefer face-to-face coaching. One might assume that the relationship quality in technology-enabled coaching can never be as good as in face-to-face coaching and, thus, must be less effective. However, the effectiveness of digital coaching is confirmed by the literature (Jones et al., 2016; Passarelli et al., 2020), although Passarelli et al. (2020) indicates that a richer media improves the quality of the working alliance and may lead to better outcomes. It explains why coaches find it harder to coach someone who doesn't switch on their camera.

A possible explanation for the preference for face-to-face coaching is that remote clients are more challenging to read. It means that the coaches lose complete insight into the client's emotional world, while the client's inner world is an essential element in the client's change process and, thus, of the effectiveness of the coaching (Erdös et al., 2021). Though the coach-coachee relationship is still an essential part of coaching effectiveness (Grabman et al., 2020), coaches can also look at other means to improve the effectiveness of remote coaching. One of the findings is that coaches use technology to increase their contact frequency with clients. Gregory and Levy (2012) confirm that increasing the interaction frequency with clients is a way to increase the impact and effectiveness of coaching.

Bringing more joy into technology-enabled coaching

Some of the coaches had problems dealing with the transition from face-to-face to 100% digital coaching. They found it more challenging and de-energizing, which took the joy out of their coaching. For most of the coaches, full-time digital coaching was new, requiring the development of additional skills. These are not only technical skills. Coaches also mentioned that they had to learn to build online coaching relationships.

While previous face-to-face coaching often required travelling from one client to the next, now they could schedule coaching sessions back-to-back. The fear of the potential business impact of COVID-19 drove them to seek higher workloads. Those coaches who reported most of the issues regarding their loss of joy were the same ones reporting a higher working rhythm seeing more clients, often back-to-back. As a result, these coaches spend long hours in front of a screen, where more attention is needed and less information from the client is getting through. Fully solving this situation seems an essential supervision topic and requires further research.

Ethical considerations and confidentiality

Most coaches reported that they had not been confronted with ethical or confidentiality issues, which does not mean they do not exist. The coaches showed awareness of the ethical issues caused by their limited view of their client's emotional state. Coaches are more concerned when clients do not turn on their cameras during a call, as it makes the line between coaching and therapy blurrier. This makes it harder for coaches to comply with the ethical code they subscribed to and is a valid concern. Some coaches are concerned about the possibility of being recorded during the coaching sessions, although they thought it unlikely that it had already happened. During the interviews, most coaches could describe a situation where a client calls them for a coaching conversation from an airport, a train or a bar. Coaches are rightly worried that this is not a safe coaching space for clients, but they seem less worried about the connection through a public network, which also causes a cybersecurity risk (Okereafor and Manny, 2020).

Many coaches recommend online articles, podcasts or videos that could interest their clients, sending them straight into the hands of the internet marketing machines. Coaches also indicated

using online assessments and sometimes recommended applications like Headspace or others where more personal data could be stored. However, they did not mention any concerns relating to ethical or confidentiality issues. The interviews showed that coaches are unaware of cybersecurity risks, similar to therapy professionals (Ioane et al., 2021). The codes of ethics of the leading professional coaching bodies contain generalist sections on secure data handling and protection when using technology (ICF, Undated; EMCC, Undated; AC, Undated) but lack guidelines on the real concerns that coaches reported on digital coaching. Professional bodies need to address this issue and set standards reflecting these new ways of working, from digital coaching to AI CoachBots.

Boundaries, constraints and suggestions for future research

First, this research reflects the voice of coaches using technology, resulting in coaches that are positively biased towards the use and, most likely, the effectiveness of using technology in coaching. The voice of those not using technology is not heard. Second, the COVID-19 crisis was a temporary context with a strong influence on the use of technology by the coaches. Now that this crisis is over, it is expected that the use and impact of technology may change. Third, the literature review has initially determined the topics of the interview, potentially resulting in a tunnel view of the topic. However, the researcher has kept the interviews semi-structured and various topics have come up during the interviews that were not scheduled in the initial interview guide. Finally, there is a limited number of participants. However, as mentioned earlier, purposive sampling (Oades et al., 2019) was used, and the number of matching volunteers eventually determined the number of participants.

Future research is suggested on different aspects of the relationship between coaching and technology:

- How does the use of technology evolve in the post-pandemic era?
- Where are the opportunities to expand the use of technology? What makes the difference between the technology superusers and those coaches who do not use technology?
- What drives the reluctance of a large group of coaches to adopt some or all technology?
- What skills and habits would make digital coaching more comfortable for coaches? How could supervisors contribute to this?

Conclusion and recommendations for practice

The context of the COVID-19 crisis changed the way coaches could work with their clients, as it did in many industries. Coaches had to transform their business from a mainly face-to-face operation to a 100% online business. Having been in this new situation for over a year, this study looks at how coaches have adopted technology in their business and the impact of using technology on the coaches.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of nine coaches. We generated five key themes using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, coaches use technology mainly for digital coaching, in-between coaching sessions, and business management. This currently leaves a lot of potential untapped. Coaches could apply technology for evaluation purposes and increase the richness of their coaching sessions by integrating more technology during their digital coaching sessions.

Second, technology has saved many coaching businesses during the COVID-19 crisis and even has improved the business model of some of the coaches. Coaches could look now at applications

of technology that go beyond survival and increased efficiency, such as improved consistency, increased impact and more.

Third, coaches have learned to build online relationships with their clients and experience sufficient effectiveness to achieve results through remote coaching. They still prefer face-to-face coaching to digital coaching. Technology could also improve the coaching relationship and increase coaching effectiveness by increasing the contact frequency.

Fourth, most coaches found remote coaching harder and de-energizing, and for some of the coaches, it can take the joy out of coaching. Coaches need to develop better skills and new habits to find a more comfortable way to deliver digital coaching. Better guidelines and supervision can play an important role here.

Finally, some ethical challenges are underestimated by coaches and not yet sufficiently anticipated by professional coaching bodies. Coaches have valid concerns about the risks of eavesdropping and for their clients to find a safe space for being coached. It is highly recommended that coaches learn to use different technology platforms and stay up to date with recent evolutions, including the security aspects of their technology. It is vital to take cybersecurity seriously. Professional coaching bodies must provide more guidance, while technology usage and risks should also be part of today's coach training.

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About the authors

Marc Innegraeve holds an MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change from Henley Business School. He is doctoral researcher at Vlerick Business School and executive coach.

Jonathan Passmore is professor at Henley Business School and Senior VP in the digital coaching industry. He has published widely over the past twenty years.