Academic Paper

Coaching in the Digital Age: Exploring Digitalisation's Impact on Executive Coaching: A Theoretical Framework and Proposed Agenda Shift

Brajesh Bajpai ✉

Abstract

Digitalisation forces emerging from the fourth industrial revolution significantly impact executive coaches and the coaching industry. Despite this, executive coaching literature has historically overlooked the impact of socio-contextual factors on the practice, leaving a research gap. A qualitative study of 25 executive coaches through constructivist grounded theory found that digitalisation significantly impacts executive coaching, but most coaches struggle to understand it holistically. Coaches encounter digitalisation-driven changes directly and indirectly, suggesting a need to adapt the coaching agenda towards the challenges of the digital age. This study positions digitalisation as a crucial socio-contextual factor, proposing a theoretical model to comprehend its impact holistically and initiate discussions on its anticipated effects.

Introduction

"Lives are changed when people connect. Life is changed when everything is connected" is the motto of Qualcomm (Friedman, 2017, p. 36), one of the world's largest makers of microchips. I got a very personal experience of these changes when, a few years back, at the end of one of my coaching sessions, the client remarked, "If this continues, it will not surprise me if I will be coached by an Alexa soon!". My client's casual doorknob comment triggered a deeper post-session reflection and a lingering thought: How are executive coaches dealing with (or not dealing with) the changes they were experiencing (or resisting) arising from widespread digitalisation in organisations and the world? This paper attempts to understand this question by exploring how executive coaches encounter digitalisation-driven change.

Research Question & Context

Executive coaching (Stokes & Jolly, 2014) has evolved with changing social realities, helping the field gain increased professionalism and meteoric growth over the last two decades (Underhill, Passmore, & Goldsmith, 2022). The practice now finds itself amidst another significant change, this time led by widespread technological changes of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) (Klaus, 2016). Digitalisation is changing the world in which executives and coaches live and operate. It is also changing leadership norms (Khan, 2016) and the organisational structures in which executive coaches operate (Balakrishnan & Das, 2020; Sanchez & Zuntini, 2018).

Over the last two decades, executive coaching scholars (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Shoukry & Cox, 2018; Sonesh et al., 2015) have asked for the coaching research agenda to enhance its focus on socio-contextual factors. In their systemic review, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) emphasize the context-sensitive nature of executive coaching and highlight the missing socio-contextual aspects in current coaching literature, calling on future researchers to address this gap. This paper intends to address this gap by exploring digitalisation's socio-contextual impact on executive coaching through the research question, 'How are executive coaches encountering the impact of digitalisation on executive coaching?'.

A rapidly digitalising world poses unprecedented challenges for organisational leaders and presents an opportunity for executive coaching to contribute to their developmental agenda across private, public and third-sector organisations (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021; Underhill et al., 2022). While we can find plenty of research on the impact of digitalisation on organisations (Balakrishnan & Das, 2020; Kiron, Kane, Palmer, Phillips, & Buckley, 2016; Sanchez & Zuntini, 2018) and its impact on leaders (Balan & Cavendish, 2017; Böck & Lange, 2018; Khan, 2016), there is little research available on digitalisation's impact on executive coaching. Some work addressing issues related to coaching platforms and the use of bots have emerged in the last few years (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2021; Terblanche, Molyn, De Haan, & Nilsson, 2022), but the body of research to holistically understand the impact on executive coaches is still quite limited. Given the wide-ranging impact of digitalisation, executive coaches are experiencing its impact on their practice, thus making this research gap even more inexplicable.

Within professional circles, significant discussions on the topic of digitalisation are already emerging. The 25th Annual European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) conference, in its keynote panel discussion, 'Digital Age and Coaching' (EMCC, 2019), raised significant issues concerning the impact of digitalisation. The issues raised in the EMCC conference and the study by the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2021) highlighted the significant increase in non-person coaching and headlined several issues related to digitisation. These concerns of the coaching community give confidence that practitioners will also welcome this research and benefit from the findings. Considering the influence of digitalisation on individuals, organisations, and the global sphere, it is expected to impact many (if not all) aspects of executive coaching. Such widespread impact and practitioners' concerns highlight a need to research the phenomena, not piecemeal but holistically (Blackman, Moscardo, & Gray, 2016). The aims and objectives of this study are intended not to be limited in scope and to view the executive coaching practice holistically while exploring and inquiring into the concerns and perceptions of executive coaches.

Research Aims and Objectives.

This paper aims to answer the central question by exploring how is digitalisation influencing executive coaching, develops theory and insights for the practice and fulfils the following objectives.

- To critically evaluate the existing literature on executive coaching and digitalisation and identify significant themes of digitalisation's impact on practice.

- To develop a framework for executive coaching that addresses digitalisation's holistic impact on practice.
- To make a theoretical contribution to the leadership and coaching literature and suggest future research directions by emphasizing the socio-contextual importance of digitalisation.

Given the multiplicity of definitions and usage of the term 'digitalisation', the definition used in this research is built on the one provided by Brennen & Kreiss (2016, 2019), which accurately identifies the sources of digitalisation while keeping the focus on the 'forces of change' it generates. Thus, digitalisation for this research is defined as:

"The forces of change arising out of widespread use of digital and computer technology which are transforming the organizations, society and world at large leading to the fourth industrial revolution".

While offering the definition, it is essential to emphasise that the research did not prescribe specific definitions or boundaries for the respondents. Instead, it focused on exploring how respondents construct the meaning of digitalisation within the context of the research aims and objectives. While executive coaching, operating in a social, organisational context, presents a suitable empirical phenomenon for investigating the impact of digitalisation, a review of the literature reveals that few studies have holistically investigated this impact.

Literature Review

This paper is concerned with knowledge-for-understanding and knowledge-for-action, which correspond to the dual nature of coaching, both as an academic field and a profession (Noon, 2017). The literature review thus explores both scholarly and practitioner research literature to avoid developing isolated bodies of theory, one informed by scholarly research and the other from the practitioners' point of view.

Impact of Digitalisation on Organisations and Leaders

Given the scale of impact on organisations and the complexity involved in the digitalisation process, it is unsurprising to find numerous and, at times, conflicting positions by scholars (Qiu & Pesch, 2019). However, Alavi and colleagues (2014) hypothesise that digitalisation leads to flatter, decentralised and informal organisations, characteristics developed to support the workforce's ability to respond quickly to threats or opportunities. However, a trend towards flatter, smaller and agile organisations predates the era of virtualisation, and even the term 'virtual organisation', initially used to denote a multi-site organisation, has since widened to include elements of e-commerce, geographically dispersed locations and the use of websites (Mohammad, 2009). It is also true that the discussions on structural elements of the organisation, such as hierarchy centralisation and mobility, are now increasingly being influenced by digitalisation and the new digitalised organisations, termed enterprise 2.0 (McAfee, 2006), which are flatter and faster and, through a greater degree of digitalisation, make information more accessible and transparent through the organisation (Kuusisto, 2017).

Workplace technologies have become the foundation for social interactions and community development (Baptista, Stein, Klein, Watson-Manheim, & Lee, 2020). It is suggested that for organisations to survive and managers to thrive, engaging with these collaboration and communication tools is now essential as they have become an integral part of organisational setups (Baptista et al., 2020). Some academics take an instrumental view of these tools and explore the behavioural and practical implications (Baptista et al., 2020), but few researchers take a more holistic view towards exploring the organisation-wide impact of these tools (Baptista, Newell, & Currie, 2010; Riemer, Stieglitz, & Meske, 2015). Within the academic debates on the

impact of digitalisation on organisations, the literature paints the portrait of a flatter, informal, decentralised (Alavi et al., 2014; McAfee, 2006) and agile organisation (Riemer et al., 2015; Stray, Memon, & Paruch, 2020) with greater information access through digital tools (Baptista et al., 2020; Dewett & Jones, 2001; Lyytinen, Nickerson, & King, 2021). Such significant organisational changes are making new demands on modern leaders (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai, & Baker, 2014; Cortellazzo, Bruni, & Zampieri, 2019; Khan, 2016; Mohammad, 2009), necessitating a leadership rethink.

Scholars have proposed a multitude of skills and competencies which e-leaders require to overcome these challenges. Annunzio (2001) identified seven competencies, Kissler (2001) proposed a different set of ten, and Avolio and colleagues (2014) suggest that e-leaders should balance the traditional with the new. Khan (2016) proposed six characteristics of digitalisation to evaluate e-leadership imperatives. Given that a digital context provides greater autonomy to followers (Schwarzmüller, Brosi, Duman, & Welpe, 2018) and access across the hierarchy (Pulley & Sessa, 2001), in addition to traditional leadership competencies that remain relatively unchanged, e-leaders face additional challenges of distributed teams (spatial distance), virtual interactions (video-mediated) and an informal collaborative work design (using digital tools of communication and collaboration). This social view of e-leadership suggests that traditional and contemporary leaders both need to evolve and change to succeed in the new digital era. As trusted leadership partners (Kilburg, 2017), executive coaches will probably be required to work with e-leaders in this journey of change.

Coaching Discussions Linked to Digitalisation

Given that executive coaching and digitalisation exist in overlapping worlds, technological evolutions and forces of digitalisation are already influencing coaching practitioners' lives (Berry, Ashby, Gnilka, & Matheny, 2011; Kanatouri & Geissler, 2017). An ICF survey in July 2020 indicated that over 80% of coaches had seen a sharp decline in face-to-face coaching (ICF, 2020b) driven by lockdown measures and stay-at-home working conditions across the globe resulting from the global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The study indicates that over 70% of coaches increased their use of audio-visual tools, and academic literature suggests that this move away from face-to-face is not a recent phenomenon attributed only to pandemic-induced situations (Berry et al., 2011; Frazee, 2008).

There is agreement among coaching scholars that a trusting coach-client relationship or a strong working alliance (De Haan, 2011) is critical for a successful coaching outcome (De Haan, Culpin, & Curd, 2011). Hence, it is not surprising that a corresponding debate on the efficacy, outcomes, and strength of the working alliance punctuates any discussion on the use of digital medium. E-coaching scholars (Berry, 2005; Ghods & Boyce, 2013) suggest that developing a stronger working alliance in a virtual setting might be even more critical, given the lack of cues. The studies by Berry and colleagues (2005; 2011) found no significant differences in working between face-to-face and remote coaching and offered evidence that remote coaching may be as effective as face-to-face coaching. In contrast, the study by Charbonneau (2002) suggests that both coaches and clients perceive face-to-face coaching as more effective than remote or digital coaching. Ghods' (2009) research into distance-coaching established a different position from Charbonneau's and demonstrated that a positive relationship could be developed in coaching without face-to-face interactions. While researching telephone usage in coaching, McLaughlin (2013) helps in locating a middle ground and labels distance-coaching as "*inherently different*" and urges the coaches "*to further their understanding*" (2013, pp. 9-10). While studies debate the effectiveness and quality of working alliances in a digital coaching environment, there is some agreement to be found around the benefits of digital coaching in the form of improved access, lower cost, greater democratisation and time management (Charbonneau, 2002; Frazee, 2008).

As connectivity mediums evolve in the age of digitalisation, locating an appropriate and suitable medium for the proper context and keeping in touch with the latest tools has become more critical. Kanatouri (2020a, p. 15) provides one framework to understand the options available under the umbrella of digital coaching. In their framework, Pascal and colleagues (2015) propose five possible areas impacted by digitalisation and highlight that non-face-to-face sessions will continue to gain dominance. Researchers agree that smartly incorporating technology in the executive coaching process is inevitable and provides many benefits (Kanatouri, 2020b); it seems equally important to research further on the concerns around efficiency v/s effectiveness, confidentiality (Pascal et al., 2015), the risk of missing context (Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010) and quality of working alliance (Fernandez et al., 2021).

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). Academic research on the impact of the current pandemic on various aspects of executive coaching is still emerging (Jarosz, 2021; Williams & Palmer, 2020). However, the trend of virtual coaching has been gaining momentum pre-pandemic (ICF, 2020a) and further accelerated during COVID-19 (ICF, 2021). ICF suggests that this impact was felt across many industries, including business and executive coaches globally (ICF, 2020c).

In summary, the literature identifies the impact of digitalisation on organisations (Qiu & Pesch, 2019) leading to flatter, informal, decentralised (Alavi et al., 2014; McAfee, 2006) and agile organisations (Burchardt & Maisch, 2019; Stray et al., 2020) with greater information access through digital tools (Baptista et al., 2020; Riemer et al., 2015). This landscape of flatter, decentralised organisations and proliferating use of digital tools leads to a need for traditional and contemporary leaders to evolve for this new digital era (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Khan, 2016) and executive coaches, as trusted leadership partners (Kilburg, 2017) to support these leaders (Avolio et al., 2014; Mohammad, 2009) in this journey. While the backdrop of digitalisation already impacts coaching practitioners' lives (Berry et al., 2011; Kanatouri & Geissler, 2017), little research is available that takes a holistic view of this impact. On the vital issue of working alliance (De Haan et al., 2011), Charbonneau (2002) suggests that non-face-to-face sessions are limited in establishing working alliances, while other scholars (Berry, 2005; Berry et al., 2011; Ghods, 2009) propose that a positive relationship is possible even in remote coaching.

Methodology and Data Collection

The aim of this research is aligned with a social constructivist paradigm that meaning is constructed (not discovered) by humans as they engage with the world they interpret (Crotty, 1998). Due to the research's constructivist nature, the study's findings are shaped by respondents' interpretations, and given that much of the data was gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents' perspectives are likely to be influenced disproportionately by this significant global event. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend a grounded theory (GT) approach to study phenomena where participants' experiences and viewpoints are used to understand how they construct, cope with and mediate their circumstances. The research strategy employed for this study is the constructivist GT version (Charmaz, 2014), which is consistent with a social constructivist paradigm. The constructivist version of GT supports the proposition that "knowledge is constructed and that reality is fluid and subject to changes based on a participant's construction of it" (O'Connor, Carpenter, & Coughlan, 2018, p. 92) and finds congruence with the objectives. A sample of twenty-five experienced executive coaches who were most likely to generate a rich, robust, and deep understanding of the topic participated in this study. The research uses a multi-phase approach for data collection and analysis, consistent with the iterative nature of GT.

In this study, the researcher and the respondents interpret how executive coaches are experiencing the impact of digitalisation on the practice. Each executive coach had their own interpretation of the impact of digitalisation influenced by their interactions with their unique social reality and

environment, leading to multiple interpretations of the phenomena. Such a scenario is congruent with the interpretivist perspective, which posits that humans arrive at the same phenomena from different backgrounds and create and experience different social realities (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019). The research gathered the constructed image or description of the phenomena from the respondent's point of view without any presumptions of inevitability. These constructs represent second-degree constructs, delineating constructs formulated by coaches of the social scene (Schwandt, 1994). This study thus takes a social constructivist approach, focusing on human interactions, emotions, and feelings to avoid the trap of taking a narrow view of instrumentalism, which views technology as just a tool. The full detailed methodology of the research is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Full Research Methodology
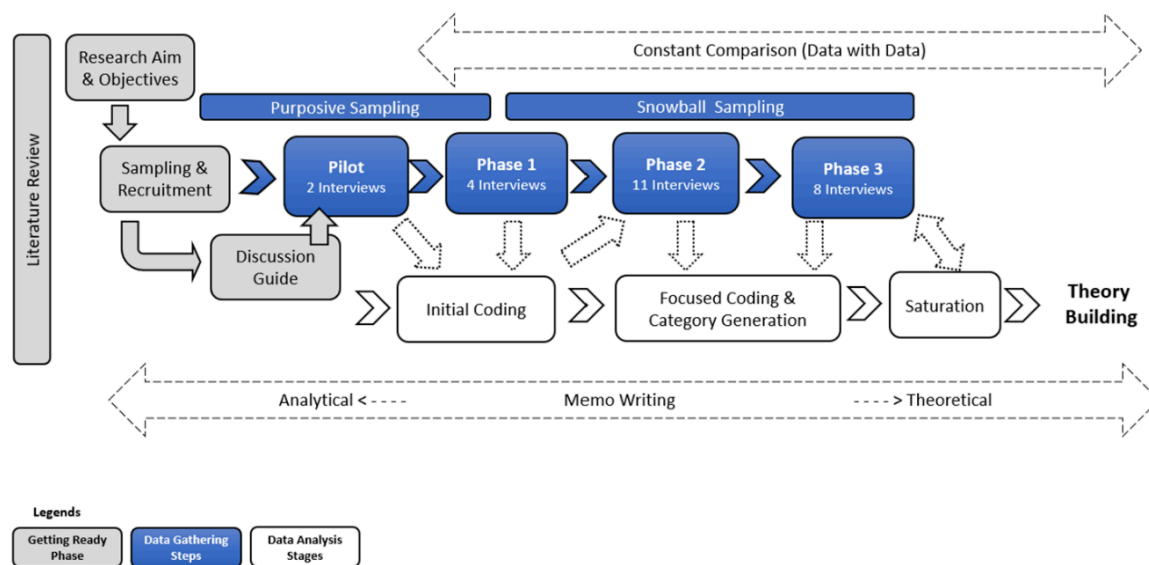
Respondent Recruitment and Selection

Based on the constraints of practicality and overall research timelines, the study started with a plan to interview between 20-25 executive coaches while remaining fully aware that the final sample size would depend on how the categories emerged and the theoretical saturation achieved. The study started with two face-to-face pilot interviews. Key documents of the privacy notice, participant information sheet, consent form and recruitment advertisement, all cleared by the Oxford Brookes University research ethics committee, were shared in advance with all the research participants.

Overall, the study needed participants who were experienced executive coaches to provide a longer horizon of their experience. To ensure experience, the study limited the sample to executive coaches with a minimum of five years in practice and a recruitment advertisement was published on the LinkedIn pages of EMCC and ICF. Purposive sampling was used to select the initial respondents for Phase 1. By Phase 2, the study had moved to a snowball sampling process. The two pilot interviews were conducted face-to-face in Jan 2020 before the emergence of COVID-19. Interviews for Phase 1 were conducted using Zoom in May 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19, when executive coaches were forced to conduct their work entirely through video conferencing tools. Due to the profound influence of the pandemic and the resultant shift to virtual interactions across various aspects of respondents' lives, topics related to video coaching and its consequences probably received substantial attention in the interviews, occasionally overshadowing other effects of digitalisation on the field. The interviews for the last two Phases were also conducted over Zoom during the summer of 2020.

While the research had not planned for any geographical or gender representation, the final sample had 25 coaches from five countries (UK, India, South Africa, Europe and the USA) across three continents, with a mix of 10 female and 15 male executive coaches. Most of the respondents had academic qualifications beyond ILM Level 5. Seven had EMCC accreditations at or beyond the senior practitioner level, and five were ICF master practitioners. Fifteen respondents owned or were partners in an executive coaching firm. Nine participants also worked in leadership development and three provided supervision. Viewed together, this is a group of highly experienced coaches with solid practice and more than a decade of average coaching experience, thus helpful in exploring the topic widely and in-depth.

Data Gathering and Analysis

While grounded theory supports a variety of data collection methods (Charmaz, 2006), this study used semi-structured interviews as the primary tool for data collection "*where core elements of the phenomenon being studied are explicitly asked about by the interviewer*" (Barrett & Twycross, 2018, p. 63). Since the respondents knew of the researcher's long executive coaching experience, they were engaged as curious equals. These twenty-five sessions, comprising over thirty-five hours of interviewing, were gently guided discussions on how digitalisation impacts executive coaching. In line with good ethical research practice, the participant information sheet helped ensure informed consent and the data handling process was designed to respect privacy and confidentiality through anonymisation.

Findings

Encountering Change

> " . . . it's all around. I think we're living in a digitally enabled universe more and more. Almost every aspect of our lives has a digital feature to it." (Brad)[1]

While the academic definition of digitalisation works well for the study, the respondents did not benefit from such a well-articulated understanding. During the interviews, varied interpretations and descriptions emerged of how coaches perceived and understood the concept of digitalisation. Some of the variance in understanding the term among coaches was to be expected, given each respondent's unique personal experiences and exposure. However, within this diverse understanding of respondents, there was general agreement that digitalisation will significantly impact the executive coaching industry, and all 25 coaches broadly agreed with this sentiment. There was also agreement that the impact of digitalisation is not only significant but will also be wide-ranging and likely impact most, if not all, aspects of executive coaching.

Respondents used phrases like 'huge impact', 'dramatic', and 'tip of the iceberg' while describing the impact, thus alluding to the enormity of the impact as they visualised it. With their struggle to define digitalisation, some executive coaches used discrete elements to explain its impact on executive coaching. Others discussed only a few specific elements of the impact and preferred to concentrate essentially on the matters associated with video coaching, a top-of-mind issue during pandemic times. The respondents in the first group were expansive in their interpretation by highlighting digital life issues, changing organisational realities, challenges for new leaders and an overall digitally transforming society. These responses presented a more solid and well-developed conceptual understanding.

One respondent with such a well-developed conceptual understanding suggested that the impact of digitalisation on executive coaching could be broadly categorised into two parts. One part is the use of digital tools and the virtual medium in the coaching sessions, which he referred to as *"how*

am I doing coaching is changing", and the second part is the *"impact on my coachee"* due to forces of digitalisation. The first was suggested to have a more straightforward impact that is easy to understand and articulate, and the second is a more roundabout impact, given that it is experienced through the coachee and originates in the changes within the organisation. Another respondent supported this two-part visualisation of digitalisation's impact on executive coaches' practice. For her, one was an indirect component where digitalisation impacted clients, given organisational changes and hence the practice. The other was a more direct component where the executive coaches experienced the impact directly, with the increased use of the virtual medium and digital tools.

These two-pronged descriptions help recognise how executive coaches, while struggling, still create a preliminary understanding of the impact of digitalisation, seemingly consisting of two distinct elements. Figure 2 outlines these two areas of impact. In this figure, the direct impact results from the increased use of the virtual medium in coaching, which the executive coaches directly experience. It covers how executive coaches are '*doing'* the coaching. The indirect impact is experienced through the client and emerges from the client's organisation and industry changes driven by digitalisation. The indirect impact concerns the material '*clients bring to the coaching sessions'*. As constructed and suggested by coaches, this visualisation of the direct and indirect impact helps understand 'why' digitalisation impacts executive coaching. The findings also suggest that the indirect impact will likely induce a change in the coaching agenda with a greater focus on empathetic leadership.

Changing Coaching Agenda

Figure 2: Encountering Change. Direct and Indirect Impact on Executive Coaching
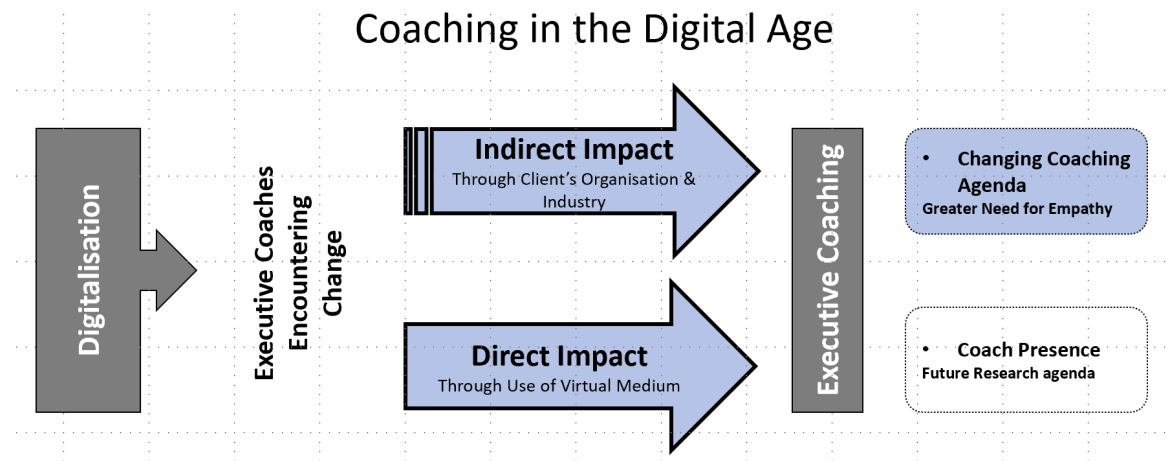
One prominent theme emerging from the indirect impact of digitalisation was the change in the coaching agenda as experienced by executive coaches. This change stems from the topics and themes the executive coaching clients bring to the sessions. According to the respondents, this shift in the coaching agenda could be attributed to the changes in the organisations driven by digitalisation, changes in team dynamics, and newer demands on modern leaders. Respondents suggested that as a result of these changes, the role of executive coaching now needs to evolve:

> *"<in> The modern leader's world of hyper-connectedness, instant-interaction . . . , constantly challenged from teams and fast-moving digital-driven changes; the role of executive coaching gets ever more important and needs to evolve"* (Amy)

Most respondents resonated with Amy's visualisation of an evolving, changing, connected organisation. In contrast to Amy's position, a few proposed a different causality. They suggested a

much more positive and agentic role for the executive coaches. In this agentic role, executive coaches have much greater autonomy and influence. They are seen as influencers of outcomes through their actions and decisions rather than passive recipients of external forces of digitalisation-induced change. In this scenario, an evolving executive coaching practice enables effective organisational change. Independent of causality and agency of coaches, respondents broadly agreed that an evolution of executive coaching was probably needed in the background of the new digital organisations where structures have changed and newer ways of working have emerged.

As the literature review suggests, scholars have discussed the elements of 'changing organisational structures' and 'changing ways of working' in the context of the impact of digitalisation. The same two elements emerged in the findings, demanding a change in the coaching agenda. During deeper exploration, the respondents suggested that a unifying central theme might be at the root of these two elements. This unifying theme was identified as the 'increasing fragmentation of team interactions' facilitated by digital tools, virtual technology and asynchronous working. One respondent suggested that *"more remote working, more knowledge working, as we know, actually requires better higher EQ, empathy, and relationship skills" (Peter).* Other respondents highlighted this significant challenge of managing distributed teams as a crucial aspect of leadership in the digital era and proposed a potential solution by coaching leaders to use greater empathy. The findings indicate that executive coaches should collaborate with their clients to cultivate heightened levels of empathy. This recommendation stems from the need for digital leaders to recognize and address the personal and organizational implications of digital transitions and distributed teams. Consequently, embracing a leadership approach characterized by enhanced empathy is recommended.

Respondents worried that a lack of face-to-face interaction (accelerated during COVID-19) could lead to a task-focused arrangement between leaders and their teams. Hence, there was advocacy for greater empathy in a digital workplace, and suggestions were made for more compassionate leadership. Respondents felt that interactions between employees and leaders are becoming virtual and shorter in the digital age. Such a scenario accentuates the need for leaders to operate with greater empathy and emotionality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is helpful to state that the findings of this research remain tentative, provisional and developing. Tentative: because these findings do not claim any universal truths and are just one construction of social reality as shared by respondents and interpreted by me. Provisional: because, like any research, this one has its limitations. Developing: given that future research will probably challenge, build, support or contest them.

The study's objective to critically evaluate the existing literature was fulfilled via a creative inquiry approach towards existing literature in executive coaching and digitalisation, as outlined in the literature review section. The other objective of developing a framework is met through the provisional framework of the impact of digitalisation on the practice and ensuing discussion, along with the literature on organisational and leadership changes in the digital age. This paper makes a theoretical contribution to business, leadership and coaching research by emphasising the need for greater empathy for future leaders and positioning digitalisation as a socio-contextual consideration. This research is concerned with knowledge-for-action for executive coaches, and this study provides a vocabulary to help practitioners engage with various implications and likely impacts of digitalisation. The framework of Figure 2 also fills a gap in the existing theoretical coaching literature, which has historically overlooked the exploration of socio-contextual factors. as suggested by coaching scholars (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2018; Shoukry & Cox, 2018; Sonesh et al., 2015).

One avenue for future research involves delving deeper into the exploration of the topic by comprehensively capturing the diverse perspectives of significant stakeholders engaged in the executive coaching process; it is imperative to encompass the viewpoints of clients, supervisors, coach training institutes, purchasers of the practice, and other pertinent entities. For researchers aligned with a constructivist conceptualisation, much depends on the participant's views of the situation under study (Creswell, 2003). Given the research design of this study, expanding the respondents to include other stakeholders could provide new insights and help strengthen the findings. Even with the same research question, modifying the respondents' demographics in further research and including younger executive coaches and coaches from other countries is likely to help enrich the discussions. Given the rapid developments in artificial intelligence and recent AI advances like ChatGPT (van Dis, Bollen, Zuidema, van Rooij, & Bockting, 2023), it might also be helpful to replicate the current study periodically and explore the evolution of these findings. The findings suggest that with the opening of a new virtual window, further research and discussions are needed in coaching towards digital presence as a separate phenomenon. This would help coaches understand how to foster their digital presence and create an empathetic connection with clients. A possible research question could explore "How does digitalisation impact the presence of coaches and clients in a virtual setting?". To conclude, it may be suitable to propose that given the constraints inherent in the present study and the proposed areas for future investigation, delving further into the impact of digitalisation on executive coaching through sustained exploration and research is likely to prove beneficial to the field.

Endnotes

[1] ↵
While quoting participants in this paper, conversational transcription, which at times is informal and might contain grammatical mistakes, has been left un-edited. <brackets> Indicate the words added to provide clarity.

References

Alavi, S., Abd. Wahab, D., Muhamad, N., & Arbab Shirani, B. (2014). Organic structure and organisational learning as the main antecedents of workforce agility. *International Journal of Production Research*, 52(21), 6273-6295. DOI: 10.1080/00207543.2014.919420.

Annunzio, S. (2001). *eLeadership: Proven techniques for creating an environment of speed and flexibility in the digital economy*. Simon and Schuster.

Athanasopoulou, A., & Dopson, S. (2018). A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 70-88. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.11.004.

Avolio, B. J., Sosik, J. J., Kahai, S. S., & Baker, B. (2014). E-leadership: Re-examining transformations in leadership source and transmission. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(1), 105-131. DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.003.

Bajpai, B. (2023) *Coaching in the Digital Age: How is Digtialisation Influencing Executive Coaching? A Grounded Theory Exploration*. Thesis Dissertation. Oxford Brookes University. (Accessed: 5 April, 2024) DOI: 10.24384/b4av-9g02.

Balakrishnan, R., & Das, S. (2020). How do firms reorganize to implement digital transformation? *Strategic Change*, 29(5), 531-541. DOI: 10.1002/jsc.2362.

Balan, A. C., & Cavendish, K. (2017). *Leadership in the Digital and Social Era - A Theoretical Review and Digital Gamification for Employee Development*.

Baptista, J., Newell, S., & Currie, W. (2010). Paradoxical effects of institutionalisation on the strategic awareness of technology in organisations. *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 19(3), 171-183. DOI: 10.1016/j.jsis.2010.07.001.

Baptista, J., Stein, M.-K., Klein, S., Watson-Manheim, M. B., & Lee, J. (2020). Digital work and organisational transformation: Emergent Digital/Human work configurations in modern organisations. *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, 29(2), 101618. DOI: 10.1016/j.jsis.2020.101618.

Barrett, D., & Twycross, A. (2018). Data collection in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing* 21(3), 63-64. DOI: 10.1136/eb-2018-102939.

Berry, R. M. (2005). *A comparison of face-to-face and distance coaching practices: The role of the working alliance in problem resolution*. Georgia State University.

Berry, R. M., Ashby, J. S., Gnilka, P. B., & Matheny, K. B. (2011). A comparison of face-to-face and distance coaching practices: Coaches' perceptions of the role of the working alliance in problem resolution. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 63(4), 243. DOI: 10.1037/a0026735.

Blackman, A., Moscardo, G., & Gray, D. E. (2016). Challenges for the theory and practice of business coaching: A systematic review of empirical evidence. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(4), 459-486. DOI: 10.1177/1534484316673177.

Bluckert, P. (2006). *Psychological dimensions of executive coaching*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Berkeley.

Böck, V., & Lange, M. (2018). *Leadership in Digitalisation: Employees' Perception of Effective Leadership in Digitalisation*.

Bonneywell, S., & Gannon, J. (2021). Maximising female leader development through simultaneous individual and group coaching. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 1-17. DOI: 10.1080/17521882.2021.1938621.

Brennen, S., & Kreiss, D. (2016). Digitalization. *The international encyclopedia of communication theory and philosophy*, 1-11.

Brennen, S., & Kreiss, D. (Producer). (2019, September 8). Digitalization and Digitization. *Culture Digitally*. Available at: http://culturedigitally.org/2014/09/digitalization-and-digitization/.

Burchardt, C., & Maisch, B. (2019). Digitalization needs a cultural change–examples of applying Agility and Open Innovation to drive the digital transformation. *Procedia CIRP*, 84, 112-117. DOI: 10.1016/j.procir.2019.05.009.

Burger, Y., & De Haan, E. (2013). *Coaching with colleagues: An action guide for on-to-one learning* (2nd revised edition). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Charbonneau, M. (2002). *Participant self-perception about the cause of behavior change from a program of executive coaching*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Alliant International University, Los Angeles, CA.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage.

Clutterbuck, D., & Hussain, Z. (2010). *Virtual coach, virtual mentor*. IAP.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). 'Strategies for qualitative data analysis' in *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, (3rd edition).

Cortellazzo, L., Bruni, E., & Zampieri, R. (2019). The role of leadership in a digitalized world: A review. *Frontiers in psychology*, 10, 1938. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01938.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed methods*.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.

De Haan, E. (2011). *Relational coaching: Journeys towards mastering one-to-one learning*. John Wiley & Sons.

De Haan, E., Culpin, V., & Curd, J. (2011). Executive coaching in practice: what determines helpfulness for clients of coaching? *Personnel Review*, 40(1), 24-44. DOI: 10.1108/00483481111095500.

Dewett, T., & Jones, G. R. (2001). The role of information technology in the organization: a review, model, and assessment. *Journal of Management*, 27(3), 313-346. DOI: 10.1016/S0149-2063(01)00094-0.

Eliot, T. S. (1943). *Little Gidding*. Faber & Faber London.

EMCC. (2019). *International Mentoring, Coaching & Supervision Conference*. Available at: https://www.emccglobal.org/conference/25th-annual-mentoring-coaching-and-supervision-conference/.

Fernandez, C. S., Green, M. A., Noble, C. C., *et al* (2021). Training "Pivots" from the Pandemic: Lessons Learned Transitioning from In-Person to Virtual Synchronous Training in the Clinical Scholars Leadership Program. *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, 13, 63-75. DOI: 10.2147/JHL.S282881.

Frazee, R. V. (2008). *E-coaching in organizations: A study of features, practices, and determinants of use*. University of San Diego.

Friedman, T. L. (2017). *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (Version 2.0, With a New Afterword). Picador/Farrar Straus and Giroux.

Gallwey, W. T. (2000). *The Inner Game of Work. Focus, Learning, Pleasure and Mobility in the Workplace*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Ghods, N. (2009). *Distance coaching: The relationship between the coach-client relationship, client satisfaction, and coaching outcomes*. Alliant International University, Marshall Goldsmith School of Management.

Ghods, N., & Boyce, C. (2013). Virtual coaching and mentoring. In *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of psychology of coaching and mentoring*, 501-523.

Graßmann, C., & Schermuly, C. C. (2021). Coaching with artificial intelligence: Concepts and capabilities. *Human Resource Development Review*, 20(1), 106-126. DOI: 10.1177/1534484320982891.

Graßmann, C., Schölmerich, F., & Schermuly, C. C. (2020). The relationship between working alliance and client outcomes in coaching: A meta-analysis. *Human relations*, 73(1), 35-58. DOI: 10.1177/0018726718819725.

ICF. (2020a). *2020 ICF Global Coaching Study: Executive Summary*. Available at: https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2020/09/FINAL_ICF_GCS2020_ExecutiveSummary.pdf.

ICF. (2020b). *COVID-19 and the Coaching Industry*.

ICF. (2020c). *International Coach Federation (ICF) - COVID-19 and the Coaching Industry: 2021 snapshot survey Registration Site*. Available at: https://pwcresearch.com/uc/ICF/Covid19/ospe.php? SES=369cd755610ada13d62810af2e168582&syid=53661&sid=53662&act=start&js=16&flash=0&devicetype=0.

ICF. (2021). *COVID-19 and the Coaching Industry: 2021 ICF Global Snapshot Survey Results*. Available at: https://coachingfederation.org/covid-19-and-the-coaching-industry.

Jarosz, J. (2021). The impact of coaching on well-being and performance of managers and their teams during pandemic. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 19(1). DOI: 10.24384/n5ht-2722.

Kanatouri, S. (2020a). *The Digital Coach*. Routledge.

Kanatouri, S. (2020b). Digital coaching: A conceptually distinct form of coaching? In *Coaching im Kontext des digitalenWandels*. Vandenhoek & Ruprecht.

Kanatouri, S., & Geissler, H. (2017). Adapting to working with new technologies. In *The SAGE handbook of coaching*, 715-730.

Kane, G. C., Phillips, A. N., Copulsky, J., & Andrus, G. (2019). How digital leadership is (n't) different. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 60(3), 34-39. Available at: https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-digital-leadership-isnt-different/.

Khan, S. (2016). *Leadership in the digital age: A study on the effects of digitalisation on top management leadership*.

Kilburg, R. R. (2017). *Trusted leadership advisor: A commentary on expertise and ethical conundrums*.

Kiron, D., Kane, G. C., Palmer, D., Phillips, A. N., & Buckley, N. (2016). Aligning the organization for its digital future. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 58(1). Available at: https://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/aligning-for-digital-future/.

Kissler, G. D. (2001). E-leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 30(2), 121-121.

Klaus, S. (2016). *The fourth industrial revolution*. Paper presented at the World Economic Forum.

Kuusisto, M. (2017). Organizational effects of digitalization: A literature review. *International journal of organization theory and behavior* 20(3), 341-362. DOI: 10.1108/IJOTB-20-03-2017-B003.

Lyytinen, K., Nickerson, J. V., & King, J. L. (2021). Metahuman systems= humans+ machines that learn. *Journal of Information Technology*, 36(4), 427-445. DOI: 10.1177/0268396220915917.

McAfee, A. (2006). Enterprise 2.0: The dawn of emergent collaboration. *Enterprise*, 2, 15-26.

McLaughlin, M. (2013). Less is More: The Executive Coach's Experience of Working on the Telephone. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring* Special issue 7, 1-13.

Mohammad, K. (2009). E-Leadership: The Emerging New Leadership for the Virtual Organization. *Journal of Managerial Sciences*, 3(1).

Noon, R. (2017). *Exploring presence in executive coaching conversations*. Doctoral thesis. Oxford Brookes University, DOI: 10.24384/97qq-r379.

O'Connor, Carpenter, B., & Coughlan, B. (2018). An Exploration of Key Issues in the Debate Between Classic and Constructivist Grounded Theory. *Grounded Theory Review*, 17(1). Available at: https://groundedtheoryreview.com/2018/12/27/an-exploration-of-key-issues-in-the-debate-between-classic-and-constructivist-grounded-theory/.

Pascal, A., Sass, M., & Gregory, J. B. (2015). I'm only human: The role of technology in coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 67(2), 100. DOI: 10.1037/cpb0000025.

Pulley, M. L., & Sessa, V. I. (2001). E-leadership: tackling complex challenges. *Industrial and Commercial Training* 33(6), 225-230. DOI: 10.1108/00197850110405379.

Qiu, Y., & Pesch, R. (2019). *The Impact of Digitalisation on Organisations - A Review of the Empirical Literature*. Paper presented at the Academy of Management Proceedings.

Riemer, K., Stieglitz, S., & Meske, C. (2015). From top to bottom. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 57(3), 197-212. DOI: 10.1007/s12599-015-0375-3.

Sanchez, M. A., & Zuntini, J. I. (2018). Organizational readiness for the digital transformation: a case study research. *Revista Gestão & Tecnologia*, 18(2), 70-99. DOI: 10.20397/2177-6652/2018.v18i2.1316.

Saunders, Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students*. Pearson Education Limited.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118–137). Sage

Schwarzmüller, T., Brosi, P., Duman, D., & Welpe, I. M. (2018). How does the digital transformation affect organizations? Key themes of change in work design and leadership. *Management Revue*, 29(2), 114-138.

Shoukry, H., & Cox, E. (2018). Coaching as a social process. *Management Learning*, 49(4), 413-428. DOI: 10.1177/1350507618762600.

Sonesh, S. C., Coultas, C. W., Marlow, S. L., Lacerenza, C. N., Reyes, D., & Salas, E. (2015). Coaching in the wild: Identifying factors that lead to success. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 67(3), 189. DOI: 10.1037/cpb0000042.

Stokes, J., & Jolly, R. (2014). Executive and leadership coaching. in E. Cox, T Bachkirova, & D. Clutterbuck, Eds., *The complete handbook of coaching*, 245-256.

Stray, V., Memon, B., & Paruch, L. (2020). *A systematic literature review on agile coaching and the role of the agile coach*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Product-Focused Software Process Improvement.

Terblanche, N., Molyn, J., De Haan, E., & Nilsson, V. O. (2022). Comparing artificial intelligence and human coaching goal attainment efficacy. *PloS one*, 17(6), e0270255. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0270255.

Underhill, B., Passmore, J., & Goldsmith, M. (2022). *Coach Me! Your Personal Board of Directors: Leadership Advice from the World's Greatest Coaches*. John Wiley & Sons.

van Dis, E. A., Bollen, J., Zuidema, W., van Rooij, R., & Bockting, C. L. (2023). ChatGPT: five priorities for research. *Nature*, 614(7947), 224-226. DOI: 10.1038/d41586-023-00288-7.

Watson, J. C., Steckley, P. L., & McMullen, E. J. (2014). The role of empathy in promoting change. *Psychotherapy Research*, 24(3), 286-298. DOI: 10.1080/10503307.2013.802823.

WHO. (2020). *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. Available at: https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020.

Williams, H., & Palmer, S. (2020). *Coaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: Application of the CLARITY solution-focused cognitive behavioural coaching model*.

About the author

Dr Brajesh Bajpai is an EMCC Senior Practitioner holding a Coaching and Mentoring Doctorate from Oxford Brookes University and an MSc in Executive Coaching from Ashridge (HULT University). Brajesh has fifteen years of coaching experience with over 500 clients globally and a successful professional career of over 28 years. He remains passionate about researching the impact of digital advances on coaching.