



Virtual Coaching is Inevitable and Effective

Dr. Jeffery S. Doolittle
Organizational Talent Consulting
Roundtable: Professional Coaching

The world has changed and the hybrid workplace with work-from-home opportunities has shifted in-person meetings and events to virtual. Technology enables individuals and teams to work collaboratively remotely. As the world changes, professional coaching has changed and will need to continue to change. Both coaching professionals and their clients have adapted to the circumstances of the times, with more and more utilizing technology tools for coaching sessions. Virtual coaching is a technology-facilitated partnership between a coach and a client to maximize the client's personal and professional potential. Virtual coaching differs from traditional face-to-face coaching by offering added convenience, service, and support benefits, such as accessibility, rapid response to needs, affordability, access to resources, and evaluation.

Thoughtfully incorporating virtual coaching has many positive impacts, but that does not mean it is without challenges. It is best to assess the situation, coach/client, and context to determine its best use. Coaching does not have to be face-to-face to be personalized and effective. A skilled coach with virtual coaching competencies can effectively utilize virtual technology to achieve lasting results.

Key Words: virtual, coaching, competencies, leadership

The world has change and the hybrid workplace with work-from-home opportunities has shifted in-person meetings and events to virtual. Going to work for many employees today has taken on a new meaning. Technology enables individuals and teams to work collaboratively remotely. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, the number of days U.S. employees spend working from home has increased (Barrero et al., 2021). There is no need to ask if business owners and executives should use virtual coaching platforms. Instead, a better question is whether or not quality coaching relationships can be developed through technology. If so, what are the best approaches? A quick internet search on the effectiveness of virtual coaching makes it appear as if virtual coaching is just as effective as face-to-face coaching. However, most

of those articles are authored by virtual coaching organizations and lack validity. This article draws from peer-reviewed literature to understand what social science has to contribute to the discussion on the effectiveness of virtual coaching.

Discussion

Coaching is one of those words that has different meanings to different people and is often used interchangeably with mentoring and counseling. Even various thought leaders in coaching have different definitions and perspectives on what coaching is and is not (Berry et al., 2011). According to the International Coaching Federation (ICF), coaching is "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (ICF, 2022).

Virtual coaching is often used interchangeably with e-coaching, distance, online, and remote coaching. Like in-person coaching, there is a general lack of consensus on its meaning. Virtual coaching can include asynchronous communications, such as email and text messaging through a virtual coaching app, and synchronous, such as phone and Zoom communications, that provide immediate feedback to a coach and client. For this discussion, the author defines virtual coaching as a technology-facilitated partnership between a coach and a client to maximize the client's personal and professional potential.

Coaching and Virtual Collaboration Competencies

The foundation of the coach and client relationship is trust-based and development-oriented. A common belief held by coaching researchers is that strong, trusting coach-client relationships lead to more successful coaching engagements despite any physical distance (Blattner, 2005). The ICF identifies eight skilled coach competencies updated as of 2019 based on empirical data collected over two years and from job analyses of 1,300 coaches globally: (1) demonstrates ethical practice, (2) embodies a coaching mindset, (3) establishes and maintains agreements, (4) cultivates trust and safety, (5) maintains a presence, (6) listens actively, (7) evokes awareness, and (8) facilitates client growth (ICF, 2022).

A study by Bower (2011) suggested that four levels of competencies specific to synchronous collaboration environments directly contribute to development outcomes (see Table 1). These synchronous collaboration competencies were hierarchical, suggesting that development initiatives should begin with Level 1 (Bower, 2011).

Table 1: Synchronous Coaching Competency Levels

Level	Description
Level 1 Operational competencies	The ability to operate the tools and functions of collaborative technology. These are the most efficiently developed level of competencies.
Level 2 Interactional competencies	The ability to effectively interact to perform a task or solve a problem using technology. These include effective collaboration tactics.
Level 3 Managerial competencies	The ability to manage a team, providing support on how to use the technology and interact effectively.
Level 4 Design competencies	The ability to select and organize tools in a way that optimizes interaction and best supports activity management. These include the ability to dynamically design the environment based on emerging collaborative and cognitive requirements.

Note. This table reflects the synchronous coaching competency adapted from Bower (2011).

Is Virtual Coaching Here to Stay?

Employers are increasing the number of remote days they offer out of concern for employee retention and productivity. A survey of 2,050 full-time remote workers indicated they were as productive or more productive working remotely than when in the office (Zielinski, 2022). PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) found that 43% of business leaders plan to keep hybrid work options for employees, and 30% plan on making remote work options permanent (PwC, 2021).

Video conferencing and team collaboration tools became must-have investments during the pandemic. Nearly 80% of workers are now using collaboration tools for work, up from just over half of workers in 2019, according to the Gartner Digital Worker Experience Survey (Rimol, 2021). This represented an increase of 44% since the pandemic began. Given the wide adoption of collaboration tools and the desire of employees to have some days of work from home, it is highly likely that virtual work is not going away.

As the world changes, professional coaching has changed and will need to continue to change. According to IBS World (2022), the business coaching industry in 2022 is listed at 14.2 billion dollars as measured by revenue. Also, between 2017–2022, the industry averaged a growth rate of 2.8% per year (IBISWorld, 2022). According to a recent survey

by the ICF, 83% of coaches increased their use of audio-video platforms for coaching. In comparison, 82% indicated a decrease in in-person sessions throughout the pandemic (ICF, 2021). A recent ICF global snapshot survey found that 87% of coaches believe virtual coaching will continue at a higher rate beyond the pandemic. Both coaching professionals and their clients have adapted to the circumstances of the times, with more and more utilizing technology tools for coaching sessions.

Is Virtual Coaching Effective?

A quick Google search on the effectiveness of virtual coaching makes it appear as if virtual coaching is just as effective as face-to-face. However, a closer look reveals that virtual coaching organizations author most such articles. The research-based virtual coaching literature is relatively limited, and the research can be placed into three categories: studies focused on the change in outcomes as a result of coaching, those focused on the process of coaching, and those focused on the technology (virtual and face-to-face) and its impacts on the relationship and outcomes (Berry, 2005; Bowles & Picano, 2006; Wang, 2000; Charbonneau, 2002; Frazee, 2008).

There are numerous virtual coaching effectiveness and efficiency benefits. Empirical research concluded that virtual executive coaching leads to significantly higher transfer of training, improved goal definition, work-life balance, and clear priorities (Wang & Wentling, 2001; Cornelius et al., 2009). Additionally, virtual coaching offers added convenience, service, and support benefits over traditional face-to-face coaching (Passmore et al., 2013).

Accessibility is likely one of the most significant benefits associated with virtual coaching, especially during a pandemic. Technology enables the coach and client to connect in different places within the same building or worldwide. Availability improves, enabling the coach to be brought into just-in-time and rapid response needs or unique situations like cross-cultural needs. Virtual coaching allows the coach to increase the number of clients they can support at one time. Also, the coach and client benefit from the flexibility and administrative ease in scheduling. Affordability improves through reduced travel and associated time out of the office. Access to resources improves through digital access to tools supporting goal setting, coaching preparation, and progress tracking. The coaching relationship's evaluation improves through the ease of tracking commitments, satisfaction, strengths, opportunities, and trends both on an individual client level and at an aggregate organizational level.

Thoughtfully incorporating virtual coaching has many positive impacts, but that does not mean it is without challenges. Numerous research studies have shown that different communication mediums have varying degrees of effectiveness in supporting in-the-moment feedback, information sharing, communication cues, emotions, and message customization (see Table 2). Additional research, however, has identified that the

challenges with the lack of multiple cues and sharing emotions can be moderated by a skilled virtual coach (Charbonneau, 2002; Frazee, 2008).

Table 2 Coaching Communication Medium Effectiveness

Coaching element	Low effectiveness	Medium effectiveness	High effectiveness
Feedback immediacy			Face to face Zoom Phone call
Information transfer			Face to face Zoom Phone call
Multiple cues	Phone call	Zoom	Face to face
Sharing emotions		Zoom Phone call	Face to face
Message tailoring		Zoom Phone call	Face to face

Note. This table reflects essential coaching elements and the effectiveness of different coaching mediums adapted from Boyce and Clutterbuck (2010), Newberry (2001), Sitkin et al. (1992), and Trevino et al. (1987).

Although the benefits of virtual coaching are advantageous for the coach and client, the research does not support replacing face-to-face coaching with virtual coaching. In reality, in-person and virtual coaching both have associated pros and cons. It is best to look at each client's situation and needs uniquely rather than using a one size fits all strategy.

Conclusion

This author's premise is based on research: virtual coaching differs from traditional face-to-face coaching by offering added convenience, service, and support benefits, such as accessibility, rapid response to needs, affordability, access to resources, and evaluation. It is best to assess the situation, coach/client, and context to determine its best use. Coaching does not have to be face-to-face to be personalized and effective. A skilled coach with virtual coaching competencies can effectively utilize virtual technology to achieve lasting results. Future research should address the need for a comprehensive coaching competency model encompassing synchronous and asynchronous coaching mediums.

About the Author

Dr. Jeff Doolittle received his Doctorate in Strategic Leadership from Regent University. He has helped business owners and executives of small businesses to global Fortune 50

companies, and his work is taught in university classrooms. Dr. Doolittle is the founder of Organizational Talent Consulting, a premier executive coaching and business consulting firm for leaders and organizations interested in achieving success and significance.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Jeff Doolittle, 7687 Byron Depot Dr., Byron Center, MI 49315. Email: jeff.doolittle@organizationaltalent.com

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