

An abstract painting featuring three stylized human figures in a circular arrangement. The figures are rendered in bold, flat colors of blue, red, and yellow, set against a background of teal and light green. The style is reminiscent of modernist or expressionist art, with strong geometric forms and a vibrant color palette. The figures appear to be in a dynamic, possibly dancing or interacting pose, with their arms raised and bodies angled towards each other.

Free to choose

best evidence for the
effectiveness of coaching

Erik de Haan shares the findings of his recent comprehensive meta-analysis study of coaching, and some conclusions he has drawn from the results



Some of this article is based on an interview between the author and Bärbel Schwertfeger, which originally appeared in German in Wirtschaftspsychologie Heute¹ (reproduced with permission)

Earlier this year, I was able to publish the most extensive meta-analysis in coaching, based only on high-quality primary studies: randomised controlled trials (RCTs).²

A large sample with high-quality studies gives us much more convincing evidence than ever before, and the overall evidence from 40 independent RCTs analysed demonstrates that coaching is effective. All studies together show that coaching interventions are likely to have significant positive effect compared with no intervention at all. Coaching has a positive impact on wellbeing, workplace skills and goal achievement. Clients feel better prepared, less stressed, and are more likely to achieve their goals.

However, when it comes to really having confidence in that effectiveness, it's a slightly different story. In social sciences, studies that do not show an effect have less chance of being published. Researchers lose their motivation to publish, and journals lose interest in publishing. This is famously known as the 'file-drawer problem': 'null' studies with no effectiveness of the intervention shown have a greater likelihood of disappearing in the drawer of a researcher's desk.

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We have shown in the meta-analysis that, if we make our best statistical estimate of the number of 'null' studies we are missing, the evidence for the effectiveness of coaching still remains, but is now rather slim.

The study included a comprehensive meta-analysis of RCTs of coaching programmes written in English between 1994 and 2021. We applied strict criteria regarding the robustness of statistical significance. The analysis of 39 of the 40 available coaching samples, with a total sample size of 2,528 coachees, revealed a statistically significant effect of coaching in the workplace (for the 40th study we couldn't get enough of the primary data). Our best estimate for a standard effect size for coaching of 0.59 was well within the moderate range.

A way to understand such an effect size approximately is as follows. It is considered a 'medium' effect, one that is well noticeable with the naked eye. A 0.5 effect size corresponds to the difference between the heights of a 14-year-old and an 18-year-old, something we can usually make out quite well and therefore guess correctly. 0.59 is a little more than that, so this

should make for a clearly discernible difference between those that were coached and those that weren't.

What is so special about randomised controlled trials (RCTs)?

RCTs are the best standard for researching human interventions in sociology, medicine and psychology. The design of RCTs gives us the best guarantee that the results we find can genuinely be attributed to the intervention. However, RCTs are not easy to perform in coaching. We can't conduct double-blind studies, as in medicine, where neither the coach nor the client knows what they are getting. In addition, clients taking part in the trial want a good service. This means they demand flexibility in terms of being assigned to a coach and when, and also in terms of frequency and number of sessions. But in a randomised controlled experiment, only 50% of participants can obtain coaching, and which 50% is decided by a random number generator. Many will be assigned to the control group, which doesn't receive coaching, or has to wait for it, which can be very difficult to organise. This is why RCT experiments are often carried out in hospitals and universities, and less often in regular companies. I was fortunate to be able to conduct one such study myself at a multinational company that had so much coaching ongoing at the time, they were able to organise an RCT. More often, such studies take place in a special setting where participants are guided to join a group, eg, at universities with students as coaches and coachees, who receive coaching as part of their studies and obtain university credit points for participating, and the time frame can be determined by the researchers. All of this, including the average age of the group, is normally different in executive or leadership coaching.

However, the studies differed not only in the profiles of coaches and coachees, but also in the methodology and qualifications of the coaches, their geography, seniority, etc. The advantage of a meta-analysis is that we can analyse if these differences are too great to study them together. We found that the variability in coaching is actually smaller than in psychotherapy studies. In psychotherapy, where we have more studies, we find greater differences between the studies. In coaching, they are sufficiently similar for a thorough meta-analysis. They seem to measure something that is quite similar as well.

Studying the data more closely, we found that the effects of self-reported results are greater than those of observed results. Of course, this can be viewed critically. Those who attend coaching sessions tend to see the whole coaching process as helpful, and the effect sizes for self-reported results will therefore be skewed upwards. But in our sample, there were also effects that were not determined by the participants; for example, by their superiors, who report that coachees have become more productive. These are the effects that are really interesting.

Our findings in brief

Broadly, executives show the smallest effect, while students show the greatest effect, while employees without a management function and managers at the lower levels are somewhere in between. We suspect that the managers are less influenced by the coach; they tend to be more mature or

set in their personality, and also more autocratic. They decide for themselves, and might not engage in as much reflection or application between sessions. However, though the effects are smaller, coaching is still effective for leaders. That is our main finding: coaching is effective for all client groups. We have even looked at some managerial coaching, ie, coaching by a manager of another manager in the same organisation, where the 'coaches' have more influence and spend more time with the 'coachees' than an external executive coach, which increases their rates of effectiveness. In four of the RCTs studied, line managers have taken on the coach role. At the end, when discussing our finer results, we decided to exclude these managerial-coaching studies, because they were not really what could be termed 'professional' coaching, and may have reflected the influence of superiors, rather than the coaching itself.

With a caveat, as we have limited data, we even found that leadership coaching seems to achieve slightly higher effects among female coachees. We cannot say why this is. Perhaps because they tend to be a minority in the leadership of most institutions? Maybe they are more grateful and receptive to this kind of intervention? Maybe they work harder on themselves when they get support that is often lacking? The data are still missing for us to probe deeper into this small but significant finding.

There are of course external and internal coaches, and we compared the data on these. If the coaching is carried out by an external, qualified executive coach, it has greater effects than coaching by an internal or a student coach. What 'qualified' means depends on the study. Usually, it means that the coach has taken a course or has accreditation with an official coaching body. In the case of student coaches, the work is often part of their qualification. The internal coaches were mostly managers from different parts of the organisation, who did coaching 'on the side'.

Finally, the effect of coaching is independent of the number of coaching sessions performed. This is a counterintuitive result at first, but we've found it before. The magnitude of the effects does not depend very much on the number of sessions. I have tentatively concluded that coach and coachee decide what they need to do, based on the time they have, to get the most out of the coaching relationship. If the coaching offer is shorter – ie, limited to four or six sessions – clients will make an effort to still take away a lot. In any case, this pattern is the same in psychotherapy. If you reduce the number of sessions, you reduce the time spent on the intervention, but not necessarily the effectiveness.

We also thought a lot about the fact that psychotherapy shows somewhat higher effects. We do not know what is behind this, but I suspect that there is greater 'problem pressure'. Coaching is more about reflecting on or improving performance. In addition, psychotherapy sessions are usually much more tightly scheduled. The more frequent the sessions, the higher the effectiveness. Coaching sessions tend to be less frequent, conducted only once a month or even every two months. Maybe some of the effectiveness dissipates due to memory loss? Often, it takes time for the client to get back into the topic of coaching or the topic itself has changed.

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Our conclusions: freedom of choice

Overall, we conclude from the results that coaching needs to be as voluntary as possible. It seems that when people are free to choose, coaching is more effective. In fact, most coaching providers agree that those who volunteer and seek coaching start more quickly, take coaching more seriously, and can make the most progress. So, let employees choose who they work with and when. Let them negotiate the number of hours. Organisations can limit the budget but would be well served to leave it up to employees how many sessions to use.

As in other professions and in wider society, we need to keep working to protect our freedoms. Full personal freedom to engage is an important value underpinning our ethics. Traditionally, executive-coaching attendance was left entirely to the coachee. Nowadays, follow up from a coach, including scheduling or other emails, or from a software application, is becoming increasingly the norm. This can affect perceived freedom for the coachee. In the process, and often entirely unintentionally, coaching may become less free or less tailored or adapted to underlying needs.

It is important for tech-savvy coaches, eager providers, and modern coaching platforms to be aware of the larger need to protect freedoms and refrain from guidance in communication with our clients. Coaching platforms may be very structured but that can distract from the sessions or limit the participation of coachees, or even the impact and number of meetings. When software gets involved with coaching, at any point a client (and even a coach) may be asked to fill out questionnaires, do homework or write reports. Moreover, platforms can easily track participation in such tasks or in attendance, and they send automated reminders before sessions or quick evaluations afterwards. Some coachees will respond quite well to some prompting, while to others, it may come across as yet another software application that is trying to 'coax' or 'manage' them. Having spoken out against some recent technological 'improvements' to executive coaching (see also chapters 6 and 7 of my book *The Gift of Coaching*³), I do not want to extend my concerns to virtual coaching in general. In fact,



we have evidence that online coaching is as effective as face-to-face coaching, and one might even argue that online coaching, especially audio-only, offers more, rather than less, freedom as compared with traditional settings. After all, you can attend from any location that is peaceful and neutral, and one can look, walk or make notes in any direction in full freedom.

However, modern applications like platforms and chatbot coaches can run the risk of overly taking control of the interaction, if only because of the possibilities they have to do so. This taking of freedoms can start very innocuously. The client has to use a specific login account or is reminded of a previous learning goal. Even small gestures like these run the risk of making the client less influential or central to the work.

Our meta-analysis appears to argue that co-regulation based on mutual influence, trust and motivation between coach and coachee is the most important predictor explaining the overall effectiveness of coaching. Coaching can be seen as a dance, an experiment involving gesture and response. Some studies have even observed body movements. Is there synchrony between the movements? Does this increase over time? Do coach and client decide together how many sessions they do? Do they decide together what topics they want to cover? Good coaching seems to be a process of mutual and reciprocal influence. This influence of the client has an impact on the result. That is our main interpretation of all our meta-analysis study results. I do not feel we are necessarily moving in the wrong direction. I do support the process of democratising coaching and offering it to more employees. There are good reasons to do this. But we have to be careful. Middle management is often offered a 'lesser' form of coaching, such as from a more limited, internal pool, or a platform, without the wider choice open to the elite within an organisation.

After the meta-analysis study: how do I see the future of coaching?

I think there will be a lot more studies on online coaching. This will be interesting because the initial results show that it can be as effective, and because nowadays half of our business is online. This is a major shift. I hope for more and better research so that we can carry out another meta-analysis in 10 years. But I'm quite content, even proud, of what we already know at this point. If we compare it to mentoring, leadership development and training or other interventions, we do know a lot more about coaching. ■

To read the study in full, see:

De Haan E, Nilsson VO. What can we know about the effectiveness of coaching? A meta-analysis based only on randomized controlled trials. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*; February 2023. [Online.] <https://journals.aom.org/doi/10.5465/amle.2022.0107>

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