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# Coaching Perspectives

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“PROMOTING EXCELLENCE & ETHICS IN COACHING”



# THE IMPACT OF DISRUPTION ON COACHING

In this fast-changing world, how does coaching as a profession stay at the forefront to best support organisations address the challenges they face? **Laura Ashley-Timms** explains how the coaching profession will need to adapt to add the most value to their clients.

Originating in business as a term to describe a radical change in industry, 'disruption' has taken on a life of its own, and, like so many fashionable phrases, it is used, misused and misunderstood. What exactly is 'disruption'? According to the Oxford Dictionary, disruption describes 'disturbances or problems which interrupt an event, activity or process.' In this light, disruption can indeed be legitimately applied in all manner of contexts.

However, adopting a disruption mindset is not about sounding up-to-date or appearing smart; it's about how this challenging attitude and approach can enable us to look upon an existing condition and question its relevance today and in the future; and it's about how we make concerted efforts to adapt. This mindset may be the modus operandi of the coach, but what does disruption mean to the actual practice of coaching?

## CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

Coaching as a practice has perhaps always been disruptive in its own right. Evolving over decades, it has escaped its niche, created new markets, and entered the mainstream.

Today, most of the world's leading businesses employ the services of a coach in some guise. This exponential growth reflects a wide acceptance that coaching can enable success for individuals and businesses alike. It's going well for the coach, right? Well, maybe - for now - but let's assume that change will happen. After all, change is the one constant that we can always rely upon.

Yes, change is constant, but the speed at which change occurs is affected by multiple drivers including the political landscape, the state of the environment, economic stability, social unrest, legislative changes, and so on. The scale and pace of change that we experience today in this VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) world is much greater than ever before, hastened by the digital revolution and the omnipresent impact of Artificial Intelligence.

We now have access to more information than we are equipped to deal with, the future is largely unknown, and few precedents exist to help us with what is to come. In technological subjects at school, educators are relying on students reading the latest magazines and blogs to stay current as syllabuses can no longer keep pace with the speed of developments and change.

Perhaps now more than ever, coaches can help individuals and teams to wade through the complexity, draw upon their resourcefulness and create clarity in highly ambiguous situations. There's no question that coaching has a place in the future landscape of organisations - but what this looks like is up for grabs.

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## HOW MUCH TIME?

One way this has already started to manifest itself is the race to shorten the typical executive coaching session. The dichotomy between what a coachee may need and how much time they actually get is on the move. It's become a triple whammy - the high stakes of 'not keeping up' by having time out of the day job, the pressure to achieve more in less time, the desire to spend less money. These three factors are driving down the average length of coaching sessions from what used to be more typically longer face-to-face sessions to significantly shorter, often virtual, encounters.

The risk in this trend is that depending on the brief, short, sharp sessions can become highly transactional, and the more strategic transformational coaching that is often badly needed at senior leadership levels can get lost in the mix. Short sessions have their place and can be effective, but it's not a one-size-fits-all solution, and deep-dive, strategic sessions can leverage significantly greater returns where the coaching objectives require this.

The challenge for the coach is to know when a transactional approach just won't work and when to say No to safeguard the quality of coaching. Paying lip service to a coaching session, regardless of content or quality, will only serve to undermine the coaching relationship and jeopardise the ability to achieve any favourable outcomes, without which the coach will inevitably be sidelined.

Faced with this level of disruption, the coach may also pose the question: 'In what other ways can we assure the quality of the coaching session without the restrictions of time?'

This is a disruptive thought process that will help the coach prepare, survive and prosper in changeable times.

## BITE-SIZED APPETITES

This appetite for bite-sized sessions doesn't rest with executive coaching alone. Most management development programmes are trending towards modular and bite-sized approaches, for example, by combining a range of shorter sessions with occasional face-to-face workshops. Even the workshop lengths are changing, and the three- to four-day programmes are now few and far between, with many organisations favouring single days or half-days in workshops off line.

For coaching skills training, which can often benefit from an immersive environment and where learning can be further enhanced and accelerated over a few days, this can be more of a challenge, although for CPD and supervision the shorter sessions can work really well.

It's easy of course to keep saying yes and just lower standards - the challenge is to meet this real need whilst maintaining, or even improving, the results achieved in shorter and more virtual programmes.

The change is starting and this is going to accelerate. What we all need to watch out for is that the quality of what we are delivering in these new formats doesn't skip a beat. Innovation is the key to success here.

## INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL COACHES

With the growing trend to develop in-house skills in coaching, will the external executive coach be out of a job?

In a global survey conducted in 2017 by our coaching firm, Notion, 64% of organisations stated that they now have internal coaches operating in some capacity, which is a significant percentage in its own right. Sadly, and quite shockingly, 87% of these organisations don't measure any return on investment from their internal coaches, which may make the ongoing funding of this resource hard to sustain as discretionary spend is put under more intensive scrutiny.

This could have a knock-on impact on external coaches, too, who could be seen to be a luxury item in the absence of proof of outstanding value. One skill that needs to change in the very short term is all coaches' abilities to measure the benefits of coaching with hard facts and commercial evidence. Whilst historically the appetite for this has been low, the ongoing commercial pressures organisations are facing and the drive to capture data are eventually going to make this inevitable.

## HELLO WORLD - TECHNOLOGY IS AT THE FOREFRONT

On a more positive front, advances in technology continue to create new opportunities and further open up the global market both for coaches and for the direct benefit of organisations.

Where fifteen years ago telephone was the only alternative to face-to-face coaching, along came Skype and other app-based video conference facilities that allowed coaches to meet their coachees on a virtual platform - so simple and effective that it's a pretty good alternative to the 'real thing.'

Over the years this has further grown to cover webinar technology and, more recently, interactive workshop systems where larger groups can be split into 'rooms' for breakout sessions, finally making dynamic and interactive virtual workshops a reality.

These virtual delivery approaches reduce travel time (for both parties) and mean that the coach can link up with clients anywhere in the world.

Fortuitously, this creates a global marketplace for the coach to operate in, but it also generates significant competition. Tech-savvy coaches will thrive through the use of digital marketing strategies, whilst those without the technological skills may flounder.

Another distinct advantage of virtual technology is the ability to connect people within the same organisation in different parts of the world. Group supervision, for example, is now accessible and cost-effective to deliver to internal coaches who might be based in four different continents. Delivery becomes inclusive and globally consistent, alongside creating new connections, opening dialogues and providing strong support networks across the business.

### GET SKILLED OR TEAM UP

Technology clearly opens up lots of opportunities for coaches to create new and innovative ways of practising, but there are also drawbacks. The coach will need to have the skills and resources to manage more sophisticated technological offerings.

Solo operators may find this particularly challenging. In a training room the coach has the ability to field questions and to contextualise these in a live situation. In a virtual context, there may be a much larger number of delegates, each navigating their own technology. It would be extremely difficult to deal with the questions and problems of each delegate without severely hampering the delivery, especially with the more complex, multi-room systems. A specialised support team would be needed to set up the systems, respond to questions and provide just-in-time technical support. And the associated costs would need to be accounted for.

The delegate experience is also at risk. The technology-bred millennial may favour a just-in-time, at-your-fingertips, fully connected learning experience, and encounter problems with relish. However, technologically naïve delegates might feel anxiety about accessing learning opportunities in this way. A one-size-fits-all strategy would not account for the different learning styles of delegates and might alienate some of the audience. Whilst a complex virtual offering can be designed to contend with many of these problems, the cost of creating it would be remarkable for most.

### THE GIFT OF CHOICE

So there needs to be a choice. There is no doubt that technology will change the way we work beyond recognition, but we can choose how we respond. Artificial Intelligence will automate many jobs, but in the coaching field, where high levels of emotional intelligence and empathy are needed to deal with completely bespoke situations, the role of the coach can endure.

### BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Technology will cause disruption. Virtual technologies have already started to change the way coaching, supervision and CPD are delivered. Coaches unable to keep up with these trends may need to align themselves with coaching organisations that have developed technological robustness. On the other hand, sometimes there is no better alternative to the interaction that occurs between humans when they are in the physical presence of one another, so there may still be scope for coaches who favour a face-to-face approach.

Screens and devices can hide a vast number of telling physical cues. And the inescapable distractions caused by being constantly on-line can prevent people from becoming completely immersed in their learning environment. This can inhibit the depth and impact of their experience. So, while technology offers a powerful contribution to the field of coaching, perhaps it will not so easily satisfy the Herculean task of real behaviour change.

It might be tempting to supplant one method for another in a knee-jerk reaction to disruption. However, a more sustainable and future-proof response would combine the best of what humanity and technology have to offer, in a blended approach that ensures that innovation is embraced but does not override the intention of coaching.

The future is very exciting.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Ashley-Timms is Director of Coaching at Notion (BusinessCoaching.co.uk). For the last 15 years Laura has helped develop Notion into a global brand. Alongside her role as a coach and designer of coaching skills programmes, she supports clients to develop sustainable operational coaching cultures that drive measurable returns on investment. She is also at the forefront of working with the latest software to support behavioural change programmes, and developing new ways of making coaching skills accessible to a wider audience.

The background is a solid dark blue. It features several concentric white circles. Three of these circles are broken at various points, with small white dots placed at the ends of the gaps. The dots are located at approximately the 12 o'clock, 9 o'clock, and 6 o'clock positions on the outermost circle. The text 'Coaching Perspectives' is centered within the innermost circle.

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