

E-Coaching: It's range, scope and benefits



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*There's an invasion of e-this, e-that and e-everything. E-coaching, or coaching by email, is one of the latest and, say **Mike and Caroline Bagshaw**, it's a high potential area for added-value training.*

There's no shortage of good training courses of various types, but no matter how high the standards, the effects won't last if they're not backed up later in the workplace. You can buy supplementary training material, but that's not geared for individual development. Informal groups and chat rooms provide shared learning and support for individuals, but their members are from various organisations, so they are not geared to organisational goals. Coaching has proved its value, first in sport, then later in business. It has the same effect in both cases. It stretches you, finds the blockers to success, brings out strengths and spurs you on to greater achievement. In no way does it imply that the person who has been under-performing. In fact, those who aim high are those who seek coaching.

However, one-to-one coaching does not come cheap in either cost or time. Those receiving coaching often start the process with great enthusiasm, but there's always the pressure of work. The coaching will have to be next week, or the week after...and somehow it gets lost. E-coaching is a way of addressing this. All in all, it might take the same amount of time as traditional coaching, but it doesn't need the same blocks of time. It can be asynchronous – that is, the coach and coachee can consider the issues, then send emails (at different times) so they don't have to organise a mutually convenient appointment. They might think things through in the bath, then talk about them with friends, jot down ideas on the train and compose the email the next day. The whole process might cover a day or more, allowing thoughts to consolidate, but it barely interrupts work at all.

This doesn't mean that emails supplant the need for human contact. You can't beat face-to-face coaching for immediate support and feedback. It can bring rapid progress, insights and ideas for action in a way that printed words cannot. However, it is not necessary all the time. E-coaching can advance and enhance learning, either on its own or alongside other methods of training.

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

E-coaching can be as simple or as complex as you like. Elliott Masie of The Masie Center,¹ who works extensively in e-learning, has decided to try it out for the personal goal of improving his health. He is serious about this, and has e-communications with his coach about three times a day – and sometimes talks with her by phone as well. This seems to be working both on the level of creating a good trusting relationship as a base for learning and in the results. Masie has lowered his blood pressure, cholesterol and weight.

E-coach Associates, Inc.² set up an extensive programme after a survey which revealed that almost everybody thought that coaching was a good idea, although some preferred their managers not to know. The organisation has websites that deal with four types of competencies:

- Interpersonal skills
- Personal capabilities
- Business sense, and
- Technology.

The e-coaching itself offers three levels.

- 'Fast Answers' gives instant information and tips on how to deal with a situation as a back-up to the person using his (or her) own experiences and that of his colleagues.
- 'Knowledge Central' gives more information and sources of where to find more. As in traditional coaching, this information is a starting point for the person to expand on his (or her) existing knowledge and advance his activities and himself.
- The third level is the 'Learning Connections'. This is like a chat room that is geared up for action. Rather than a place to throw in comments, it is a forum to test out ideas and begin to make action plans, with the support of others who have a similar type of experience.

TEAM E-COACHING

Taking this further, Performance Partners International (PPI)³ has developed an online process that allows for the possibility of team e-coaching. It uses a computer-supported collaborative learning approach where knowledge is shared and people learn from each other through online group interaction. The e-coach is available to support the group. The process involves asynchronous communication so there is no turn-giving as such and all those involved have the opportunity to give their own point of view in their own time at their own pace. Also, since communication is in electronic form it is easy to refer back to stored notes.

E-COACHING SCOPE

E-coaching can tackle anything at all. Leadership Insight⁴ has crated 168 modules in soft skills including change management, communication skills and emotional intelligence. The starting point is a prescribed material with examples and questions. From there, coachees are encouraged to find their own ideas and build self-development plans. Leadership Insight suggests that e-coaching suits those for whom e coaching is desirable, but not top priority, and whose managers lack good coaching skills.

There are those who say that e-coaching militates against the poor typist, as there is the extra chore of getting the thoughts and feelings on to the screen. Others say this is a positive advantage, as coachees are challenged to put rambling thoughts into succinct language. It encourages them to extract their key thoughts and to prioritise, which is an aim of traditional coaching too.

SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Ibility,⁵ a Swedish company based in Stockholm, has devised an e-coaching programme with the potential to bring self-development to every employee. It goes beyond the traditional assumption that the coach is the driver, the one who starts with more knowledge. This is bottom-up development. Command and control from above have no part in the Ibility programme. The company believes that organisations will thrive when people at the pitface actively pursue their own development. It is as though part of a car asked 'How can I improve the way I work so I'm a happier carburettor?', instead of waiting for the mechanic to fix it. The Ibility programme starts from a base of simple questions on screen like those below.

- What am I doing?
- What have I done?
- What can I do?
- What do I want?
- How can I improve my performance?
- How can I increase my enjoyment?

Under each of these questions is a range of further questions, which enables the individual to, in a sense, coach himself. A combination of e-coaching and occasional face-to-face coaching helps the user to overcome any blocks to self-analysis, and to close the gap between self-knowledge and doing.

It might sound self-centred, but the self is a good centre for development. It's a simple but powerful idea. An organisation where the employees are constantly seeking improvement is clearly going to knock spots off one where the employees are just watching the clock. If you can make self-development intrinsic in the business, you've got a learning organisation. E-coaching has a big role in this. It can be provided almost on tap. It doesn't matter if one of the parties is asleep. Insomniacs can compose their thoughts through the night. Globetrotters can tap in their thoughts from a far-away hotel. It fosters the culture of continuous learning. It's not a substitute for other types of training; it's another approach. The more directions from which training is coming, the more effective it will be.

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References

1. The Masie Centre; for further information visit (website) www.masie.com
2. E-coach Associates Inc.; for further information visit (website) www.e-coaching.com
3. Performance Partners International; for further information visit (website) www.ppi-global.com
4. Leadership Insight; for further information visit (website) www.leadership-insight.com
5. Ibility; for further information visit (website) www.ibility.se (for those who understand Swedish).

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