

The impact of COVID-19 on coaching practice: results from a global coach survey

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The impact of COVID-19 on coaching practice: results from a global coach survey

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results from a global coach survey of 1266 coaches from 79 nations conducted in Summer 2021, when the world emerged from global lockdowns and the 18-month COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to sharing data on the composition of the global coach community (national residence, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability), this study focuses on the impact of the global pandemic on the coaching industry using a quantitative analysis. The findings indicate that age, platform association, pre-pandemic online coaching experiences and average fee were significant predictors of the total impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on coaches. Those least able to adjust and transition to an online environment, or with the least experience working online, reported the greatest detrimental impact. Moreover, the data confirm coaching's transition towards online delivery, with the pandemic accelerating this process to a point where we believe that this trajectory will continue post-pandemic. To enable the success of this shift, coach supervisors, peer support and professional coach training need to recognise the need for this digital transition and adjust training, support and practices to reflect this new reality.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 1 February 2022
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KEYWORDS

Coaching; COVID-19; digital coaching; online coaching

Practice points

- Platform association: Coaches can actively work with online coaching platforms to counteract the negative effects of COVID-19 now, and also to mitigate potential lock downs or restrictions in the future.
- Coaching Supervision: This should adjust to support coaches working in more isolated and high demand environments
- Coaching Training: Professional course providers should review syllabuses to incorporate greater use of technology, enabling coaches to be digital natives able to work both face-to-face and online, leveraging apps in support of their work.

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What are the tangible implications for practitioners?

The implications for practitioners from this study are a need for coaches to diversify their practice, moving partly or wholly online, if they wish to minimise the impact of future pandemics from COVID-19 variants or similar, and capitalising on a shift to online opportunities. This requires the development of online / digital coaching skills, and for coach training providers of accredited courses to review their learning syllabuses to take account of the switch from face-to-face to digital coaching as the main mode for coaching delivery.

Introduction

Reports of an out-break of a new respiratory virus were first reported in late 2019. Labelled COVID-19, the virus started to spread initially through Wuhan province in China and appears to have accelerated during Chinese New Year celebrations, becoming a national Chinese emergency and subsequently a global phenomenon. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation announced that the outbreak of COVID-19 was a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). As of December 2021, the cumulative number of officially recorded cases of infection reached 248 million, with some 5 million deaths. The viral lethality rate was estimated at around 2%, thus significantly less severe than previous global pandemics such as the Spanish Flu, but sufficient to create a global impact (Ioannidis, 2021). In order to limit the virus's spread, many countries adopted preventative measures such as restrictions on public movement, closures of places of work, shops and entertainment venues, while also introducing travel restrictions or 'stay at home' orders. In many instances, organisations responded by shifting to remote working (McKinsey and Company, 2020) and their employees created domestic spaces to enable working from home (WFH).

Through 2021 and 2022, COVID-19 mutations have caused fluctuations in the infection rate curve worldwide, despite a widespread vaccination programme. The recurrent, highly infectious and lethal nature of this virus has created a variety of uncertainties for society and, while some sectors and economies have opened up, many have seen frequent loosening and tightening of restrictions in response to varying case numbers (Jarosz, 2021). This evidence suggests this loosening and tightening approach may be a strategy of developed world economies from 2022 onwards.

Multiple environmental pressures have affected individuals and organisations. Employees have experienced uncertainty across most sectors, with developing world countries using government paid leave ('furlough'), experiencing shortages of supplies (for example, building materials), and witnessing the collapse of some sectors (such as travel and entertainment industries) (Blustein et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, many employees faced personal issues, from changes to income levels to managing home schooling and the loss of family members (Novitasari et al., 2020). These challenges in combination have reportedly created a wave of mental health issues (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

At a global level, COVID-19 has impacted the economy in three main ways: by directly affecting production (supply), by creating supply chain and market disruption (supply) and by its financial impact on firms and markets (demand) (Deloitte, 2020). Focusing

on the supply side, factories were unable to produce new supplies due to lockdown. Some industries, such as tourism and catering, were forced to close. Considering demand factors, people's requirements for numerous goods changed, with a greater focus on digital consumption and home improvements.

While these individual, organisational and global changes were happening, the coaching industry was impacted in numerous ways, as workers and organisations transitioned from office to home working. The coaching industry witnessed sustained growth in the 20 years leading to 2019 (PwC, 2020). It has an estimated value of \$2.849 billion (ICF, 2020), but has remained largely a cottage industry, with the majority of coaches being self-employed and working in their own or small practices (Passmore & Evans-Krimmer, 2021).

This research therefore aimed to explore how COVID-19 has impacted on coaching perceptions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic during the period 2019–2021. We acknowledge that COVID-19 continues to present challenges in many parts of the world, impacting on individuals, workers and organisations, but in selecting Mid-2021 to conduct this study, we felt coaches had experienced a sustained period of working with the pandemic, thus having months of experience to reflect on and consider how the coaching industry's future may look.

Beyond the general descriptive analysis of the overall data set, we were also interested to explore what might lie behind these global figures. Given the complex and diverse way in which COVID-19 has played out in different countries and economies we selected one sample nation to understand in more detail the role gender, race, disability or professional body membership played. Was working as an associate better in terms of protecting client hours and income than working as a self-employed coach? These questions lead us to develop and test some hypotheses using data from the largest respondent nation, as follows.

Online coaching experience

Firstly, some coaches had experience working online before the outbreak of COVID-19, which provided them with the initial ability to adapt quickly in the uncertain working environment. The international outbreak began in early 2020, with countries experiencing the first, second, third and fourth waves of the epidemic at different stages. The repeated mutation of the virus has created uncertainty for economic development and planning of events, meetings and a wider return to work (Marmarosh et al., 2020). This pandemic has led to widespread instances of death, and thus has seen higher levels of anxiety expressed by workers when faced with a return to work (CIPD, 2021) as well as substantial, and sometimes violent, push back from groups of workers who feel their freedoms are being compromised by restrictions on travel, leisure and work. As a result, coaches and clients have been seeking online modes of delivery to reduce these risks and uncertainties.

Coaches who implemented digital coaching before 2020 were the best placed to move forward when lock-downs began. They had previously acquired the technical skills and the software applications to enable a smooth transition. Therefore, we hypothesised that coaches with experience in online coaching faced less negative impact from the epidemic, and were more likely to benefit from the impact of the outbreak in terms of revenue, number of clients, etc.

H₁: Coaches with pre-pandemic experience in online coaching would report lower levels of negative income impact during the pandemic than coaches without prior online coaching experience.

Digital coaching contractors

Secondly, among coaches who worked online, many were associated with one or more digital coaching platforms. As Kinnunen and Georgescu (2020) noted, digital coaching provides an online alternative for coaching dialogue and reduces many administrative and inefficient activities. For coaches, the online platform solves the problem of selecting, investing and adapting to different online coaching tools. It also provides a more predictable flow of client sessions. For the coach buyers, the online platform can save time in checking coach quality, coaches' qualifications and provides choices in terms of language and time zones.

These benefits have allowed digital coaching platforms to grow significantly in the period 2017–2019, with providers raising millions of pounds of Venture Capital investment, reflecting wider changes in the investment market over the past five years and the workplace shift towards greater use of digital apps (The Economist, 2021). This advancement of technology, combined with investment funding and a maturation of the science, placed coaching at a pivot point in 2019 (Passmore & Evans-Krimmer, 2021). Thus, our second hypothesis was:

H₂: Coaches working as associates for digital coaching platforms during the pandemic were less likely to see a decrease of their income compared with coaches that did not work as digital platform associates.

The role of gender

Thirdly, the coaching industry has seen an imbalance in gender, with female coaches forming a majority in most economies, ranging from 63% to over 75% of coaches (ICF, 2020; Passmore et al., 2017). The data from this survey confirmed coaching continues to provide employment to women at rates above their representation in the wider workforce. We can look for both demand side and supply side explanations for this imbalance. On the supply side, this may reflect the flexible nature of coaching employment, which can fit around other responsibilities, recognising that women continued to undertake the majority of care for children and older relatives. A second supply factor may be the relational aspect of coaching, matching women's over representation in other sectors where relational skills are highly valued, such as nursing and teaching.

On the demand side, a mixed-methods study by Gray and Goregaokar (2010) explored gender influence on the coach-client matching process. Although the quantitative data in their research showed no bias in gender choice, the qualitative data presented some reasons for the preference for female coaches. The interview results suggested that female clients favoured female coaches, partly as a role model of business success. In comparison, male clients tended to justify their selection of a female coach as an individual who was more approachable for the discussion of sensitive, personal issues. For this study, we therefore hypothesised that female coaches were less likely to see a decrease of their income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic onset in 2020.

H₃: Female coaches would be less likely to report a decrease in income during the pandemic compared with male coaches.

The role of geographic variance

Finally, due to the uneven spread of the coronavirus and the different restrictions imposed by different governments, the impact has varied across the globe. In some cases, governments have enforced border shutdowns, travel restrictions and quarantine. In other cases lighter measures have been introduced (Buck et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). The US, the UK and Germany have been particularly heavily impacted by restrictions, possibly counterbalanced by all three countries having high levels of digitisation in coaching (Kinnunen & Georgescu, 2020). At time of writing (January 2022), we list the official percentage of the number of COVID-19 cases standing in the total population of the country as: UK (12.8%), US (13.7%), Germany (5%). We can see that this ratio is unevenly distributed across countries. This is likely to be due to a variety of factors, including climate, government response, the volume of international travel, testing regimes and more. Thus, we hypothesised that coaches working in different countries might face different levels of impact of the global pandemic.

H_{4a}: There would be a statistically significant difference in the change in income reported by coaches within Germany, UK and USA.

H_{4b}: There would be a statistically significant difference in the change in hours worked reported by coaches within Germany, UK and USA.

Method

Design

The descriptive data were researched using a survey design. Data were extracted from the survey findings to test the hypotheses. There were three independent variables: with/without online coaching experience; associate/non-associate with online platform; female/male. There were two ordinal dependent variables: 'coaching income impact' and 'coaching hours impact'. The data for these variables were coded as follows:

- Decreased a lot (26%+ decrease): -2
- Decreased a small amount (1-25% decrease): -1
- Stayed the same: 0
- Increased a small amount (1-25% increase): 1
- Increased a lot (26%+ increase): 2

Participants

The initial version of the questionnaire was piloted with twenty participants, one sample of ten participants from a global pool of coaching practitioners and a similarly sized group from a university business school coach training programme. For the main study, a snowball method of participant recruitment was adopted, with an aim to reach beyond coaches within any single professional coaching association, network or single

organisation, to encourage a breadth of practitioners and perspectives. The questionnaire was completed by 1380 respondents, of which 1266 consented to their data being included. There was a mean respondent age of 54 ($SD = 10.9$). 66% of respondents identified as female, 32% as male and the remainder as other (including Cisgender, transgender and preferring to 'self-describe'). The male-female ratio was comparable with professional coaching body membership and other coaching studies (for example, Passmore et al., 2017).

Measures

This research study used a survey method, with the research questions designed by the research team in collaboration with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Research Committee. Four broad areas were identified as the focus for the research (Team coaching, Digital and online coaching, Future trends and Diversity and inclusion), and a pool of survey items created for the pilot study. The pilot group participants were then invited to focus groups to share their feedback on the questionnaire items, which resulted in adaptations to create the final version of the questionnaire, which featured a range of question types, including Likert scale and forced choice items. A full copy of the questionnaire may be accessed by contacting the lead author.

Procedure

The finalised questionnaire was posted online using Qualtrics, with the link initially shared with EMCC Global and multiple research partners, including AceUp, African Executive Coaching Council, CoachHub and LHH. Respondents were encouraged to share the link with as many relevant individuals as possible. The survey link was open for a four-week period in June 2021, with the stated objective of securing '1000 completions' from a diverse group of 'professional coaches', defined as individuals who earned a living in full or part from providing coaching.

Potential respondents were presented with onscreen information about the structure and purpose of the research and asked to provide their informed consent. They were then given access to the online questionnaire to complete, after which debrief information was displayed, confirming their right to withdraw their data, ask questions of the researchers and a further encouragement to disseminate the link to the questionnaire.

Results

Coach demographic data

1380 respondents completed the questionnaire, of which 1266 consented to their data being included. The global spread of responses meant data were obtained from 79 different countries.

For the first time in a large scale coaching study, data were collected on coach race, sexual orientation and disability. Following participant feedback from the pilot study, 'self-categorisation' was included as an identity category. The ratio of coach racial identities were 81.2% 'White', 5.1%, 'Asian', 3.2% 'Black' and 2.4% 'Latinx' or 'Hispanic' 2.6% of

coaches opted to 'self-describe', using identities such as 'human' (the most popular word used), 'Jewish', 'Indian' and 'Celtic'.

The sexual orientation response patterns vary widely depending on the source country. It should be noted the data is based on a global sample, including some countries where identifying as 'gay' or 'lesbian' is illegal. Overall, the responses were 'heterosexual' 91.2%, 'preferred 'not to say' 2.8%, 'gay' or 'lesbian' 2.6% and 'bisexual' 1.8%. The results appear to broadly reflect the statistical data regarding sexual orientation ratios in national survey data from the US, UK, Australia and Germany.

This research also gathered data on 'disability'. Like race, this is a complex issue, with different countries using different terms. We also wanted to explore themes broader than 'disability', to include 'neurodiversity'. The data from this survey resulted in 85% of participants describing themselves as having 'no disabilities', 4.3% classifying their disability as 'sensory', 2.8% experiencing some form of 'neurodiversity' and 2.3% as having 'mental health issues'.

The largest number of participants identified as members of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) 44.4%, with 30.8% identifying as members of the EMCC and Association for Coaching (AC) 6.3%. These numbers broadly reflected expectations based on global membership numbers, and reflect in order the size of the three largest coaching bodies. Psychologists were also strongly represented with just under 1 in 20 (4.4%) coaches reporting members of national psychological bodies. Less than 1% of respondents had no professional body affiliation. It should be noted that we asked about membership as opposed to accreditation or qualification, where it would be expected accredited members would form around 50-65% of members, depending on the professional body concerned.

Survey results

The focus of the study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the period 2019-2021. The data from this survey points to the impact being very mixed. Some coaches experienced reduced income (21%), others increased income (12.49%); some increased hours of work (18.94%) and others reduced hours of work (18.05%). In essence, the pandemic brought winners and losers within the coaching industry. This view was echoed by the ICF, 2020 survey (PwC, 2020), but what we have been able to do is to step behind these broad global categories to explore who were these winners and losers. [Figure 1](#)

[Figures 2-5](#) detail the impact that the pandemic had on various aspects of coaches' practice. [Figure 2](#) details a range of impacts, including the number of coaches that entered the industry as a result of the pandemic, experienced redundancy or closed their business. Focusing specifically on the number of clients coaches worked with, [Figure 3](#) shows 43.9% of respondents reported an increase, whereas 30.7% reported a decrease in client numbers. Similarly, [Figure 4](#) suggests a greater number of coaches witnessed an increase in income (37.5%), as opposed to a decrease (36.1%) and [Figure 5](#) shows 48.8% of coaches were able to engage in an increased number of coaching hours during the pandemic, as opposed to 33.3% reporting a decrease. In combination, these suggest the coaching industry may be experienced many positive outcomes from the pandemic.

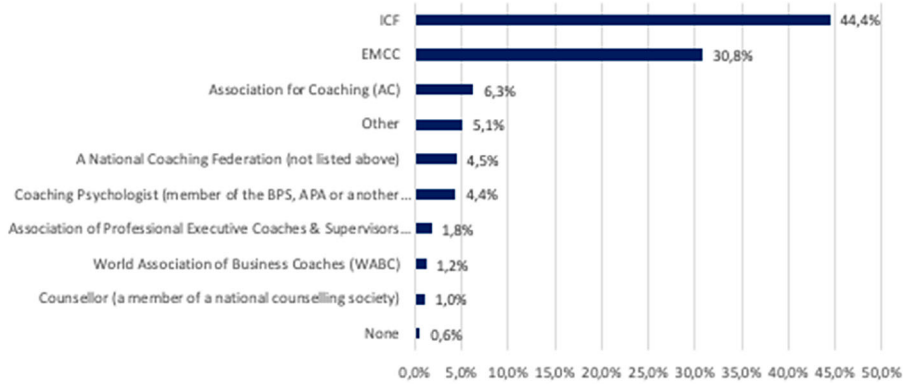


Figure 1. Professional membership.

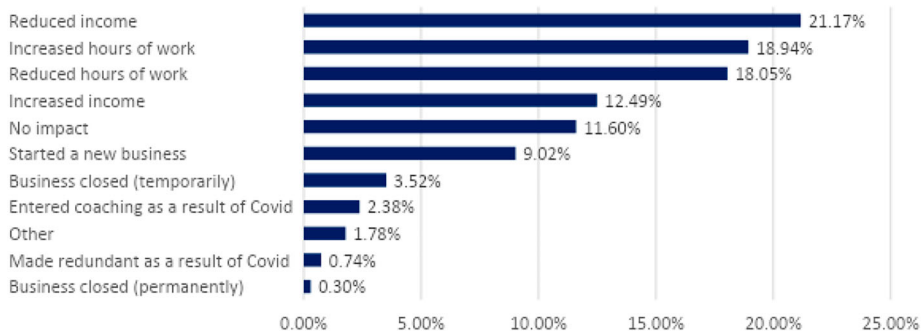


Figure 2. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on coaches.

The survey also explored coaching client presenting issues (Figure 6). If the world was managing disruption, how did this play out in terms of the issues being brought to coaching? The top three issues reported by coaches were balancing work-life priorities (19.11%), followed by relationships at work (17.94%) and stress (17.78%). This would accord with periods of disruption where individuals struggle to balance competing demands,

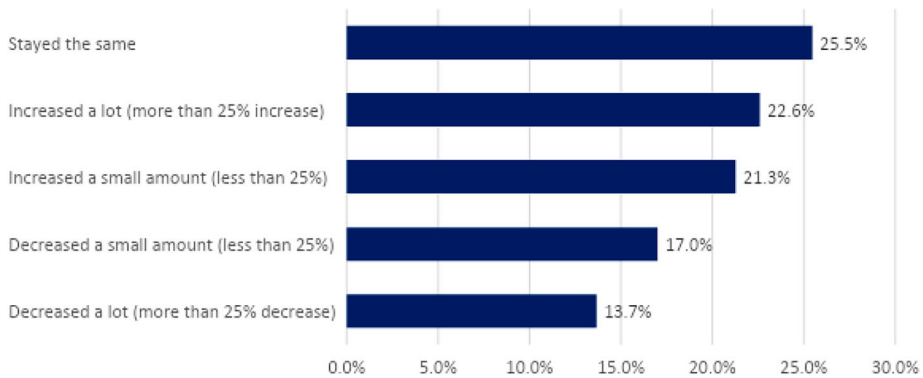


Figure 3. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on number of coaching clients.

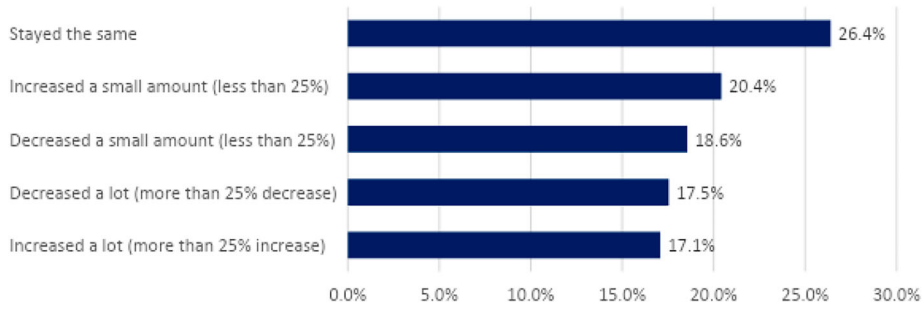


Figure 4. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on income from coaching.

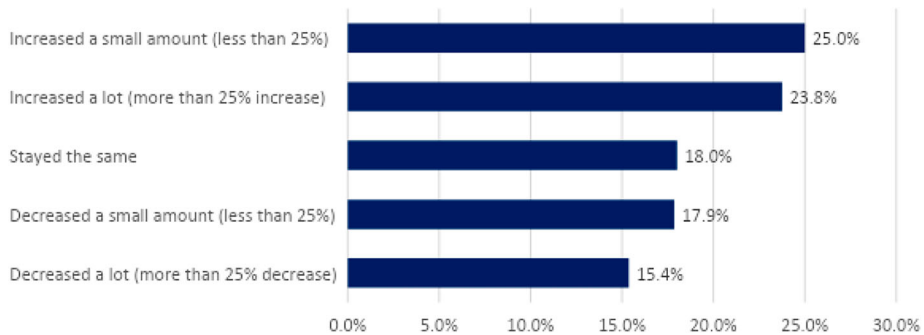


Figure 5. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on coaching hours.

(particularly for those working from home, with care responsibilities), in navigating the new style of leadership, when they and team members are working from home, and the associated emotional challenges which these and wider organisational and systemic change bring.

Finally, we also asked coaches about the challenges they faced during COVID-19. Common responses from coaches included isolation, online working and managing emotional content during this period. These matched the data from other surveys for knowledge workers, where similar themes emerged (CIPD, 2021).

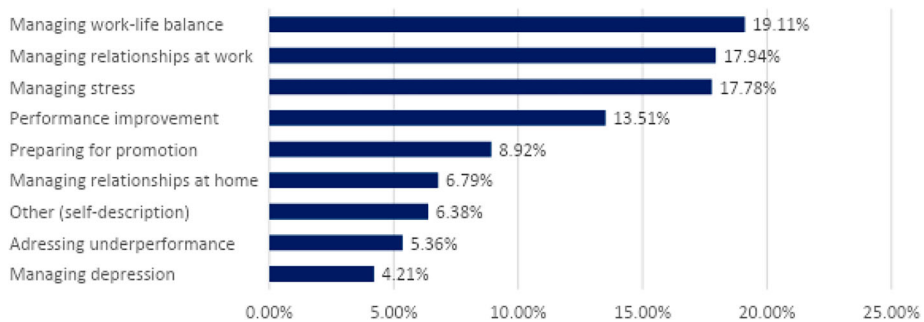


Figure 6. The top client issues in 2020.

Hypotheses results

H₁ predicted that coaches with pre-pandemic experience of online delivery would experience less negative economic impact than coaches without any such experience. A Chi-square test for independence was performed to assess the relationship between prior online delivery experience and economic impact. There was a significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(4, N = 922) = 10.16, p = .04$. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. [Figures 7–9](#)

H₂ predicted that coaches that worked as associates for digital coaching platforms during the pandemic would experience less negative economic impact than coaches that did not. A Chi-square test for independence was performed to assess the relationship between digital coaching associate status and economic impact. There was a significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(4, N = 922) = 31.07, p = <.001$. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

H₃ predicted that female coaches would be less likely to report a decrease in income during the pandemic compared with male coaches. A Chi-square test for independence was performed to assess the relationship between gender and economic impact. There was a non-significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(4, N = 729) = 2.54, p = .63$. Therefore, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

H_{4A} predicted a statistically significant difference in the change in income experienced by coaches within Germany, UK and USA. A Chi-square test for independence was performed to assess the relationship between the coach's resident country and economic impact. There was a non-significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(4, N = 400) = 8.13, p = .09$. Therefore, the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

H_{4B} predicted a statistically significant difference in the change in hours worked experienced by coaches within Germany, UK and USA. A Chi-square test for independence was performed to assess the relationship between the coach's resident country and hours worked. There was a significant relationship between the two variables, $\chi^2(4, N = 451) = 11.29, p = .02$. Therefore, Hypothesis 4B was supported.

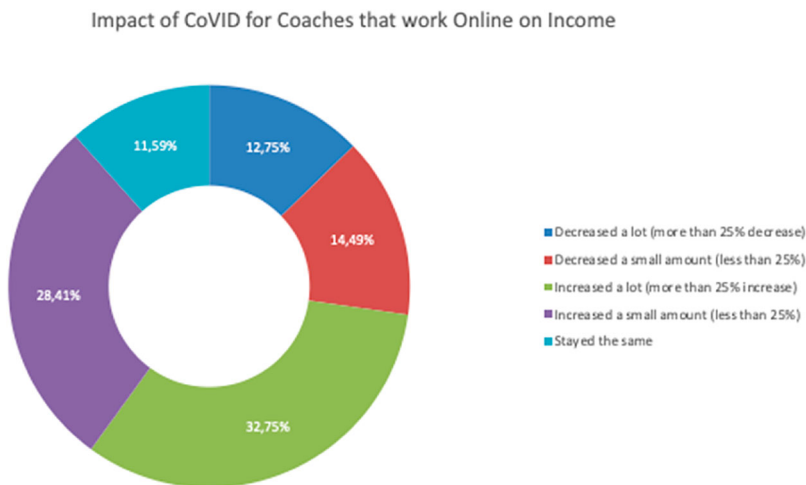


Figure 7. Impact of COVID-19 for Coaches that work Online on Income.

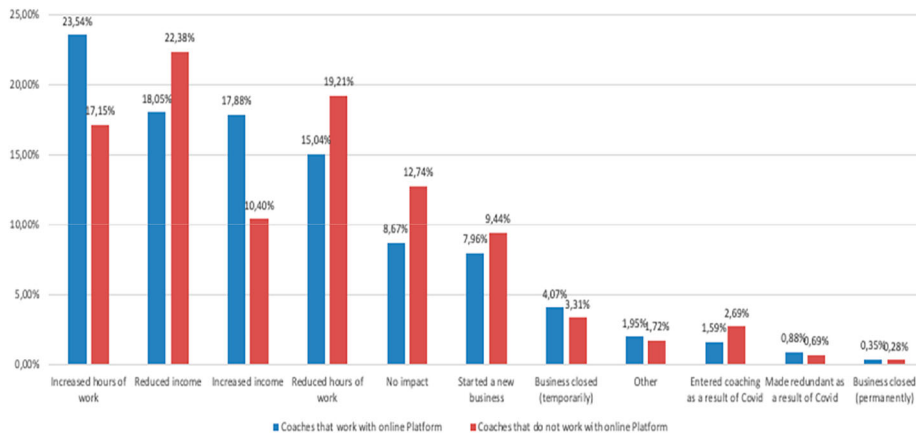


Figure 8. Are Coaches that work for digital coaching platform less affected by Corona.

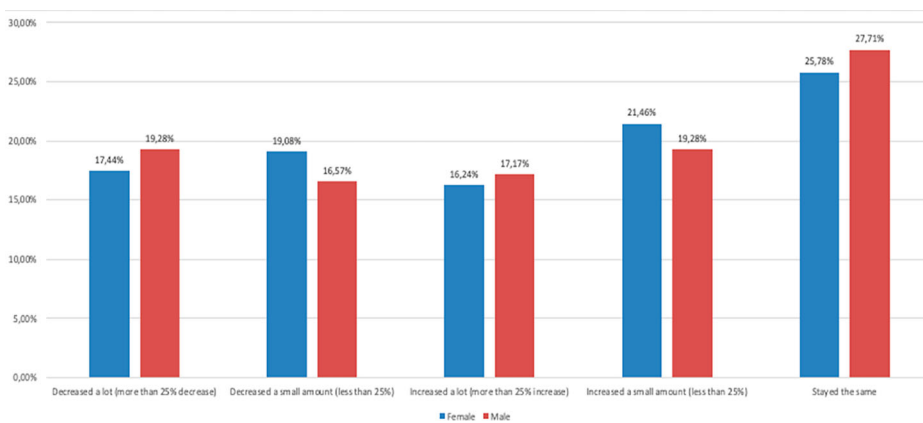


Figure 9. Impact of COVID-19 for female Coaches and male coaches on Income.

Discussion

The descriptive data suggest there is little evidence of a uniform impact on the coaching industry as a result of the pandemic. Broadly equivalent groups of practitioners reported increases and decreases in client numbers, income levels and hours worked. However, below a global analysis of the data set, there appear to be predictors for which coaches navigated the lockdown most favourably, including those with experience of online coaching prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and those during the pandemic that, in part at least, offered their coaching services as associates for digital providers.

This paper contains the data from a global coach survey. The findings showed that at the time of our survey, coaches were not just forced to try online coaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but had come to view online coaching as a norm, and anticipated continuing these practices into 2022 and beyond. We begin our discussion with the changes in the form of coaching brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, we discuss the skill gaps caused by this transformation and the change in the trend of

coaching topics caused by the epidemic. Finally, these challenges show the gap between clients' needs and coaching ability that needs to be filled, specifically through a response by professional bodies to the changing nature of the coaching industry and, secondly, from coach training providers who have traditionally focused coach training on face-to-face delivery. Further the changing nature of working (being more isolated), the changing nature of issues (being more emotionally charged) and the changing nature of the mode of delivery (requiring changing skills and approach) all necessitates the importance of supervision to support coaches in managing these transitions to a new normal in coaching.

1. Shift to online

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the development of online coaching, both in terms of the transformation in format and the change in people's expectations. According to the 2021 global coach survey, due to the pandemic, 98.3% of the coaches had used online tools for coaching conversations since 2019, with audio-video platforms the preferred method, followed by phone (audio) and emails (Passmore, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have accelerated the organisational trend for online HR solutions (The Economist, 2021), as well as witnessing a shift by coaches towards online coaching. These experiences have seen coaches come to see benefits expressed in this survey, including: greater 'convenience', 'safer personal space' and 'cost reduction'. Further, other researchers' have suggested that digital coaching not only provides an online alternative for coaching dialogue, but also reduces many administrative and inefficient activities (Kinnunen & Georgescu, 2020). The result is that more coaches have invested in technology enabling them to pursue online coaching (ICF, 2020) or have enriched their online coaching experience by adding additional online tools. Such experiences, alongside a growing confidence by both coaches and clients in online solutions, are likely to contribute to enhanced bonds and continued growth in use of these formats. In the current survey, when asked for their preferred mode of delivery in the future, 85% of coaches expressed a preference to coach online and 83% stated their clients would prefer the online mode. These responses suggest coaching has reached a tipping point in the move to online, where circumstances generated by the pandemic forced engagement with a format, built confidence and competence, and now most coaches and clients have created a 'new normal' of online coaching practice.

However, the research also highlighted disadvantages associated with online coaching. Around a third of coaches expressed a view that their online work was 'less intimate', required more effort to 'build relationships' and was 'less enjoyable'.

Given that coaching relies on relationships as a foundation stone, the online format may sometimes fail to replace the intimacy that comes from face-to-face engagement. This emphasises the need for both greater experiences, for training in the use of these formats to enhance coach skills to work in these new formats and for support through supervision to provide space for relational reflection and emotional connection.

This concern regarding technology as an inhibitor of the working alliance is also one of the reasons that AI coaching is often questioned. The data from this present survey does suggest hesitancy in the coach community as to whether coachbots, driven by machine

algorithms, could now or in the future partially or wholly replicate some of the functions and benefits generated by pure human coaching. As Graßmann and Schermuly (2021) note, more work is needed to better understand the risks and concerns presented by the developments of AI in machine-human interactions. We support their call for further research on this topic.

In spite of these concerns about the growing role of technology by a third of respondents, the benefits of cost and convenience outweigh the disadvantages. At the beginning of the pandemic, coaches experienced a general decrease in income and number of clients (Passmore, 2021). More than half of survey respondents reported a negative impact from the epidemic. This may have been due to the uncertainty in the early stages of the epidemic (Irving, 2021). However, as the pandemic continued, clients appear to have returned and have learnt new ways to continue to engage in work, learning and coaching, with significant growth, particularly around wellbeing (Fleisher et al., 2020).

Given the widespread adoption of remote and hybrid working during the pandemic, we expect online coaching to remain as the primary mode of delivery post-pandemic from 2022 onwards. However, what needs to occur alongside this are wider changes to coaching practice and the enhancement of digital coaching skills across the industry.

2. Needs for adaptations

In the previous section, we discussed the trend towards online coaching. In this section, we discuss in more detail the problems this trend has brought. Moreover, we should realise that the pandemic has not only brought about changes in coaching format, but also brought about the emergence of new themes.

Skill gap in digital coaching

The trend of online coaching brings the need for further professional training for coaches. The new form of coaching brings a lot of skill gaps in all phases-before, during and after coaching.

The most recent research was reviewed in order to determine what makes for good contracting and to provide coaches with assistance on their emerging best practice for success, with the researchers contributing additional insights (Hawkins & Turner, 2019). Stakeholder contracting is viewed as a crucial component of successful coaching at work by the vast majority of coaches and organisations that use coaching (Turner & Hawkins, 2016). It has shown that organisations play a considerable, if occasional, role in determining coaching outcomes and evaluating outcomes (Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011; Rogers, 2008; Stewart et al., 2008;). The phases of contracting should consider how the company, the individual, supervision and submission for credentialing fit into it. With digital coaching, one more possible stakeholder would be the coaching platform. The complexity involving multi-stakeholder and considering various phases in digital coaching contracting requests coaches to equip themselves with necessary skill sets in a digital coaching environment.

During the digital coaching process, there are also many new factors that need to be taken into account. For example, how do some traditional coaching techniques strengths

cards, flip charts translate well in the online format? How to deal with the problem of interruption of internet connection in online coaching? Coaches need to be trained to be proficient in coaching with online resources and how to react to these unexpected situations. Smartphones can be a backup choice when the internet is disconnected or in places without internet at all (Kinnunen & Georgescu, 2020).

The new skill sets needed in the before and during-coaching process are more to cope with the challenges emerging in digital coaching. But these new skills needed at the end of coaching are more like brand new opportunities for coaches. Skilled coaches will be able to use technology to track coaching records and use AI to do administrative work to enhance effectiveness. The growing coaching platform providers can also help to make this process even more efficient for coaches and clients.

Coaching themes

We need to recognise that the trend in coaching topics is to address uncertainty and complexity. There are uncertainties of how workplaces will operate post pandemic (IFOW, 2020) and the possibility of repeated large-scale disruptive events in the future (Irving, 2021). In the current survey, the top three issues reported by coaches were balancing work–life priorities (19.11%), followed by relationships at work (17.94%) and stress (17.78%). Due to the multiple environmental pressures brought by the pandemic, clients' demand for wellbeing-related coaching topics has shown a dramatic increase (Irving, 2021).

These volatile settings remind us to call for a more innovative and flexible coaching framework system. Williams (2017) linked flexibly structured coaching with unpredictable work environments. Moreover, coaches devised and trialled novel market-appropriate coaching packages during the COVID-19 pandemic; adding new empirical insights to work by Fleisher et al. (2020) and the EMCC (2020) describing innovative approaches during times of upheaval, which highlighted demand for short-notice coaching access to address immediate needs (Irving, 2021).

3. Importance of supervision and professional training

The need for technological advancement and the pursuit of a more flexible and innovative theoretical framework are strong motivations for coaches to invest in their own development. This can be achieved through coaching supervision and peer support, and it also raises the need for professional training for coaches' personal development. Coaching supervision, peer support and professional training can provide both psychological and technical support for coaches, helping them to cope with the complexities during times of pandemics, lockdowns or other possible crises.

From a psychological perspective, coaching supervision can provide a variety of possibilities to support coaches maintain their professional and personal well-being (Hodge, 2016). The coaches' economic and life uncertainty due to the epidemic or the crisis caused by the epidemic can bring negative effects on their personal psychology (Tamiolaki & Kalaitzaki, 2020). Moreover, the coach-client dynamic may be influenced by shared experience with a complex situational challenge. Multi-layered pandemic-

induced stresses (CIPD, 2020; EMCC, 2020; Grant Thornton, 2020) also challenged practitioner capacity for practice while allowing coaches to interact empathically, supporting practice. In this case, psychological guidance for coaches is a very important preparation aspect for the success of the coaching process, especially during crisis situations. Coaches consciously cared for themselves in anticipation of confronting stressed clients, which necessitated more input over and above pre-pandemic levels (Irving, 2021). Seeking coaching supervision and peer support is a very effective way to relieve psychological stress in crisis.

From a technical point of view, professional training can help with technological issues and theoretical enrichment for coaches in digital coaching environments. Pandemic lockdowns make the coaching format more inclined to the online model. According to our research, this model may not change significantly in the short term and may be maintained in large proportions in the long term. Therefore, in the professional training of coaches, the expansion of technical issues and theoretical knowledge related to online coaching is necessary. Coaching techniques and the innovation of coaching approaches are the issues that coaches should think about in the crisis, and they are also the contents that professional training should include (Irving, 2021).

Conclusion

This large-scale survey sought to explore the changing nature of the coaching industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how this affected coaching practice, expectations, as well as working hours and incomes. The results show a mixed effect, like the wider economy there were winners and losers. The biggest losers seem those that were least able to adapt and change to an online environment, or who had least experience of working online. The biggest winners were those protected by working through digital platforms. The results also indicate that the global pandemic, like in many sectors from online shopping to learning and development, has created a shift in coach working habits which is likely to be sustained long after the pandemic, and this shift requires a change in professional bodies, coach educations, as well as coaches to respond to this shift to digital.

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