The rise of e-coaching

Hannah McNamara looks at how technology can be used to enhance face-to-face coaching
t was only a matter of time before coaching joined the world of e-learning. In the last few years, e-coaching, or coaching using electronic platforms and tools, has moved from being a solution offered as a novelty on games consoles to being considered a viable development option for organisations.

The idea of introducing e-coaching into an organisation raises a number of questions: Can a computer replace the need for a live interaction with a coach? Is it really designed to? If you’re going to introduce a form of e-coaching, which one should you use and what’s the best way of going about it?

Before addressing these questions, let us take a look at an area of the market where e-coaching is already being used extensively.

From games console to the workplace
Within the consumer gaming market, there are already numerous electronic products available that mimic the relationship between coach and coachee. These are becoming more and more advanced.

Nintendo launched the My Word Coach game for the DS console in 2007 as a teaching tool designed to improve the player’s vocabulary, and offered the player a choice of ‘coaches’ to help him. At the end of 2010, Sony launched the Kinect sensor for the Xbox and opened a new world of possibilities. The console can literally watch the player and give feedback and personalised encouragement, so fitness games such as EA Sports Active 2 and Your Shape: Fitness Evolved hit the high streets in time for players’ 2011 New Year’s resolutions.

With more than 8 million units sold in Kinect’s first 60 days, the reach of electronic platforms should not be underestimated. The gaming market has shifted from being the preserve of teenage males to being something enjoyed by the whole family.

What this means for organisations is that a large proportion of staff are already engaged with, and actively using, a form of fully automated e-coaching – whether they realise it or not.

What is e-coaching?
E-coaching can broadly be defined as any form of coaching that takes place using electronic media, with or without the input from a real coach.

Professional coaches are now adding e-coaching to their portfolio of services, either as stand-alone programmes or to add value to existing one-to-one or group coaching programmes.

Coaching is usually employed to assist with the development of soft skills such as leadership, time management, delegation and communication, and it can also be used to embed learning from training courses by helping the learner to set goals and follow through on the necessary actions. E-coaching is no different.

How is e-coaching delivered?
Real-time e-coaching tools are:

• Instant Messenger services
• Skype
• webinars.

Coaching using these methods can take place in a formal coaching session or as required, providing the coach and coachee are available at the same time. We use Skype in my company, although the service can be patchy from time to time and we sometimes end up reverting to the telephone. The reason we prefer it over typed communications is that we can talk to the coachee and get a feel for his mood, motivation level and language. Having the option to use video means we are able to see him and he can see us, plus we can use the chat box to send links to relevant resources he might find useful during the course of the session.
Skype is free when accessed via the Internet and can be used for conference calls. For example, one of our clients in Dubai wanted to work with two coaches from our team at once – I was there to help her set goals, become more self-aware and address the challenges she was facing, and my colleague was there as a mentor providing market-specific guidance.

Through this medium we were both able to coach her at once from separate locations and her progress was vastly accelerated. It also helped that she had two people to whom she was held accountable.

We also find that, because we travel internationally, Skype can be used to supplement face-to-face sessions with clients. Equally, many of our clients are senior executives who are called away on business at a moment’s notice so using this media allows us to maintain the continuity and momentum of a coaching programme.

For in-house coaches in companies with multiple locations, Skype means coaching sessions can be held without the need for either party to travel; likewise with Instant Messenger services.

Webinars combined with online discussions can be an effective way of sharing knowledge in the organisation and allowing people to learn from one another. Webinars are relatively easy to host through providers such as GoToMeeting and GoToWebinar and do not involve a huge investment.

Far from being a one-way flow of information from trainer to staff, this technology incorporates many interactive features such as polls, chat functions and being able to ask the trainer/facilitator questions. When group coaching sessions are held as webinars, there is no time taken up away from the office and staff members at different locations are connected. There is the added aspect of accountability: participants in a series of group online coaching sessions can be asked to report back on their progress since the last session.

Combined with a discussion forum, individuals can come together to share experiences and learn from one another.

Non-time specific e-coaching tools are:
- email
- online discussion groups (see above)
- dedicated online coaching platforms
- automated self-coaching programmes.

Email is usually used to supplement live or real-time coaching, for example when sending exercises and links to resource materials. Within our coaching programmes, we always include unlimited email access between the coach and coachee throughout the period of the engagement. It provides the coachee with a higher level of access to his coach and the feeling that his coach is there for him should he need him.

Rather than creating a sense of dependency on his coach in which the individual might feel he needs to check with him before acting, the opposite is most often the case. Knowing they could get help if they needed it means that people become more self-sufficient.

Anecdotal feedback from our clients tells us that the very act of explaining the situation in an email means people often end up answering their own questions and they don’t need to click ‘send’ after all.

Dedicated online programmes are more suited to situations in which the individual is working towards achieving a specific outcome. This is more akin to e-learning with the interactivity of having answers to questions submitted to a coach for review and feedback. For example, we have developed two distinct e-coaching programmes moving the individual towards two quite different outcomes. Land That Job is a career coaching programme for middle managers planning their next move. Our Leadership Coaching online programme is mainly used by recently-promoted executives to settle into their new role quickly and
is used as a resource library for coaching exercises between face-to-face sessions. Both programmes are interactive, but the career coaching programme is designed to be a self-coaching programme as well, without the need for an e-coach.

The technology we use gives the coach and coachee access to a secure online workspace, which means they can be more frank than they would be if they knew communications were being passed through email, which is less secure.

Automated coaching programmes are generally self-study courses where the next module is released after a period of time has passed or only after the previous module has been completed.

What is the appeal of e-coaching?

**Flexibility** Getting someone to commit to formal coaching sessions can sometimes be challenging, whether he is working with an in-house coach or an external one. E-coaching means he can set goals, work through coaching resources and give feedback to his coach at a time that suits him. Likewise, the e-coach can read and respond at a convenient time within agreed parameters.

For the in-house coach, being able to coach by email or via an online coaching platform means he can manage his time more effectively and, if he is so inclined, log in from home and coach when he can think more clearly away from the office.

External coaches providing e-coaching can work in a more flexible way, which is particularly appealing for parents working from home. Where once the hours they had available for coaching were dictated by the school run, housework and general activities, they can now coach outside of office hours. For those external coaches who do operate normal office hours, they are able to work with their e-coaching clients between one-to-one sessions and make use of other 'down time' during the working week.

For part-time or home-workers, e-coaching offers the same benefits and means they are not excluded from the development options available to full-time office-based staff.

This flexibility means the organisation can benefit from cost-savings and provide coaching support to staff globally, regardless of the time of day or night.

**Blended learning** Coaching has long been used to help individuals and groups embed what has been learned on a training course, so it is a natural step to add in a coaching layer to existing e-learning activities.

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**E-coaching is any form of coaching that takes place using electronic media, with or without the input from a real coach**
E-coaching can be combined to help staff set, and work towards, development goals. As with any other form of coaching, it is vital the e-coach is briefed on people’s development plans, feedback from appraisals and the outcomes the organisation is looking for. In this way, the e-coach can be sure he is operating within the brief he has been given and supports the individual’s ongoing development.

Amie Crews, in-house leadership coach at Southern Railways, says an online coaching programme “can act as a knowledge and resource base with webinars and online discussions. It can be utilised when the client wants or needs it, and provides a way of capturing and recording data. I think this is particularly useful for CPD purposes”. This point about continuing professional development is interesting because professional bodies have started to adjust the way they monitor the CPD activities of their members. For example, as a chartered marketer, I am required to log my CPD each year. The process at the Chartered Institute of Marketing has changed from filling a form to having access to a website on which I can log my goals for the year, map out what I need to learn to achieve those goals and reflect on the usefulness of each activity.

Scalability and cost-savings Due to the budget involved, many organisations reserve one-to-one executive coaching for more senior staff. Online coaching is a more affordable option in situations where large numbers of staff need access to a coach quickly, for example as part of outplacement support for those being made redundant. Pre-written self-coaching programmes such as the Land That Job course can be released to a large number of people at the same time at a fixed per-head cost. Access to an e-coach for a set period of time can be added as an option at a rate that is more affordable than committing to an on-going package of coaching due to economies of scale.

In-house coaches can be trained to use online tools and provide e-coaching to staff, and will be able to manage relationships with more people than through providing only one-to-one coaching.

Connection to the right coaches for the job When selecting external coaches, location can become a large factor in the decision-making process, especially if the coaching company charges for travel to and from the venue if they are not local. Online tools make it much easier to connect the coachee to the right coach for him, regardless of location.

When one office has an existing relationship with an external coach who is trusted and has proven his worth, other offices can utilise his expertise.

Key tips for getting a good result from e-coaching

- Blend it with other learning methods
- Don’t expect online self-coaching programmes to fully replace human interaction
- Identify which skills and topics are suitable for e-coaching and which aren’t
- Test it thoroughly before rolling out to large numbers of staff
- Work with a provider experienced in this field.

Are there any drawbacks to using e-coaching?

E-coaching is primarily designed to supplement one-to-one and group coaching, not to be used instead of it.

For those individuals within the organisation who have no prior experience of being coached, use purely online programmes with caution and thoroughly explain how it works. Run a small pilot programme first, with a few individuals, to assess how it compares with other development options. Organisations expecting to save money by substituting living, breathing coaches with computer software to still get the same results will be disappointed.

Crews is open to the idea of using an e-coaching platform, with some caveats: “I don’t think it should completely replace the physical one-to-one interaction of a coach. Rather it should be used as an additional tool to support the client in between sessions.”

At law firm Pinsent Masons, partner development coach Sophie Turner says that “a key factor in the success of our partner coaching programme is that we have insisted on it being face-to-face. Face-to-face enables the key ingredients of effective coaching to occur – the impact of the signature presence of the coach and the rapport between coach and coachee”.

As an external coach I find face-to-face interaction invaluable. I specialise in working with senior people in technology companies and, ironically, they are the people who most crave human interaction. While my company does provide purely online coaching programmes, they are for a specific purpose. My personal preference is to use technology to complement one-to-one coaching at senior levels and only use it when appropriate.

Are we at the point where machines will take over the world of L&D? Perhaps, but not quite yet.