

# **The social media coach: Social media and coaching. A qualitative study of coach practice**

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## Abstract

*Individuals and organisations throughout the world are actively involved in the use of social media to support learning yet the potential use and supporting materials within the field of coaching in organisations has presently not been empirically investigated. The aim of this research is to investigate the extent to which social media tools and materials are currently being used by internal or external coaches to support face to face coaching in a public, private or voluntary organisational context. The outcomes from this research provide the coaching community with information that they can use to consider whether social media could be of value in their coaching practice (or not) which could potentially inform their future practice. 117 coaches who work in an organisational context completed a questionnaire and the findings show that over a quarter use social media to support coaching and that there is scope and benefits to using social media tools and materials to support both individual and group coaching in organisations. However over 50% of coaches indicated that there are a number of disadvantages and barriers that can prevent the use of social media. Key Issues raised by coaches were organisational security concerns, client confidentiality and ensuring that all parties have the necessary technology skills. Recommendations on areas that need to be addressed when considering whether social media could be used to support coaching conclude this piece of research.*



## Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate the extent to which social media tools and materials are currently being used by internal or external coaches to support face to face coaching in an organisational context. The organisation may be public, private or voluntary.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of this research within the context of the organisation were to:

1. Identify whether social media tools and materials are being used by coaches to support face to face coaching
2. Explore which social media tools and materials are being used by coaches and how they are being used to support face to face coaching
3. Investigate perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching
4. Investigate the barriers to using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching
5. Formulate recommendations for ways in which social media tools and materials could be used to support face to face coaching



## Context

There is currently limited empirical data related to both web and e-coaching and the extent to which social media tools and materials are being used by coaches to support face to face coaching in organisations (Stokes 2010;pa77-84, Boyce & Hernez-Broome 2010;pa139-174 & Emelo & McGee 2010;pa109-127). Millions of individuals and organisations throughout the world are actively involved in the use of social media (Bozarth 2010;p1) with significant implications for managers and organisations (Grenville-Cleve & Passmore, 2009), yet the potential connection between social media tools and materials and coaching in organisations has presently not been empirically investigated. However "Coaching is essentially a learning process" (Pask & Joy 2007;p220) and the use and integration of social media technologies to support learning and development in organisations is gaining momentum (Hart 2011;pa28-30)

Stokes (2010;p83) calls for further investigation to establish the extent to which e-development might add to coaching for individuals, groups and organisations. Stokes recognises the "plethora of media for communications" p83 but at present there is "little understanding of how such mechanisms work in the context of coaching" p83 Stokes (2010) raises unanswered questions; What media are actually being used? and how do participants use electronic resources? In the context of the extent to which social media can be used to support coaching, these questions link directly to the research objectives.



# Method

## Method

Although this is not ethnographic research, this qualitative study was influenced by literature on ethnography (Bryman & Bell 2007; pa440-460). A review of literature\* in the related fields of learning & development and e-coaching & mentoring has been conducted alongside the collection and analysis of empirical data. This consisted of a questionnaire that was completed by 117 coaches who work in an organisational context.

\* The literature review is not included in this paper. Please contact me if you'd like a copy

## Participants

The qualitative study involved the completion of a questionnaire by coaches who met one or more of the following criteria:

- at some point during the last 2 years had been actively involved in coaching individuals or groups in an organisation.
- Were an enrolled and accepted member of an online coaching, learning or social media group such as: Coaching at work, EMCC, Coaching forums, Training zone & Social media today,
- held a recognised coaching qualification

117 coaches gave informed consent and participated in the completion of a questionnaire between 7th April 2011 and 13th May 2011. All 117 participants met at least 1 of the specified criteria with 95% of participants having been actively involved in coaching individuals or groups in an organisation. 37.8% were current members on online coaching, learning or social media groups and 36.1% had a recognised coaching qualification.



## **Data Collection**

Participants were accessed either via face to face meetings, telephone, email or via established online groups using a combination of a snowball and convenience sampling (Bryman and Bell 2007;p458).

Qualitative data was gathered from Coach participants in line with the research objectives via a questionnaire. Survey monkey (2011) was used to produce an online questionnaire and a paper based version was also available to ensure that all participants had access. Branching was used in the questionnaire to enable questions to be tailored for those who both do and don't use social media to support coaching.

The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample group of coaches who all hold masters level qualifications. Their feedback enabled the researcher to review and amend the wording of questions which was helpful in strengthening their reliability.

Questions were centered around themes linked to the research objectives:

1. Are social media tools and materials are being used by coaches to support face to face coaching
2. Which social media tools and materials are being used by coaches and how they are being used to support face to face coaching
3. The perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching
4. The barriers to using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching

## **Social media and ethics**

Consideration was given to the ethics of contacting participants via social media. Both public and private information is available on the internet and information generated in Social media groups could be perceived as both. Membership is required and personal information regarding name and contact details are given by members. However some of these groups are open which means that all information and discussions that take place within the group is publically available.



Bryman and Bell (2007, p684) suggest that the "distinction between public and private space on the internet is blurred and contested". They raise concerns regarding anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent and point out that debate regarding guidelines and ethics of internet research is ongoing. Grinyer (2007) refers to the British Sociological Association's *statement of ethical practice* that suggests the issues of gaining informed consent, negotiating access agreements, assessing the boundaries between public and private and data security are potentially problematic and ongoing ethical debates for researchers. Heath et al (1999) in Grinyer (2007; p3) critique the covert collection of data whereas Herring (1996; pp153-168) argues that information in public chatrooms are "part of the public arena" since private forums are also available.

Taking account of the academic debate offered by Bryman and Bell (2007;p670-673) and Grinyer (2007), the researcher did not pose questions or gather information for from discussions that took place in existing social media groups. However members of relevant groups were asked if they would be willing to take part in the research. As with all potential participants, full details concerning the research was given in order that participants could make an informed choice and give informed consent before participating.

## **Data Analysis**

The framework for data analysis followed the qualitative analysis model outlined by Biggam (2008; Fig E4 p120). As suggested by Biggam (2008;p115-124), initial themes were developed based on the research objectives and were used as the basis for developing a questionnaire. An iterative process of describing, analysing and interpreting data from the questionnaires was followed. These themes were reviewed following initial analysis and reflection and cross referenced with literature to produce a synthesised and meaningful analysis of the empirical data. During this iterative process Bell's (2005; p 130) suggested questions for internal criticism were applied to the review of literature and Scott's (1990) criteria (Bryman & Bell 2007; p570) were considered when analysing documents sourced from the internet.



## Limitations

The participants in the study were coaches. The findings therefore are limited to their perspective on the research objectives and questions which could skew the findings. To reduce this issue, additional data was gathered regarding the generic use and benefits of using social media.

Regarding access to participants, a number of participants were members of established online social media groups. This has perhaps resulted in a disproportionate number of participants who currently use social media. However participation in a social media group does not necessarily imply that these coaches use social media to support coaching.

Finally, some organisations are currently considering whether to allow the use of social media tools as they weigh up potential constraints such as security and staff distraction with potential benefits of openness and transparency. (Woodill 2011;p144-146) A growing number of organisations are using social media for marketing and recruitment yet some have banned employee use of these tools within their organisations (Hart 2011;p28). This may influence the use and scope of social media generally to support face to face coaching which could limit the significance of this research.



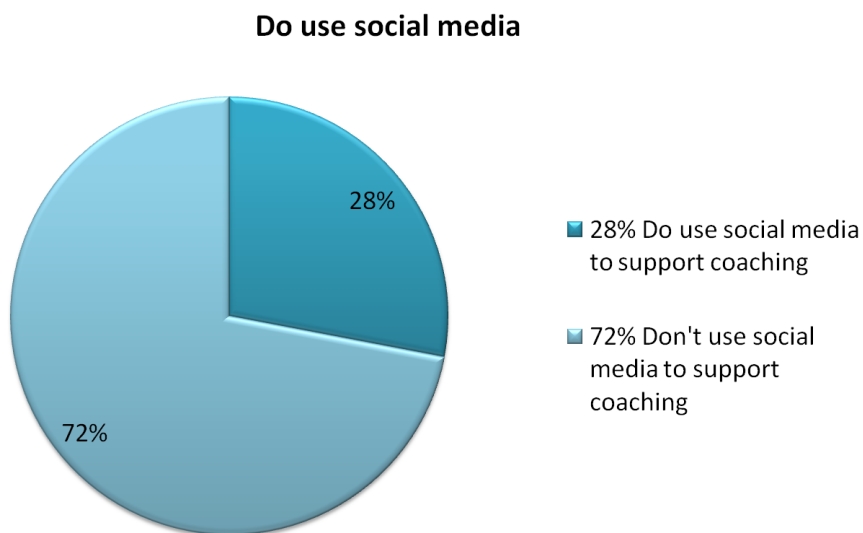


# Research Findings

## Research Objective 1.

### Identify whether social media tools and materials are being used by coaches to support face to face coaching

The questionnaire responses show that 72% (84) of research participants do not at present use social media to support face to face coaching.



Of the 28% (33) who do use social media to support coaching, almost three quarters have been using it for over 12 months and a third for over 2 years. These participants therefore have experience to draw upon when answering research questions.

### Context and general use of social media

In order to give context to the research, 2 questions were asked about participants general use of social media outside of coaching. Table 1 shows that there are similarities between some general uses of social media.

**Table 1**

|                               | Those who do use social media to support coaching | Those who don't use social media to support coaching |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| To support my own development | 81.3%   | 80.8%  |
| To collaborate with others    | 62.5%   | 66.7%  |
| To seek advice from others    | 53.1%   | 50%  |
| To support job search         | 25%   | 29.5%  |
| Online recruitment            | 9.4%  | 6.4%   |

However table 2 shows that there appear to be differences in percentages in the following general uses of social media between those who do and don't use it to support coaching.

**Table 2**

| How social media is used outside of coaching      | Those who do use social media to support coaching | Those who don't use social media to support coaching |
|---|---|--|
| To share information with others                  | 87.5%   | 70.5%  |
| To establish and build online relationships       | 84.4%   | 69.2%  |
| To socialise with friends and family              | 68.8%   | 44.9%  |
| To support the learning and development of others | 65.6%   | 38.5%  |
| To create my own content                          | 56.3%   | 23.1%  |
| To store and share weblinks                       | 40.6%   | 21.8%  |

The most frequent general use of social media by coaches who don't use it to support coaching is to support their own development and the sharing of information with others. Whereas, the most frequent general use of social media by coaches who do use it to support coaching is to share information with others and to establish and build online relationships.

Table 3 shows that differences are also evident in the social media tools and materials that coaches use to support these activities as follows:

**Table 3**

| <b>Social media tools and materials</b>    | <b>Those who do use social media to support coaching</b> | <b>Those who don't use social media to support coaching</b> |
|--|--|---|
| <b>Multimedia sharing tools</b>            | <b>71.9%</b>   | <b>53.2%</b>  |
| <b>Document creation and sharing tools</b> | <b>65.6%</b>   | <b>32.5%</b>  |
| <b>Blogging tools</b>                      | <b>56.3%</b>   | <b>27.3%</b>  |
| <b>Micro-blogging tools</b>                | <b>56.3%</b>   | <b>36.4%</b>  |
| <b>Wiki tools</b>                          | <b>46.9%</b>   | <b>14.3%</b>  |
| <b>Social bookmarking tools</b>            | <b>21.9%</b>   | <b>13%</b>  |

Coaches who do use social media to support coaching appear to use these tools in greater numbers than those who don't outside of the coaching process.

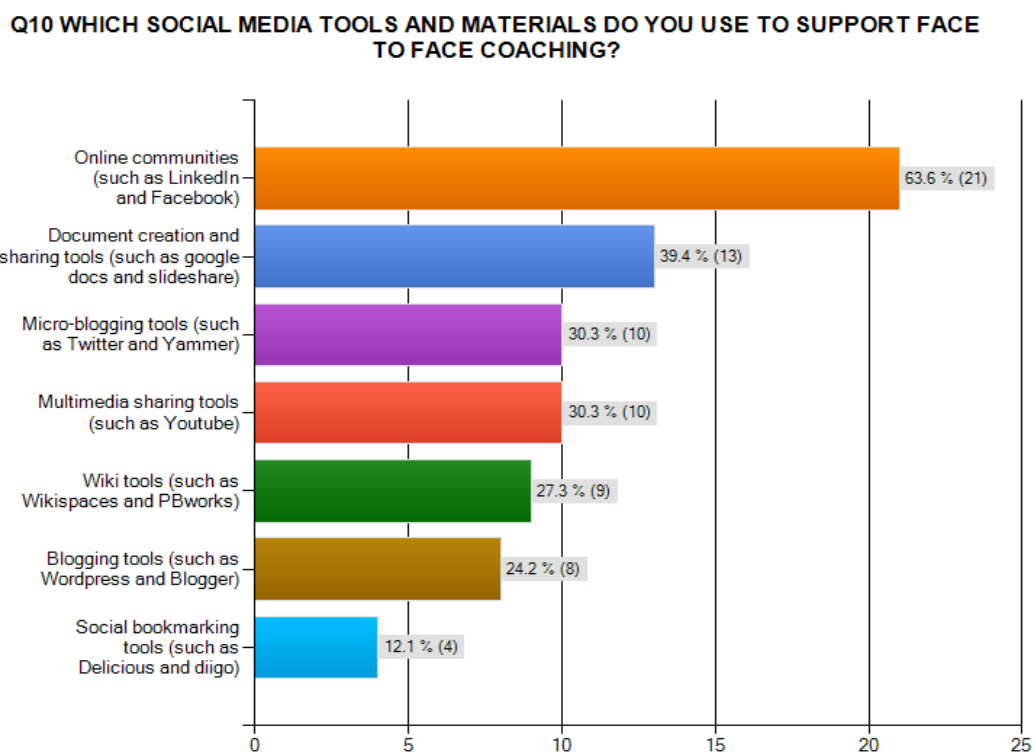
However the most widely used tool by both groups outside of the coaching process are online communities with 96.9% of those who do use social media to support coaching and 94.8% of those who don't use social media to support coaching using these type of tools to support their general social media activities. It is interesting to note this in the context of the findings that only 28% use social media to support coaching. This is interesting because they are using social media for other purposes.



## Research Objective 2.

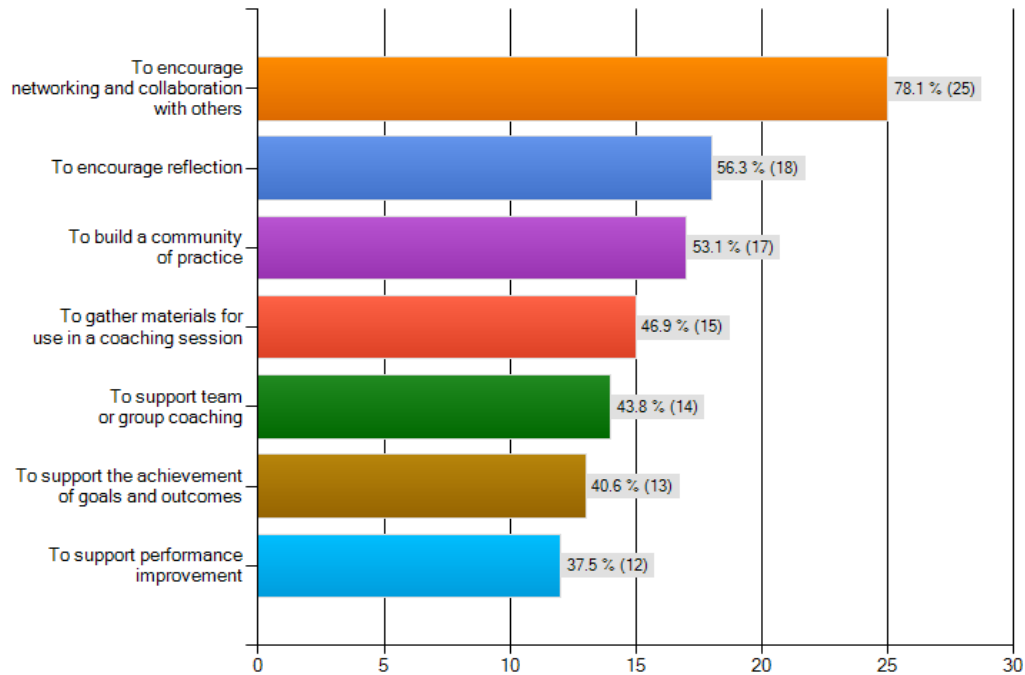
### Explore which social media tools and materials are being used by coaches and how they are being used to support face to face coaching

The following table shows the tools that the participating coaches use to support coaching.



Online communities are the most widely used tool with 63.6% of participating coaches using it to support coaching. 39.4% of coaches use document creation and sharing tools and 30.3% use micro-blogging tools and multimedia tools to support coaching.

**Q11 HOW DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AND MATERIALS TO SUPPORT FACE TO FACE COACHING?**



78.1% of participating coaches use social media to encourage coachees to network and collaborate with others and 56.3% of coaches use social media to encourage reflection. One coach stated that "Collaboration and reflection on-line with wiki or LinkedIn groups may be of value for individuals and organizations. Social media is also a great networking tool, both with clients and coaches." A229.40

46.9% use social media to gather materials for use in a coaching session and 43.8% use it to support team or group coaching. One coach commented "Since these tools are SOCIAL tools and lend themselves much better to group interactions - we should be thinking more about their use in terms of GROUP coaching " A189.29

### **Research Objective 3.**

#### **Investigate perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching**

##### **Benefits**

Those coaches who do use social media to support coaching were asked about the benefits they had experienced through their use of social media.

41% (12) coaches mentioned the benefit of being able to collaborate and share information with both groups and individual clients. One coach stated that "It allows me to share information, articles and blog comments which may be relevant to my clients, as individuals and as groups" A138.45

41% (12) also highlighted the flexibility of social media tools which can enable "Anytime, anywhere learning" A194.28 communication on the move and enables "discussion to take place at the time required by the coachee" M52.55

38% (11) have experienced increased networking opportunities with others; both for themselves and by encouraging their coachees to network with others. One coach stated that "For the coachee, the huge benefit is a whole world of networks, resources and learning." M37.36

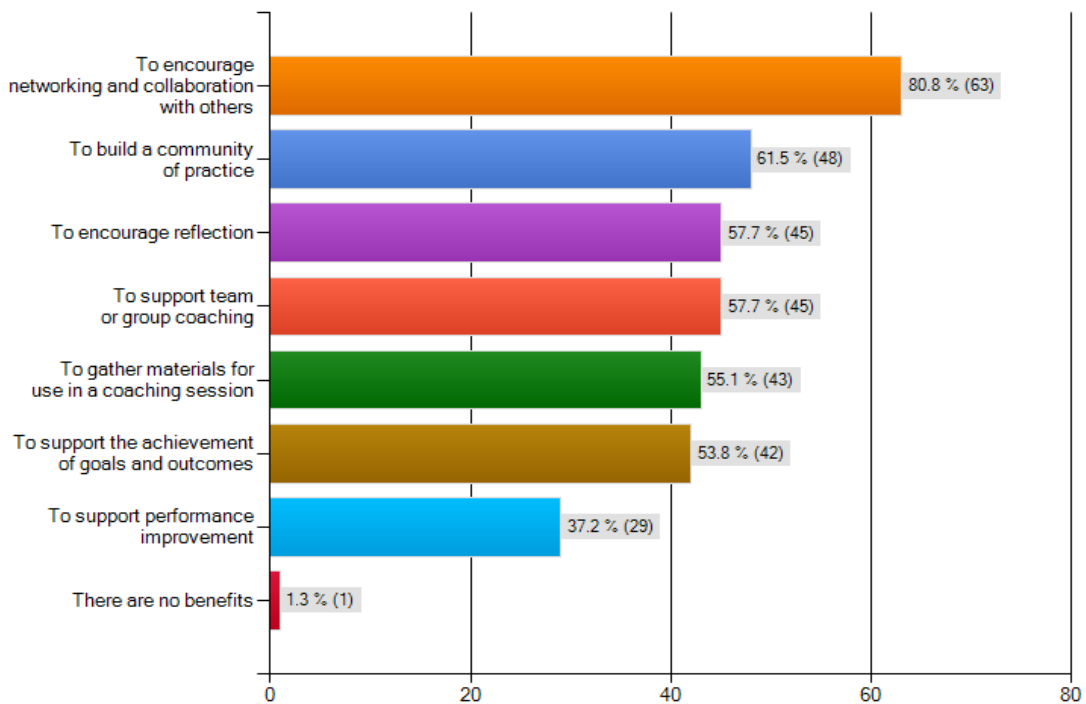
34% (10) have found that social media offers learning opportunities and additional perspectives which encourage reflection, develops coachee thinking, offers new ideas and sparks new thinking. One coach stated that social media "opens up new perspectives such as collaboration and new ideas" A229.26

21% (6) have signposted coachees "to different resources/tools which they can explore and use to help them achieve their goals" M37.36



Coaches who don't use social media to support coaching at present were asked:

**Q17 IN YOUR OPINION WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS AND MATERIALS TO SUPPORT FACE TO FACE COACHING?**



Additional comments highlighted further benefits that included; providing learning opportunities to spark new thinking, flexibility and ease of use.

It appears that significant numbers of participating coaches who don't use social media to support coaching can see the potential benefits of using it to support coaching. Table 4 compares these potential perceived benefits with the way in which social media tools are being used to support coaching.

**Table 4**

| <b>Comparing Q17 and Q11</b>                                 | <b>How Social media is being used to support coaching</b> | <b>Perceived benefits of using social media to support coaching. By coaches who don't use social media to support coaching</b> |
|--|---|--|
| <b>To encourage networking and collaboration with others</b> | <b>78.1%</b>  | <b>80.8%</b>   |
| <b>To encourage reflection</b>                               | <b>56.3%</b>  | <b>57.7%</b>   |
| <b>To build a community of practice</b>                      | <b>53.1%</b>  | <b>61.5%</b>   |
| <b>To gather materials for use in a coaching session</b>     | <b>46.9%</b>  | <b>55.1%</b>   |
| <b>To support team or group coaching</b>                     | <b>43.8%</b>  | <b>57.7%</b>   |
| <b>To support the achievement of goals and outcomes</b>      | <b>40.6%</b>  | <b>53.8%</b>   |
| <b>To support performance improvement</b>                    | <b>37.5%</b>  | <b>37.2%</b>   |

Networking and collaboration with others was both the most frequently perceived benefit (80.8%) and the most frequent way (78.1%) that social media is being used to support coaching. It is interesting to note that the other percentages highlighted in table 4 show perceived benefits are similar to how social media is actually being used by participating coaches to support coaching.

Conversely, participants who don't use social media to support coaching were asked about the benefits of face to face coaching:

53% (37) participants highlighted the ability to read and respond to body language as a benefit and 39% connected this with the building of rapport and trust in a relationship. 20% mentioned that having the physical space to meet which enabled a clear focus with no interruptions was a benefit. Less than 10% identified the following as additional benefits of face to face coaching: immediacy of response & feedback, Improved performance & capability, Increased accountability, more personal and facilitates the exchange and exploration of ideas. 3% felt that face to face coaching provides a perception of value to the client with the coachee feeling more involved.





1.5% felt that the coachee may feel that face to face has more integrity and is more genuine.

The identified benefits of face to face coaching are quite different from the benefits coaches had found in using social media to support coaching, for example, there was no reference to body language and physical space.

## **Disadvantages**

Coaches who use social media to support coaching were asked about their experience of the disadvantages of using social media to support coaching.

48% of coaches have found no disadvantages to using social media to support coaching and 28% have found that client confidentiality and security can be compromised and that materials shared via social media can be unreliable. Two coaches stated that "Privacy settings and confidentiality need to be carefully monitored" A229.29 and "I only use SoMe tools where I can create private groups for such interactions rather than use public social media - although I do use these for more open conversations/discussions with others" A189.24

16% have found that using social media to support face to face coaching can cause confusion in the coaching relationship if it was not agreed and included in the contracting process.

2 (8%) coaches have found that the possibilities of social media can be overwhelming and highlighted the need for social media training both for the coach and the coachee in order that potential problems could be avoided.

## Research Objective 4.

### Investigate the barriers to using social media tools and materials to support face to face coaching

Table 5

| Barriers to using social media to support coaching                     | Do use social media to support face to face coaching | Don't use social media to support face to face coaching |
|--|--|---|
| Individual clients don't use social media tools                        | 62.1%  | 38.4%   |
| Lack of skills or experience in using technology                       | 55.2%  | 49.3%   |
| Client organisations don't allow the use of social media tools at work | 51.7%  | 43.8%   |
| Organisational security concerns                                       | 41.4%  | 46.6%   |
| The technology needed is not available                                 | 20.7%  | 11%   |
| There are no barriers  | 17.2%  | 15.1%   |

Table 5 shows that both coaches who do (55.2%) and don't (49.3%) use social media to support coaching identified that the lack of skills or experience in using technology was a barrier to using social media to support coaching. The most common barrier for coaches who do use social media to support coaching is that Individual clients don't use social media tools. One coach stated that "Everybody know about LinkedIn or Twitter, but a few are able to register and start using it" A229.32

It appears from the additional comments from coaches who don't use social media to support coaching that the lack of skills in using the technology lies with both the coach and the coachee. Two coaches stated that "I'm not sure how I would use this media to assist with a coaching intervention" A116.03 and "Delegates misunderstand and underestimate the power of social media for learning and supporting learning/working" A1511.25



Both groups, in similar proportions have found that organisational security concerns and blocks on using social media tools to be a barrier to using these tools to support coaching. One coach stated that "organisations block access to third party tools and don't see how they can be used" A1511.25. Some of those who have come across these blocks have used private secure spaces rather than blocked public tools to support coaching.

25% of coaches who don't use social media to support coaching added additional comments regarding barriers (Table 6) which perhaps suggests that a proportion of coaches who don't use social media to support coaching are prevented from doing so because of lack of personal skills and personal concerns.

**Table 6**

| <b>Barriers</b>  | <b>Percentage of those who commented</b> |
|--|--|
| <b>Personal lack of skills and knowledge in using social media</b> | <b>45%</b>                               |
| <b>Personal security concerns</b>                                  | <b>15%</b>                               |
| <b>It doesn't fit with my style</b>                                | <b>10%</b>                               |
| <b>It takes time to build a social network</b>                     | <b>5%</b>                                |

## How could social media be used to support coaching in the future.

Responses to this question have been themed in table 7 as follows:

**Table 7**

| <b>How social media could be used to support coaching in the future<br/>Question 20</b>      | <b>Coaches who use social media to support coaching</b> | <b>Coaches who don't use use social media to support coaching</b> |
|--|---|---|
| <b>To enable the coachee to network, share ideas and build relationships with others</b>     | <b>10 (37%)</b>   | <b>30 (46%)</b>   |
| <b>As IT evolves social media will become more widely used in coaching (it's inevitable)</b> | <b>7 (26%)</b>  | <b>9 (14%)</b>  |
| <b>For reflection and contact pre, interim and post face to face coaching sessions</b>       | <b>5 (18%)</b>  | <b>21 (32%)</b>   |
| <b>To support team or group coaching</b>   | <b>6 (22%)</b>  | <b>11 (17%)</b>   |
| <b>To broaden accessibility to coaching and learning</b>                                     | <b>4 (15%)</b>  | <b>12 (18%)</b>   |
| <b>To support younger coachees</b>   | <b>3 (11%)</b>  | <b>5 (8%)</b>   |
| <b>To support coach development</b>  | <b>2 (7%)</b>   | <b>6 (9%)</b>   |

The most common finding related to how social media could be used in the future to support coaching by both groups was to enable the coachee to network, share ideas and build relationships with others. This is consistent with previous findings.

There appeared to be a certain degree of inevitability about its increasing future use in coaching in the context of the rapid evolution of information technology. One coach stated that "As realities become more virtual, social media will increasingly become the norm of conversational learning" A209.36

Additional future uses identified by between 1-5% of coaches were: marketing of coaching services, supporting supervision, using ipad apps, using you tube videos and coaching using second life.

## Additional issues raised

This question raised a number of other issues that link to disadvantages and barriers as follows:

- Social media spaces often have a sales focus and discrimination is needed when using them. One coach stated that "Social media spaces can be like a bazaar. Useful things can happen there, but the most volume is selling. And people can be misinformed if they are not adept at telling the difference" A289.10
- Social media can blur the coaching relationship and its use needs to be agreed with the coachee.
- When using social media to support coaching, the coach needs to be clear about what they are doing and why they are doing it
- A New skillset is required. One coach stated that "A coach using social media may need to develop a different skillset compared to that of face to face coaching " A1211.50
- Culture change is needed if social media is to be valued and used to support coaching. One coach stated that "I think there would need to be a culture change in my own organisation A11 10.03 and another stated "Making collaboration effective requires a massive culture change and we are only just scratching the surface of this change." M124.21

## Discussion

### Is social media being used to support coaching?

Based on the research findings from this project only 28% of participating coaches use social media to support coaching and 72% don't, despite the fact that more than 95% of all participating coaches use social media outside of the coaching process.

It appears that the percentage of participating coaches who are using social media outside of the coaching process is higher than the norm. Just over 70% of the US web based audience have a Facebook account for example (Digitalbuzz 2011;p1) and in a recent survey of learning professionals 80% used social networking tools in their personal life (Skillsoft 2010;p1) The reason for the seemingly high general use could be that approximately 75% of the research questionnaires were received via an invitation in an online community and are therefore currently using social media. However this does not account for the difference between using social media generally and to support coaching.

The disadvantages and barriers to using social media that have been identified in this research perhaps give some insight into the reasons for this difference. Lack of skills and experience in using technology, organisational security concerns and an organisation not allowing the use of social media tools were the most common barriers identified to using social media to support coaching. This is discussed further below.

However the findings indicated that there is a certain degree of inevitability about the increasing future use of social media in coaching in the context of the rapid evolution of information & communications technology. This inevitability is also evident in web based mentoring Emelo & McGee (2010;p127), web coaching Boyce & Hernez-Broome (2010;p169) and by the growing popularity of virtual coaching (Ghods & Boyce, In Press).



## **Which tools are being used and how are they being used to support coaching?**

Online communities are the most widely used tool with almost two-thirds of coaches using it to support coaching. This is consistent with the recent Cara group (2011;p2) survey that showed that almost half of the learning leaders have found that communities were one of the most useful tools for supporting learning.

CIPD communities are growing too (Crofts 2011) as well as online communities for coaches via LinkedIn. Online communities provide a vehicle that enables members to collaborate and network with each other Hart (2011;p125) to connect and learn Bingham & Connor (2010;pa22-55) and to innovate and solve problems together Vanio & Leppisaari (2010;p177-187)

Over three quarters of coaches use social media to encourage coachees to network and collaborate which is consistent with the activities that online communities enable. In addition over half use social media to encourage reflection.

The most common finding too related to how social media could be used in the future to support coaching by both groups was to enable the coachee to network, share ideas and build relationships with others.

Interestingly over two thirds of coaches who don't use social media to support coaching use it to collaborate with others and build online relationships yet they don't use it to support coaching. Disadvantages and barriers, discussed later, give some insight into reasons for this.

Encouraging coachees to network and collaborate with others could perhaps cause confusion in the coaching relationship. Clutterbuck (2010;p83-87) identified that a complexity of group coaching is relationship scope. 16% of coaches found that using social media can cause confusion in the relationship if the use of social media in the coaching process was not agreed and included in the contracting process.

This was also raised as an issued related to the future use of social media to support coaching. To prevent confusion and a potential blurring of the coaching relationship, it is important that the use of social media is discussed and agreed with the coachee as part of the contracting process.



Encouraging coachees to network and collaborate may involve others on the sidelines of the coaching relationship. Clutterbuck (2004) in relation to peer mentoring suggests that mentors can help mentees to develop "their learning net" p103 and not to view peer mentoring as an exclusive relationship. Similarly other people too are involved in group and team coaching.

44% of coaches use social media to support team or group coaching. Meister & Willyerd (2010;p70) & Hart (2011;p36) cite the example of BT's dare to share programme that enables employees to share and solve problems. There is little literature related to which social media tools and how they are used to support both team and individual coaching. However similarly to the organisational examples in the literature review (Hart 2011;p36, Personnel Today 2008;p1, Cloudave 2010;p1 Social media examiner 2010;p1) and the findings from this research, a group or team community could be set up in which coachees share reflections and ideas and work on solving common challenges together. Alternatively all coachees could join relevant external communities and bring their learning back to the group or team.

Hussain (2010;p53-76) explores how new technologies can support coaching. Although he mentions tools such as second life, live journal and 2 live video broadcasting media, he makes no mention of online communities or encouraging coachees to network and collaborate with others. Nor does he mention You tube used by approximately a third of research participants. Multimedia sharing tools, online communities and micro-blogging tools could all be used to gather information for use in a coaching session. 47% of coaches use social media for this purpose

## **Benefits of using social media to support coaching**

There is consistency in the results in the way in which coaches use social media to support coaching and the benefits experienced.

The greatest benefits of using social media to support coaching, identified by coaches who use it, are: collaboration and sharing information with coachees, increased networking opportunities with others for both the coach and coachee and the flexibility that social media tools provide.





These findings are also consistent with the views of several authors in the literature review (Hart 2011;p125, Bingham & Connor 2010;pa33-55, Vanio & Leppisaari 2010;pa177-187, Meisters & Willyard 2010;p71) albeit that their view is in relation to the related fields of learning, e-coaching and e-mentoring. Bozarth (2010;p12) identifies that social media reduces the barriers of time and geography. This would contribute towards the flexibility that social media can offer.

Over a third of coaches have found that social media offers additional perspectives to the coachee which encourage reflection, provide new ideas and spark new thinking. Billington & Davidson (2010;pa110-112) have found these benefits in a business context. Clutterbuck (2010;p16) in relation to asynchronous virtual coaching agrees that built in reflection time is also a benefit.

Coaches who don't use social media to support coaching recognise the potential benefits of doing so. The results would suggest that they are slightly more positive about the benefits than those coaches who are using social media to support coaching. The greatest benefit perceived by this group was to encourage networking and collaboration with others. This benefit is also the most frequent way in which social media is actually used to support coaching.

More than half of coaches who don't use social media to support coaching identified the ability to read and respond to body language as a benefit of face to face coaching and almost 40% connected this with the building of rapport and trust in a relationship. It appears that in identifying these benefits that they have been compared with the use of social media and technology generally to support coaching. These benefits perhaps indicate some limitations of social media, however there is only tenuous reference to this in the results on barriers and disadvantages.



## **Disadvantages of using social media to support coaching**

Investigating the disadvantages and barriers give some insight into why social media is not being widely used at present by participating coaches.

Almost a half of those coaches who use social media to support coaching have experienced no disadvantages when using social media to support coaching. However over a quarter have found that client confidentiality and security can be compromised

Woodill (2011;p145) and Smith (2010;p30) report that material posted to a social media site may not be private. Client confidentiality in a coaching context is paramount. If social media potentially compromises this confidentiality then social media should not be used to support coaching. However almost three quarters of coaches had not found this to be a disadvantage.

Social media is widely used for marketing (Hart 2011;p28, Smith 2010;p13) and due to the volume of material available, it can be a challenge to find valid and reliable information and communities that add value (The CARA group 2010;p5) Over a quarter of coaches who use social media to support coaching have found that a disadvantage is that materials shared via social media can be unreliable. One coach stated that "Social media spaces can be like a bazaar. Useful things can happen there but the most volume is selling. People can be misinformed if they are not adept at telling the difference" A289.10

Filtering, critical thinking and discernment are therefore required in order that coaches can evaluate materials shared in social media sites in relation to their authenticity and reliability.



## **Barriers to using social media to support coaching**

Approximately 50% of all participating coaches identified that the lack of skills or experience in using technology was a barrier to using it to support coaching. This appears to be applicable to both coaches and coachees.

Question 20 asked about the future use of social media and one of the issues raised was that when using social media, the coach needs to be clear about what they are doing and why they are doing it. In order to do this the coach needs to have an appropriate level of knowledge and skills in social media application.

Clutterbuck (2010;p16) in relation to effective asynchronous virtual coaching stresses the need for participants to be computer literate and have the necessary technology skills. Lack of training for e-mentors has been found to be a failure factor in some e-mentoring programmes Williams et al (2011;p89)

When using online communities to support coaching, the coach would need knowledge and access to these and other resources in order that they can support their clients developmental requirements. Boyce & Hernez-Broome (2010;p151) Over 95% of all coaches are currently using online communities for general use so will have some technical skills in this area. However 9 coaches commented on their personal lack of skills and experience in using social media to specifically support coaching (question 16) The findings however don't identify the specific skills needed to use social media in a coaching context. It appears that further research is required in this area.

Both groups in similar proportions have found that organisational security concerns (41-46%) and blocks (44-51%) on social media tools are barriers in using social media to support coaching. From an organisational perspective, security concerns are a barrier to using social media (Woodill 2011;p145, Hart 2011;p53, Smith 2010;p30). If the organisation doesn't allow access to social media tools then it may be difficult for a coach to use them to support coaching although the coachee may be able to access these tools at home. Some coaches have overcome this by using organisational private secure spaces such as yammer.



Organisations may block access to social media because of security concerns or for other reasons such as staff distraction Woodhill (2011;p144-146) or an apprehensiveness about the openness of social media technologies (Harris & Rea 2009;p142).

The most common barrier (62%) for coaches who do use social media to support coaching is that individual clients don't use social media tools. This perhaps is a surprising finding given the widespread use of social media generally. (Digitalbuzz 2011;p1, Smith 2010;p5, Bozarth 2010;p4) and amongst the participating coaches in this research. If a coachee doesn't currently use social media in an organisational context, it is likely that some or all of the issues and barriers described above are preventing its use.

An issue identified in relation to the future use of social media to support coaching was that a culture change may be necessary in some organisations in order that the necessary tools and websites are valued and available to use.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to investigate the extent to which social media tools and materials are currently being used by internal or external coaches to support face to face coaching in an organisational context. The main findings from the 117 participating coaches are:

Only 28% of participating coaches use social media to support coaching and 72% don't, despite the fact that more than 95% of all participating coaches use social media outside of the coaching process.

Online communities are the most widely used tool with almost two-thirds of coaches using it to support coaching. Over three quarters of coaches use social media to encourage coachees to network and collaborate with others and half use it to encourage reflection. 44% of coaches use social media to support team or group coaching.

The greatest benefits of using social media to support coaching, identified by coaches who use it, are: collaboration and sharing information with coachees, increased networking opportunities with others for both the coach and coachee and the flexibility that social media tools provide.

Over a third of coaches have found that social media offers additional perspectives to the coachee which encourage reflection, provide new ideas and spark new thinking.

The greatest benefit perceived by coaches who don't use social media to support coaching was to encourage networking and collaboration with others. This benefit is also the most frequent way in which social media is actually used to support coaching.

Almost a half of those coaches who use social media to support coaches have experienced no disadvantages when using social media to support coaching. However over a quarter have found that client confidentiality and security can be compromised and that materials shared via social media can be unreliable. 16% have also found that using social media to support coaching can cause confusion in



the coaching relationship if it was not agreed and including in the contracting process.

Approximately 50% of all participating coaches identified that the lack of skills or experience in using technology was a barrier to using it to support coaching. This appears to be applicable to both coaches and coachees.

Both groups in similar proportions have found that organisational security concerns (41-46%) and blocks (44-51%) on social media tools are barriers in using social media to support coaching.

The most common barrier (62%) for coaches who do use social media to support coaching is that individual clients don't use social media tools.

## **Recommendations**

Both literature in related fields and the findings from this research suggest that there is scope and significant benefits to using social media tools and materials to support both individual and group coaching in organisations.

Online communities can be used to support coaching by enabling the coachee to network and collaborate with others. Social media can also offer additional perspectives to the coachee which can provide new ideas and spark new thinking.

However there are a number of disadvantages and barriers that can prevent its use or suggest that it is inappropriate to use.

Client confidentiality and security need to be addressed and assured. If social media potentially compromises this confidentiality then social media should not be used to support coaching. To avoid confusion, the way in which social media was to be used to support coaching would be need to be agreed as part of the coaching contracting process.

Both coach and coachee need both knowledge and appropriate technology skills regarding social media use in order that it can be used to support coaching. Ideally both need to be actively using social media at the point when it is agreed that it will be used to support face to face coaching.



The barriers of organisational security concerns and blocks would need to be addressed and removed if social media was to become more widely used to support coaching in this context. This may require significant culture change

Although there are significant disadvantages and barriers in place the research findings and literature in related areas suggest that there is a certain inevitability about the future use of social media which indicates that it will be used more frequently in the future to support coaching.

Issues such as organisational security concerns, client confidentiality and ensuring that all parties have the necessary technology skills need to be addressed when considering whether social media could be used to support coaching.

## **Suggestions for future research**

There appear to be some related questions that remain unanswered. Further research would be useful for the coaching profession in the following areas:

What specific skills are required in order to use social media to support coaching

Case studies that explore: the benefits and barriers, required organisational culture, lessons learnt and results of using social media to support coaching in organisations

## **Lynn Wernham**

Lynn Wernham is an independent business change & learning professional with 20+ years experience in the design of L&D solutions and frameworks, blended learning, performance improvement, coaching, facilitation, and partnership working.

Lynn has worked collaboratively with numerous organisations both in the private and public sector in the UK. Her focus is supporting people and embracing new learning technologies whilst balancing this with the realities of change and performance improvement in the real world.

As 'Blended Learning Lead', she worked on the largest transformation programme in Europe involving the design of a corporate blended learning framework and



Individual development pathways for an organisation employing over 40,000 staff.  
Lynn has also coached, mentored and developed L&D teams to align thinking and approaches with changing priorities, blended learning and leadership strategies.

Lynn has recently completed her MA dissertation exploring the extent to which social media is used to support face to face coaching in organisations.





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