

THE AI-ENABLED COACH

Thought Leadership



Coaching is a bedrock of learning and development, guiding individuals and organizations toward optimal performance. Yet, in the current age of rapid technological progress, standard coaching finds itself at a crossroads.

Anchored in face-to-face interactions and time-bound sessions, this kind of coaching seems increasingly outdated. While the essence of coaching—the deep human connection, empathy, and intuitive understanding—remains timeless, its methodologies need to be re-imagined to stay relevant. The intersection between coaching and emerging technologies provides an opportunity to explore how the two can combine to form a powerful force for personal growth and organizational transformation.

Coaching in an ever-changing environment

In the modern business landscape, the only constant is change. Organizations, in their pursuit of sustained relevance and competitiveness, find themselves in a state of unending transformation. Such transformations often push both leaders and employees out of their comfort zones, leaving space to unlearn old ways and acquire new skills and behaviors. As change becomes more rapid and complex, a question arises: Is the traditional approach to coaching equipped to handle this new paradigm?

Traditional coaching, while invaluable, has its set of constraints in the world today. At first glance, it often lacks the agility and responsiveness demanded by contemporary organizations. For instance, as employees are exposed to evolving challenges and new directions, waiting for a scheduled session to seek guidance might lead to missed opportunities or intensified issues.

Sometimes, this traditional model lacks the immediacy required for today's pace of work. On top of that, the ever-complex business environment requires individuals to be critically self-aware by continuously challenging and dissecting their preconceived assumptions and beliefs. Traditional face-to-face coaching programs are often based on a rigid, pre-defined structure shown to effectively provide valuable insights. But when there is too much time between coaching sessions, the level of introspection that occurs may be limited, hindering coaching momentum.

AI meets coaching

Enter artificial intelligence (AI), a turning point in the realm of coaching. Through AI integration, coaching can transcend limitations. Digital platforms enable quick access and real-time feedback, ensuring that individuals receive timely and situationally specific guidance, regardless of their geographic location. This not only caters to the needs of virtual working environments but also to a learner's preference for flexibility.

What's more, AI tools have the potential to create new, more transparent, and systemic applications of coaching. In the past, coaching has been a privilege accessible mainly to high-ranking executives and the rare few high-potential employees in critical roles. With AI, coaching can be disseminated more widely, providing access to a larger portion of the workforce.

Greater access can lead to broader organizational transformation, as more individuals align with the company's strategic goals.

AI platforms also allow coaches to streamline many routine tasks, such as scheduling sessions, taking notes, and accessing resources more quickly to inspire progress between sessions. By automating these tasks, coaches can invest their time and energy in what truly matters: facilitating transformational experiences.

Studies underline the growing impact of technology in coaching. Since the pandemic, the transition from in-person to virtual coaching has accelerated. According to a report by the International Coach Federation (ICF), almost 9 in 10 (87%) coach practitioners agree that coaching virtually *will continue at a higher rate in the long term*, beyond the pandemic. Coaching experts have also found *many of the top coaching trends in 2023 relate to technology*, from adapting to the metaverse to leveraging AI and chatbots. In randomized control trials, coaching provided by an AI chatbot was *found to be as effective as human coaches in helping people achieve their goals*. The combination of technology and coaching goes beyond mere convenience and aims to improve the quality of coaching outcomes.

Proof Points: Korn Ferry Coaching

Korn Ferry coaches deliver high quality sessions that have a transformational impact on people and organizations.

After KF coaching...

- 94% felt more effective at work.
- 96% said it was worth their time.
- 98% said the experience was inclusive.
- 98% were satisfied with session quality across 180,000+ users.

6 ways AI can enhance coaching

Emerging technologies are improving the quality and efficiency of coaching, making it more personalized, data-driven, and impactful. Here are six examples of AI's potential to enhance coaching:

1. **Collect new—and more—data.**

Gone are the days when coaching was solely based on observational analysis and periodic assessments. Today, technology helps us collect detailed and continuous data about ourselves and the people we serve. In the realm of sports, wearable devices like smartwatches and heart rate monitors offer insights into an athlete's performance, providing instant feedback on various metrics.

Similarly, in the workplace, the collection of real-time behavioral data allows a deeper understanding of individual communication patterns, highlighting areas of strength and potential improvement.

2. **Simplify information.**

While access to vast amounts of data is beneficial, it also presents the challenge of information overload. The key to effective coaching lies in discerning essential data from the redundant. Predictive models and advanced analytics help filter vast information, ensuring that the focus remains on the parameters critical to a person's success. As a result, coaching interventions can be laser-focused and customized to individual needs.

3. **Guide self-reflection.**

Self-awareness is a cornerstone of effective coaching. With the rise of AI tools and chatbots, people can engage in automated coaching dialogues, stimulating introspection and self-awareness. By allowing people to control the pace and direction of these interactions, they gain an increased sense of ownership and accountability toward their development.

4. **Generate and deliver learning content.**

The strength of a coaching program often lies in its content. AI tools take content creation a step further by offering personalized and adaptive material tailored to a person's goals and preferences. The ability of generative AI to produce fresh, high-quality, domain-specific content ensures that learning is always relevant, up-to-date, and engaging.

5. **Reinforce learning with simulations.**
 Experiential learning has always been touted as one of the most effective forms of learning. With tools like augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), people can immerse themselves in realistic simulations, providing an opportunity to practice and reinforce learning in a controlled yet realistic setting.
6. **Improve the overall coaching process.**
 Beyond direct interactions with people, AI aids coaches in the administrative aspects of their roles. From scheduling sessions and setting up goals to tracking activities and providing reminders, AI tools can help coaches maintain momentum while providing a seamless experience for the user.

5 potential pitfalls in the age of AI

Although AI promises efficiency, reach, and versatility, it comes with a set of challenges that merit scrutiny. Before we wholeheartedly embrace these tools, we need to weigh the benefits against the potential pitfalls. Here's a deeper look into the concerns associated with implementing new technology in coaching:

1. **Loss of human connection.**
 At the heart of coaching lies the bond between a person and their coach. This relationship thrives on trust, rapport, and the human touch. There's a risk that an overuse of technology may dilute this bond. Video calls, for instance, might not capture the nuanced body language or provide the warmth that face-to-face sessions offer. Without these interpersonal connections, the quality and effectiveness of coaching might suffer.
2. **New ethical dilemmas.**
 As with any profession that relies on technology, there's a possibility of data breaches, unauthorized access, and violations of privacy. However, the emergence of generative AI has brought new dilemmas, such as copyright abuses, even more sophisticated scams, and ethical challenges. These risks are heightened in coaching, where personal and sensitive information is shared. A single breach could irreparably damage the trust placed in the coaching profession.

3. **Market saturation with unqualified coaches.**
 Technology can be a double-edged sword. While it offers scalability, it might also lead to an influx of people who use technology as a mask for their lack of competence. Virtual platforms can sometimes make it harder for people to discern the credibility of a coach, potentially leading them astray with subpar guidance.
4. **Erosion of professional identity.**
 The coaching profession prides itself on its unique ability to foster personal development through human skills, judgment, and intuition. Over-reliance on technology might erode this distinct identity, making coaching seem less of an art and more of a mechanized service.
5. **Potential disengagement.**
 AI tools might inadvertently make people passive in their journey. Without direct human interaction, they might feel less accountable for their progress, leading to reduced motivation and engagement.

The future of coaching in a tech-dominated world

The rapid advancements in technology, particularly with AI and data analytics, have inevitably cast a spotlight on the future of coaching. As technology continues to seep into almost every part of our lives, a critical question arises: What will be the role of coaches in an AI-enabled coaching environment?

At the heart of this inquiry lies a profound understanding that coaching is inherently a human practice. Even as technology influences this domain, the human element remains irreplaceable.

Recent surveys conducted among Korn Ferry coaches provide insightful perspectives on the evolving dynamics between coaching and technology. While only a minor fraction (8%) perceive technology as a potential threat to the traditional role of coaches, a significant majority see the technological evolution as a beneficial aid rather than a replacement.

1. **AI as a supplement to coaching.**
 About 24% of coaches surveyed expressed an optimistic view that technology would augment coaching and spawn new opportunities. Technology can act as a conduit, enhancing the coaching process by streamlining administrative tasks, analyzing data efficiently, and allowing coaches to focus on the core elements of coaching. As one respondent put it, technology enables both the person and their coach to “go further, faster.” The vision of a future where supervisors across varied levels and organizations benefit from coaching, with technology playing a pivotal role, is becoming more conceivable. In such an environment, technology doesn’t overshadow the coach but rather complements their functions.
2. **Human supervision needed—a balancing act.**
 Equally, nearly a quarter (24%) of coaches emphasized the importance of human supervision in technology-enabled coaching. While AI and other tools can facilitate a substantial chunk of the process, the human touch is essential in monitoring the outcomes and adjusting the approach where necessary. Coaches act as the checks and balances, ensuring that technology remains a tool and not the expert. A coach can “correct for the output of AI or technology that does not seem to fit,” according to one survey participant.
3. **The irreplaceable human essence.**
 According to 44% of survey participants, technology cannot replace the unique role of human coaches. Senior executives, for instance, would invariably lean towards the expertise and emotional intelligence of seasoned coaches. This is primarily because true coaching transcends beyond data and analytics. It delves deep into the realms of emotional and relational connections, helping people align their passions, emotions, and drivers with data insights. One survey participant stressed that “it still takes the interpersonal conversation between a person and their coach to build enough trust to bring down resistance walls, dispel doubts, unwind twisted mindsets, and encourage risk-taking.”

In the landscape of the future, where AI-enabled coaching is likely to be ubiquitous, coaches will remain the heartbeat of the process. Their roles might evolve and adapt, integrating technology for efficiency and enhancement, but the essence of coaching—the human connection—will remain steadfast. It’s a symbiotic future, where technology and human coaches coexist, each amplifying the strengths of the other.

Conclusion

The merging of coaching with AI marks a transformative era for personal and professional development. As organizations and individuals navigate the complexities of a fast-evolving business landscape, the blending of the timeless principles of coaching with cutting-edge technology holds unparalleled promise. Still, it is crucial to approach this juncture with discernment and balance.

As AI and coaching intertwine, the challenge and opportunity lie in harnessing the best of both worlds, ensuring that coaching remains anchored in its foundational humanistic values while evolving to meet immediate demands. The future of coaching is not a single choice between technology and tradition, but an opportunity to usher in a new era of transformative growth and development.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

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