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| Attitudes to Online Coaching  2021 |
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# Introduction

This is a pulse survey based on JMA Consulting LinkedIn database of 814 connections. These connections are Senior Executives and Managers in a range of businesses. A random sample of 122 (15%) connections were invited to take part in the pulse survey on Survey Monkey. The survey questions are contained in appendix 1. A 41% rate (50 respondents) to the survey was achieved by the date of this report.

The pulse survey was designed to compare peoples’ experience of / attitude towards online coaching in comparison to in-person, face to face coaching. The survey was a short 10 item survey and the questions of particular interest were:

1. How respondents rate online coaching in comparison to in-person, face to face coaching ?
2. What themes are generally most important for coaching particular during the current COVID 19 pandemic?

As a short pulse survey and to protect respondents’ anonymity limited number of demographic questions were included at the start of the survey.

1. Organizational Level (Executive, Senior Manager, Middle Management)
2. Location – primary country where the respondent is based
3. Experience of online coaching (as the sample was random it was interesting to note how many people had direct experience of online coaching and if this had any impact on respondents’ attitudes to online versus face to face coaching)

The sample has the following demographics.

Organizational level:

Executives (36%), Senior Management (50%) and Middle Management (14%)

Location:

Ireland & UK (86%) and Global locations (14%)

Experience of Online Coaching

Have had direct experience of online coaching (66%), have no direct experience of online coaching (34%)

These factors along with the overall sample size need to be kept in mind when reading this report.

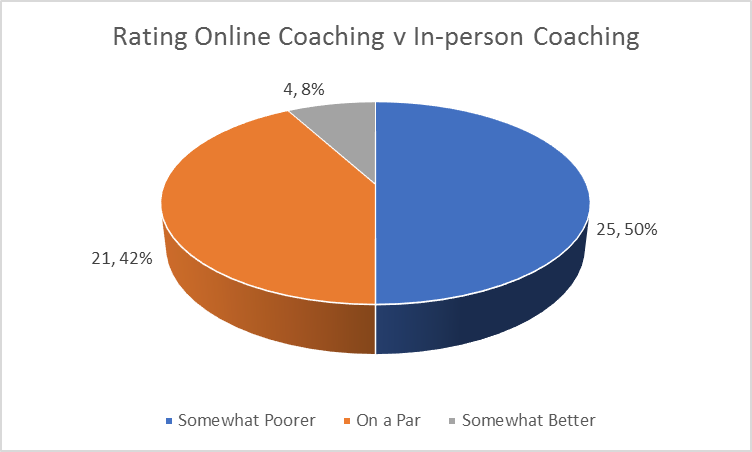
# Results

1. Online Coaching versus In-Person Coaching

Respondents were asked to rate their experience or views of online coaching on a five point scale as to whether they saw online coaching as:

1. Much poorer than in-person, face to face coaching
2. Somewhat poorer than in-person, face to face coaching
3. On a par with in-person, face to face coaching
4. Somewhat better than in-person, face to face coaching
5. Much better than in-person, face to face coaching

Figure 1



The results show that 50% of the respondents see online coaching as ‘Somewhat Poorer’ than online with no respondents indicating it was ‘Much Poorer’. The remaining 50% saw online coaching at least on a ‘Par’ with in-person coaching with 8% reporting it to be ‘Somewhat Better’. No respondents indicated it to be ‘Much Better’ than in-person coaching. This result shows that online coaching is at least on a par with the more traditional face to face coaching and may even have a slight advantage.

When the results are analyzed to take into consideration whether respondents have direct experience of online coaching or not the following picture emerges:

Table 1: Impact of having experience of online coaching on overall rating of coaching.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Somewhat Poorer | On a Par | Somewhat Better | Total |
| Direct Experience |  | 15 | 15 | 3 | 33 |
|  |  | 45.5% | 45.5% | 9.1% |  |
| No Experience |  | 10 | 6 | 1 | 17 |
|  |  | 58.8% | 35.3% | 5.9% |  |

When the level of experience with online coaching is added to the analysis 54.6% of people who have had online coaching see it as ‘On a Par’ or ‘Somewhat Better’ than traditional face to face coaching. 9.1% of the direct experience group think it’s ‘Somewhat Better’.

Conversely those who have no experience with online coaching primarily (58.8%) see it as ‘Somewhat Poorer’.

A note of caution here is the sample size and in subdividing the data particularly on the ‘No Experience’ has to be treated with care. It could be, however, that those who have no experience of online coaching have a poorer perception of it than those who have benefitted from the experience.

Table 2: Rating for online coaching versus in-person coaching by organizational level

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Online Coaching | Somewhat Poorer | Par or Somewhat Better | Total |
| Executives | 6 | 12 | 18 |
|  | 33.3% | 66.7% |  |
| Senior / Middle Managers | 19 | 13 | 32 |
|  | 59.4% | 40.6% |  |

Note Middle Managers are included with Senior Managers.

C-Suite Executives are more favourably disposed towards online coaching compared to Senior / Middle Managers.

Table 3: Benefits of online coaching:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Benefit | N | % |
| Accessibility | 16 | 32.0% |
| Efficiency | 11 | 22.0% |
| Leadership Continuity | 9 | 18.0% |
| Flexibility | 8 | 16.0% |
| Other | 4 | 8.0% |
| Not Answered | 2 | 4.0% |
|  | 50 |  |

When respondents were asked to identify the benefits of online coaching versus in-person coaching the top two reasons were Accessibility and Efficiency at 32% and 22% respectively.

Attached are a sample of the free text responses in support of the benefits as per the table above.

|  |
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| *Great benefits, I’m currently receiving weekly coaching 45 mins and love it* |
| *Time saving, flexible, easier to open up* |
| *Easier to bring a global team together for online coaching. Breakout room options are always useful too.* |
| *Great flexibility when it comes to time and location* |
| *Continued support during lockdown, increased availability / opportunity if /when normal life resumes for people who travel* |
| *It is particularly apt right now when travel is limited and people are looking to upskill* |
| *Less time consuming, accessible across time zones, easy to manage the organisation and administration, ability to integrate other assessments into the coach and coachee selection process.* |
| *Keep the motivation levels up and focus on goals with COVID-19 fatigue setting in* |
| *Punctual punchy sessions, access to high calibre resources including international expertise.* |
| *The main Benefit is that you do not need to commute elsewhere, therefore you can get coach by any expert no matter where you and her/him are. IT also facilitates to match agendas.* |
| *Saving in Travelling time and costs , Available at your convenience and comfortable workplace, Access to better coaching for people based in remote locations* |
| *Ease of access, time efficiency, reduced distraction* |
| *Cheaper easier more accessible better range of coaches* |
| *You do it from anywhere, best fit for your crazy agenda* |
| *More focussed and direct, easier time management* |
| *Online coaching is a huge time-saver. Eliminates the need for travel. Sets finite timing so sessions cannot run late. Easier to control interruptions (Selective 'mute')* |
| *Allows continuity of coaching in a world of restrictions. Safe environment for both coach and coachee.* |
| *In the current climate I think it's great to be able to continue coaching through online. It keeps you focused and on track.* |

Table 4: Downsides to online coaching:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Challenge | N | % |
| Rapport Building | 8 | 32.0% |
| Reading Reactions / Body Language | 5 | 20.0% |
| Building Trust and Engagement | 4 | 16.0% |
| Other e.g. experience with technology | 3 | 12.0% |
| Prefer mix of online and in-person | 2 | 8.0% |
| No Reason | 3 | 12.0% |
|  | 25 |  |

This table is drawn from the 25 respondents who rated online coaching as less effective than in=person coaching and relates to the reasons they gave for their ratings. The top 3 reasons are connected and are Rapport Building (32%), Reading Reactions / Body Language (20%) and Building Trust and Engagement (16%).

Attached are a sample of the free text responses in support of the challenges for online coaching as per the table above.

|  |
| --- |
| *It does not facilitate rapport building as well as a face to face. Strong rapport can build greater trust and openness which is important.* |
| *Harder to read body language and would need to consider adapting some techniques* |
| *Being able to pick up small physical expressions that give signals not always possibly online* |
| *Hard to beat in-person interaction. Sometimes people can seem disengaged during online coaching and participating in other tasks/emails which is not helpful to anyone.* |
| *More difficult to build rapport as there is no personal interaction, i.e., only through a screen, and hard to see the body language* |
| *Harder to build relationships and trust, distractions due to email and IM pop ups, willingness of people to take a more intimate conversation online* |
| *Certainly the 360 degree view of the coach/ coachee relationship. The full amount of rapport building and trust building I feel does take longer in online coaching.* |
| *a) Miss the Person to person connect b) Technical glitches sometimes can mar the experience* |
| *Not everyone comfortable with on-line coaching. May not engage the coachee to the same extent.* |
| *Lacking presence and picking up on nuances of behaviour, eye contact, etc Too contrived* |
| *With an online/virtual experience, it is important to spend time building rapport and establishing trust. Usage of cameras is imperative to this otherwise the relationship is focused solely on sound /tone of voice which is challenging.* |
| *Either party may need some time to adjust and adapt to communicating naturally and openly via this medium* |
| *Relationship of a face to face, easiness to share deep feeling may be not that obvious at the beginning of an online coaching, may take more time to get mutual trust* |
| *Fatigue - longer than 30 mins online a one to one can be very tiring. 'Building rapport' in face to face setting is more relaxed and less intimidating generally in establishing new relationships / chemistry. But on the other hand, we have to accept in current COVID world that isn’t always now possible so we have to adapt to online.* |
| *Can be harder to build a rapport / easier to ‘hide’ behind the screen* |
| *Less personal, difficult to read body language, more awkward if first engagement.* |
| *More challenging for some to establish the relationship and read the chemistry when interacting* |

Table 5: Current top themes for coaching:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rank | Theme | % |
| 1 | Leading and Motivating Teams Remotely | 20.44% |
| 2 | Managing Resilience, Courage, Confidence and Well Being | 12.41% |
| 3 | Providing Clarity of Purpose, Setting Individual / Team Goals, Expectations and Accountabilities | 10.95% |
| 4 | Change Management, Strategic Thinking and having an Agile Mindset | 10.22% |
| 5 | Communications, Influence / Impact, Stakeholder Engagement and Networking | 9.49% |
| 6 | Performance Management - Challenging Conversations, Feedback and Coaching | 8.76% |
| 7 | Time Management and Work Life Balance | 6.57% |
| 8 | Building Self Awareness | 5.84% |
| 9 | Ongoing Career Progression and Self Development | 5.84% |
| 10 | Building Trust, Empathy, Listening and Emotional Intelligence | 5.11% |
| 11 | Other (e.g. GDPR, Diversity, Sales, Customer Service, Decision Making) | 4.38% |

Participants were asked to identify their top 3 current themes for coaching. As this was voluntary not all participants gave 3 areas. In total 137 responses were received. In analyzing these into clusters ten key themes emerged plus a small category of ‘other’ responses.

Not surprisingly given the current COVID-19 global pandemic the top theme relates to Leading and Motivating Teams Remotely (20.44%) followed by Managing Resilience, Courage, Confidence and Well Being (12.41%). Other themes reflect themes that are prevalent in not just in the current COVID-19 situation but also for coaching sessions in general. The middle group of items reflect the need to provide clarity to people on their roles and to support them in achieving their objectives. They also reflect a focus on change and continuing to engage with stakeholders through communications and networking.

Overall Summary Comments.

In the final free text question respondents were asked for any additional comments. These were largely supportive of online coaching and a summary of these are set out below.

|  |
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| *As a recipient on virtual coaching and a trained coach, I see huge merits to online coaching. There is a decrease In ‘no shows’ due to weather; traffic; family etc. as no commute involved. Costs are less in delivering also, while the Coach time remains the same, there are no added expenses or room booking costs* |
| *I have done some coaching over the phone and would expect online coaching to be better as visual contact adds a dimension.* |
| *I feel the format is irrelevant, online or in person, if the content and delivery is strong* |
| *Initially online coaching was uncomfortable but the more you do it , better it becomes for you. One needs to be open to the experience* |
| *Inevitable so we need to learn to make it work better. Possibly interim face to face sessions as well as online* |
| *Contracting is just as important - coach needs to make clear that the time allocated is privileged time and just because it is run remotely, does not mean it is ok to casually cancel at short notice* |
| *I am delighted with online coaching, at first I was skeptical how it would work successfully remotely but it has worked* |
| *Overall it is a positive experience but teams need to be re-educated to the remote/on-line experience that has become the new-normal* |

It appears that online coaching is seen to be at least as successful as in person coaching and is particularly well received during the pandemic to continue professional development and coaching support. There is, however, a clear place for online coaching outside of the pandemic and we should consider building it as a clear, alternative strategic option for both coachees and coaches. Many of the traditional views of coaching having to be an ‘in-person’ activity are being challenged and it is up to us as coaches to adapt to these changes in consumer demand and embrace the greater possibilities for online coaching.

# Top 5 Learning Points

1) If done correctly online coaching has the potential to be at least as effective as in person coaching.

2) People who have not experienced online coaching tend to rate it a lower in its effectiveness to those who have direct experience of it. This points to a need to educate potential coachees / employers on the benefits of the online coaching and to present it as a realistic alternative strategy to in-person coaching rather than just a substitute for it.

3) C-Suite Executives have a slightly higher preference for online coaching than Senior Managers / Managers. In addition to the previous point particular attention should be paid to the Senior Manager / Manager group in communicating the benefits of online coaching.

4) The benefits for online coaching relate to its accessibility and its efficiency. While ultimately the future approach to coaching may be a blend of in-person and online coaching the benefits of being able to access coaches globally, the time savings involved (e.g. no travel times for coaches / coachees) and the focused attention on topics of importance to coachees are key benefits.

5) The key challenges for online coaching relate to the issues associated with building rapport, accessing and interpreting body language and building trust. Coaches need to work on ways to counterbalance these issues if the full benefits of online coaching are to be realized.

# Top 5 Practical Recommendations for Online Coaching

1) Increasing Awareness of Confidentiality: Along with the usual issues on confidentiality, coaches should spend even more time on this topic. This should include reassuring the coachee that they cannot be heard or seen while on the coaching call even if this means the coach turns their camera about to show the coachee their room set-up. They should also check that the coachee is in a suitable set up to discuss confidential issues.

2) Contracting on Technology: The contracting phase, that is agreeing elements of how the coach and coachee will work together, should include a specific discussion on online technology. The ideal set up is a camera mounted or integrated at the top of a device positioned at about eye level. In addition to the preferred platform for meetings (e.g. Zoom, Webex etc.), the use of headsets should be discussed and agreed between the coach and the coachee. On the plus side their use can help and be necessary for confidentiality while on the downside they could reduce a more natural feel to the discussion and restrict some opportunities to observe expression / non-verbal behaviour.

3) Increase Non-Verbal Communications: There are at least two practical steps coaches can take in this area. Firstly, to improve eye contact reduce the amount of note taking while the person is speaking e.g. write on a pad without looking, wait until the coachee is finished making a point then comment on it and note it down etc. Secondly, avoid verbal affirmation or encouragement e.g. even saying ‘yes’ or ‘I see’ interrupts the flow of the main conference technologies used by coaches. Practice using non-verbal supports head nod, facial expressions etc. to allow / encourage the person to make their points.

4) Manage Screen Presence and Proximity: In our three dimensional world we are very aware of personal space and navigate not standing or sitting too close or too far away from people in meetings. This is particularly important in our on-screen meeting behaviour. While there can be some limitations with space, it is important for coaches to manage this aspect. If coaches are too close to their camera it will appear more intrusive, dominant etc. If coaches are too far from their screen they will not be able to observe changes in expressions / body language that are important in coaching. Similarly, with coachees their proximity to the screen may enable or hinder opportunities to build rapport with the coach. The use of poorly integrated virtual backgrounds should be avoided for coaching. The ideal set is where facial expressions and general body language or gestures can be observed. This could be discussed at the contracting stage of coaching and links to points 2 and 3 above.

5) Differentiating Coaching: Online coaching offers a key benefit of fitting more effectively with Executives / Managers busy schedules or diaries. Coaches need to be agile and adapt their services and offerings to reflect this opportunity. From the coachee’s point of view, however, it is critical that they continue to see the difference between coaching and other types of meetings. Coachees should protect this online time in the same way they would protect it in face-to-face coaching arraignments. For example, just because coaching is delivered online does not mean it can be cancelled at the last minute. It is also even more important that distractions such as other online notifications e.g. emails, other applications etc. are closed down. These issues should be addressed in the coaching contract.

Appendix 1: JMA Consulting pulse survey questions:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| N | Questions | Response Type |
| 1 | Which of the following best describes your current job level? | Drop Down - Data |
| 2 | In which country are you primarily based for work? | Drop Down - Data |
| 3 | Which category best describes your experience of online interactive video coaching (e.g. via Zoom etc.)? | Drop Down - Data |
| 4 | What benefits, if any, do your see for online coaching (type 'none' if appropriate)? | Qualitative Free Text |
| 5 | What drawbacks, if any, do you see in online coaching (type 'none' if appropriate)? | Qualitative Free Text |
| 6 | How do you think online coaching via video conferencing compares to face to face in-person coaching? | Drop Down - Data |
| 7 | What is the reason for your rating in the previous question number 6? | Qualitative Free Text |
| 8 | What are the top 3 topics that coaching (either online or in-person) should focus to support leaders and managers? | Qualitative Free Text |
| 9 | What are the top 3 topics that coaching ( either online or in person) should focus on to support people working remotely ? | Qualitative Free Text |
| 10 | Please make any additional comments you wish to make about your experience or observations on online coaching | Qualitative Free Text |