

Executive, Workplace and Life Coaching: Findings from a Large-Scale Survey of International Coach Federation Members

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Abstract

The knowledge base of coach-specific research detailing theories, techniques and outcomes of coaching is growing annually. However, little is known about coaches themselves. This paper reports on a large scale survey of coaches. A total of 2,529 coaches responded to an online survey conducted in 2003 amongst International Coach Federation (ICF) members. Data on credentialing, prior professional background, and current coach practice were collected. The coaches in this study had overwhelmingly graduated from or have been enrolled in a coach training program and virtually all had come to professional coaching from a prior professional background. In addition, data on coach demographics, coaching process and demographics were collected. This paper reports in detail on these findings, and makes suggestions for future research directions.

Key words:

Coaches, ICF, Credentialing, Demographics, Professionalism, Research

Introduction

It is clear that executive, workplace and life coaching have attracted considerable global media coverage (e.g., Koepper, 2002; Patten, 2001) with many thousands of media items published each year. Coaching appears to be attractive, both as a potential career or occupation, and to clients as a means of enhancing personal or professional development and improving performance in a wide range of areas.

In short, we are witnessing the emergence of a new cross-disciplinary profession. Individuals with a wide range of prior professional backgrounds are working as professional coaches. These backgrounds include business consultancy, management, teaching, workplace training, learning and development, clinical, organisational and sports psychology, amongst others. Each of these has its own knowledge base, which comprises both theoretical frameworks and practical, applied experience, and each has a significant contribution to make to the emerging professional discipline of coaching.

Possibly due to its diverse roots, there has been little published academic research on coaching, with only 131 papers in the peer-reviewed behavioural science press

(as at December 13th 2003). Of these 131 citations, 75 were articles that discussed coaching, theories of coaching or application of techniques, and there were 56 empirical studies. The majority of empirical investigations are uncontrolled group or case studies (Grant, 2003). Of the 56 empirical studies, 33 were doctoral dissertations. Clearly, although anecdotal reports of efficacy abound, there is scant academic research about the effectiveness of coaching or professional coaching *per se*.

The peer-reviewed coaching-specific literature dates back to 1937 (Gorby, 1937) with most of the literature focusing on the process of coaching in organisations. There are several different research trends over time. The first research trend involves descriptive reports of internal coaching in organisations, with managers or supervisors acting as coaches to their subordinates and staff. This is most clearly evident in the literature between 1937 and the 1960s and it continues through to the present day. Then, the late 1960s saw the beginnings of more rigorous academic research in the form of doctoral dissertations with a continuing focus on internal organisational coaching. The beginning of the 1990s saw levels of doctoral research accelerate and empirical coaching research began to gather momentum. Most recently we have seen the emergence of literature aimed at the professional external coach.

However, very little is known about coaches themselves or about the coaching industry. There have been claims that there are tens of thousands of coaches in the USA (e.g., Capuzzi Simon, June 19, 2003), and over 50,000 globally (e.g., Hyatt, 2003). But in fact such statements are at best guesstimates. Further, there have been very few studies that have sought to develop a profile of professional coaches or to track trends in professional coaching.

Some of the past studies include Creane (2003) who investigated clients' perceptions of the coaching experience, and Wasylyshyn (2003) and Fanasheh (2003) who examined what qualities and prior experiences executive clients value in a coach. Issues of coach competencies have also been discussed (e.g., Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998).

However, fewer studies have examined the characteristics of coaches themselves. In one study (Gale, Liljenstrand, Pardieu, & Nebeker, 2002) an on-line survey was conducted which examined issues such as client acquisition, contracting, coaching practices, outcome evaluation, philosophical issues, and demographics, using a total of 40 main items. In Gale et al. (2002) 5,500 professional coaches from the International Coach Federations (ICF), Professional Coaches and Mentors Association (PCMA) and The Executive Coaching Forum (TECF) and Coaching.com were invited by email to complete an on-line survey. Twenty-four percent (1,338) of these completed the survey. To the present study's authors' best knowledge, the report of Gale et al. (2002) has not been published.

Although such prior work has laid a foundation, clearly more research is needed. This is important as we know little about coaches' prior professional backgrounds, their modes of practice, ability to gauge mental health issues in their clients, rates and fees, training or commitment to on-going professional

development, and these are key issues as professional coaching continues to develop. It is this context that makes the present study an important and welcome initiative.

Method

Six key broad areas of issues relating to:

- a) *coaching professionalism* – credentialing, training etc.
- b) *respondents' coaching career* - prior professions, length of time working as a coach etc.
- c) *coaching processes used* – telephone vs. face-to-face coaching, length of session etc.
- d) *coaching practice* – number of clients, techniques for generating new clients, fees etc.
- e) *client profiles* – life coaching or executive coaching etc.
- f) *demographics* – gender, age, education etc were identified as being foci of interest.

Members of the Research and Development Committee of the ICF and the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney initially developed a battery of question items which reflected the above six categories. These initial items were then examined by a number of experienced research professionals from both academic and industry backgrounds and evaluated for relevance, conciseness and clarity. As a result of this iterative process a total of 76 final multiple choice and qualitative short answer questions were selected for the survey.

Data were collected online using www.SurveyMonkey.com as the survey platform. Pilot studies were conducted in September and October 2003 to ensure that the web site was operational and error-free, and the survey was actually fielded from October 14th to November 13th 2003. The survey took between 15 and 20 minutes to complete.

Respondents were recruited from the membership database of the ICF. Initial emails inviting members to take part in the survey were sent to all members beginning October 14, 2003. Two follow-up emails were sent. Respondents were promised a free copy of the report in return for completing the survey.

Sample

The present study was limited to coaches who were ICF members, and this should be born in mind when interpreting the results. One advantage of restricting the survey to ICF members is that the availability of an established sample frame, the ICF membership list, allows for comparison of respondents with non-respondents and this provides one method of authenticating the results of the study. It is intended that future surveys will draw on a sample base that extends beyond the ICF. Details of numbers of respondents are as follows:

There was an initial 6,512 email addresses of ICF members on the ICF database and this formed the sample frame. Of these there were 6,443 useable email

addresses that could be sent out. Of these 6,443 there were 290 undeliverable emails, leaving a total of 6,153 delivered emails. This represented 95.5% of the total sample frame.

There were a total of 2,529 respondents. This is a response rate of 41.1% and of these 89.4% completed the entire survey - an excellent response rate for such surveys (Bickman & Rog, 1998) and greater than Gale et al. (2002) survey. The sample was comprised primarily of professional coaches (N = 2,314; 92.3%) with 192 (7.7%) declaring that they were not professional coaches – 23 respondents did not answer this question.

To ensure that the respondents were representative of the ICF membership base, an internal cross-referencing check was conducted. Sample survey responses were compared to known ICF membership information on the following criteria: country and state of origin, ICF coach credential held, years of ICF membership and attendance at the ICF Conference.

The geographic distribution of the sample is quite close to that of the ICF membership (in parentheses). United States 66.8% (66.2%), United Kingdom 8.8% (8.2%), Canada 8.9% (7.9%), Australia 5.1% (5.1%), Other Europe 6.4% (7.5%) and all other 4.0% (5.1%). Non-English speaking countries accounted for 8.9% of the sample despite representing 10.8% of ICF membership, an under-representation of about 18%.

Respondents reporting that they hold an ICF credential were over-represented by about 78%. The comparison of survey and membership are as follows: Associate Certified Coach (ACC) 3.5% (1.2%), Professional Certified Coach (PCC) 8.4% (4.8%) and Master Certified Coach (MCC) 7.1% (4.6%).

There are three categories of ICF certification, and readers may not be familiar with these. An Associate Certified Coach (ACC) credential requires the completion of 60 hours of coach-specific training hours and 750 hours of client coaching. A Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credential includes completion of 125 hours of coach specific training and 750 hours of client coaching. A Master Certified Coach (MCC) includes completion of 200 hours of coach specific training and 2500 hours of client coaching.

Years of membership in the ICF reported by respondents varied slightly from ICF membership records. Respondents were overall of slightly longer tenure than ICF membership.

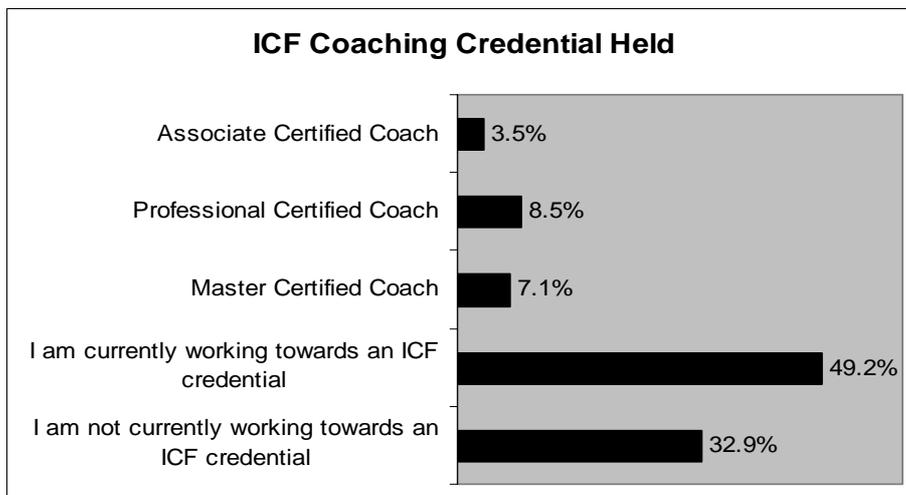
	Survey	Membership
Less than 1 year	34.5%	46.4%
Between 1 to 2 years	21.7%	18.5%
Between 2 to 3 years	17.9%	13.1%
Between 3 to 5 years	16.3%	15.0%
More than 5 years	9.5%	7.0%

Results and Future Research Recommendations

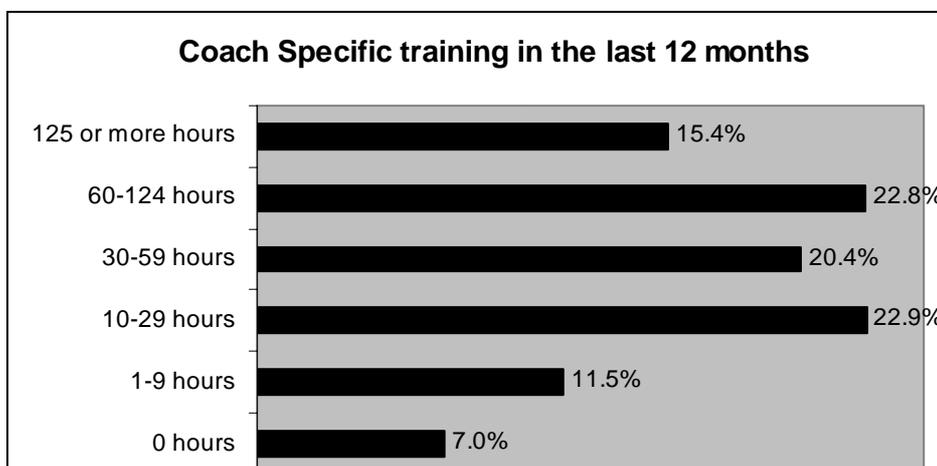
Please note that not all collected data is reported here and responses to open-ended questions are not included in this analysis.

1. Coaching Professionalism

Credentialing and appropriate coach-specific training are cornerstones of professionalism. Most coaches in this survey claim to hold some credential (57.3%), although only a minority of coaches currently hold an ICF credential (19.0%). Nearly half the coaches in the survey report they are currently working towards an ICF credential (49.3%). Very few coaches neither hold a credential nor are seeking an ICF credential (17.7%) Of those who have received a Professional Certified Coach certification, most have done so after 2001 (50.3%)



Coaches in this study had overwhelmingly graduated from or have been enrolled in a coach training program (90.3%), with the majority having graduated (71.7%). Most are graduates of an ICF accredited training program (70.3%). The most frequently cited include, “Coaches Training Institute” (25.8%), “Coach U Certified Graduate Program” (21.6%), and “Corporate Coach U International” (6.0%).



A substantial number of coaches in the study had not graduated from any program (28.3%) while some have never been enrolled (9.7%). 34.2 % indicated they are or have been enrolled in non-ICF programs, the most common by far being the Coachville School of coaching (16.3%). Over a 12 month period, the majority of coaches surveyed had engaged in at least 30 hours of coach-specific training (58.5%), with 18.5% receiving less than ten hours.

Many coaches had specific training of 11 or more hours in mental health issues (40.1%). This training was mainly in the format of professional development workshops or programs (40.4%).

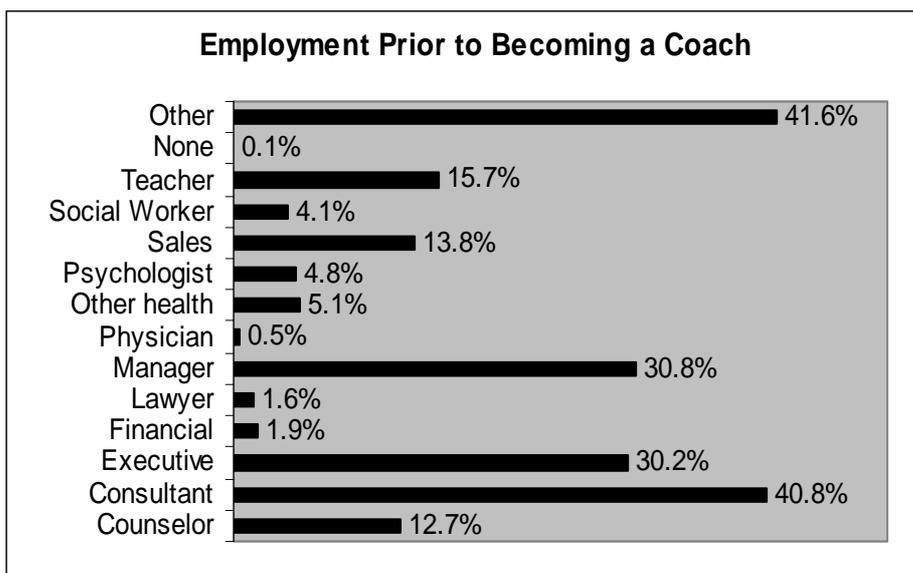
As would be expected in this study, the vast majority of coach respondents report being members of the International Coaching Federation (ICF; 92.4%), and 54.7% belong to ICF local chapters. The ICF is also considered to be the primary coaching organisation for the majority of respondents (56.3%), although many coaches have been members for less than a year (34.2%). Most coaches have not been involved with the ICF in an official or volunteer capacity (67.6%), and a minority report participating in the ICF Coach Referral Service (44.6%). There is not as much interest in ICF virtual chapters (5.7%) or special interest groups (10.0%). Many coaches have not attended a local or virtual chapter meeting in the past year (39.6%) or an ICF conference ever (62.3%). The majority of coaches were not aware of the 2003 ICF Coaching Research Symposium (58.2%), despite a reminder in the recruitment letter. Most did not intend to go to the 2003 ICF conference (68.3%).

Many coaches currently pay to receive coaching (45.1%) or have done so in the past (41.3%).

Future research should further investigate the skills of coaches in recognising and referring clients with mental health issues, and this is important given the current controversies over the boundaries between coaching and psychotherapy (Berglas, 2002; Naughton, 2002). It may also be informative to investigate the knowledge and skill base on which coaches who have not completed coach-specific training base their coaching practice.

2. Coaching Career

Professional coaching is an emerging cross-disciplinary practice (Grant, 2003). The study finds that virtually all coaches have come to professional coaching from a prior professional background (99.9%). Before becoming coaches, many respondents were engaged in other careers as consultants (40.8%), executives (30.2%), managers (30.8%), teachers (15.7%), and salespeople (13.8%). Interestingly, in this sample 18.8% of respondents had backgrounds in the helping professions of social work (4.1%), psychology (4.8%) or counselling (12.7%).



As regards the amount of time respondents spend coaching, approximately half of respondents practice on a full-time basis (51.7%). In addition to their coaching practices, coaches also work as, for example, consultants (33.7%), teachers (6.7%), counsellors (5.2%), and managers (5.1%). It is interesting to note that only 13.1 % of coaches do not engage in any other occupation.

Possibly reflecting the part-time nature of many coaches and the relative recency of many coaching practices, annual personal incomes from coaching activities before tax tend to be less than US \$30,000 (52.5%), with 32.3% under US \$10,000. Almost half the respondents report their coaching businesses have been established for less than two years (47.9%). Coaches have typically been earning money as a coach for 2 to 5 years (29.7%), with 44.2% for an even briefer period of time. Overall, 93.6% of coaches are pleased they became a professional coach, 78.1% are very pleased

Future research should investigate the relationship between non-coaching activities and respondents' coaching practice. It may be that these respondents are adding coaching services to their existing professional services. It will also be informative to investigate how coaches' prior professions and training impacts on their coaching practice, and this would be a useful focus of future research. Details of prior occupations subsumed under the heading "other" can be found in Appendix 1.

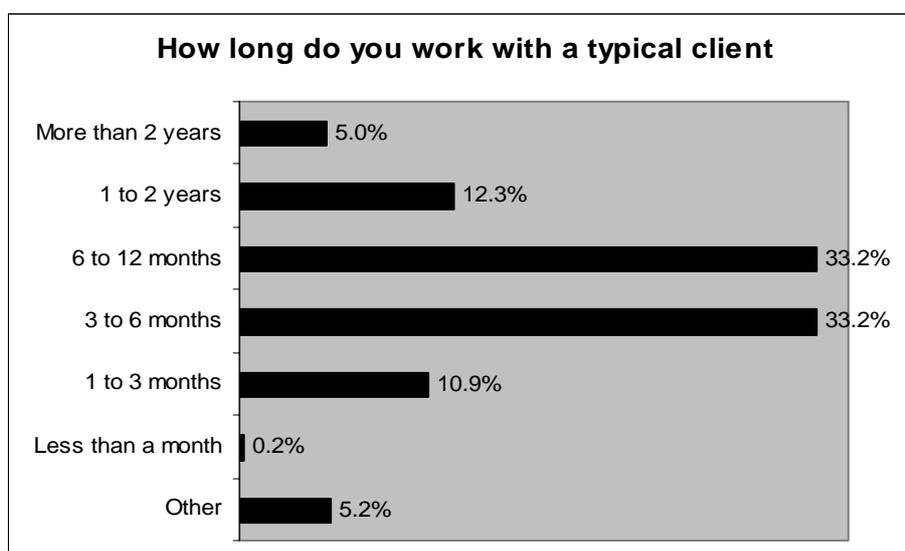
3. Coaching Processes

Coaches primarily work with clients on a local (68.5%) and national level (72.9%) rather than internationally (2.0%). Individual coaching sessions are generally 30 minutes – one hour in length (59.2%), and the majority of coaches work with their clients three times a month (39.0%). Typically, a coach will work with a client between three to six months (33.2%) or six to twelve months (33.2%), although 53.2% work with their client for longer than six months.

Coaching is primarily conducted over the phone (63.0%), followed by in-person (34.3%) and electronic means, e.g. e-mail (1.4%). Overall, most use electronic means, at least sometimes (63.6%). Typically, a coach will work with a client between three to six months (33.2%) or six to twelve months (33.2%), although 53.2% work with their client for longer than six months.

Coaches typically spend between five to ten hours per week in actual coaching time with clients (31.9%), with 34.5% spending less and 33.5% spending more. Over the past year, coaches have averaged four to six clients per month, (30.4%), with 22.4% having three clients or fewer.

The clear majority of time spent by respondents in coaching-related activities is one on one coaching (97.4%), but also involves conducting workshops and seminars (63.4%), public speaking (52.1%), and group coaching (48.2%).



Future research should investigate why coaches choose phone coaching over face to face coaching. In addition, the effectiveness of phone coaching compared to face to face coaching should be investigated. One other interesting avenue might be to explore the differences between short term and long term coaching engagements, in terms of the coach/client relationship and the types of goals and outcomes, and in doing so increase our knowledge of what makes for effective coaching processes.

4. Coaching Practice

The majority of coaches consider themselves to be self-employed and sole practitioners (73.7%). Of the small number of coaches that are self-employed but have others working for them (5.3%), most do not have more than one employee engaged in coaching practice. A fraction of self-employed coaches have five or

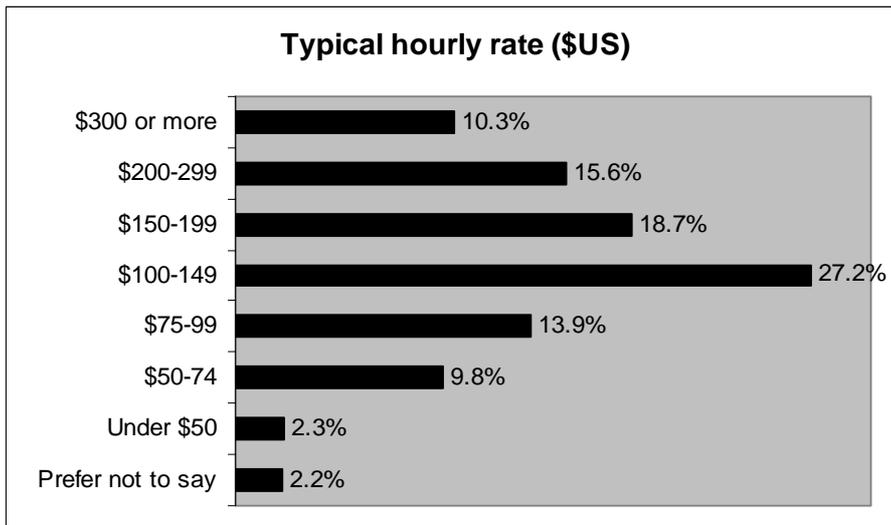
more employees acting as coaches (0.9%), which may indicate a large client base, compared with other sole practitioners.

Following the start of their company, over half the coaches had ten paying clients within a year (52.1%), typically within six to twelve months (27.4%). A large number of coaches report that they do not yet have ten clients (26.2%). Coaches primarily price their services on a monthly basis (58.8%).

As regards practice building; coaches tend to identify their client prospects as individual professionals and executives (41.9%), and the most useful means of finding new clients appears to be through referral, whether from other professionals (42.1%) or, more likely, from clients (57.6 %). Offering a free coaching session is considered an effective practice building tool (32.6%). However, on a monthly bases most coaches spend less than \$100 on marketing coaching related activities (58.9%), and between 11- 20 hours (27.7%) or 6-10 hours (25.9%) on coaching business-related activities, including marketing, professional development, and business administration. The majority of coaches have worked with clients on a sliding scale (52.5%) or *pro bono* (59.3%), but not on a barter basis (47.1%).

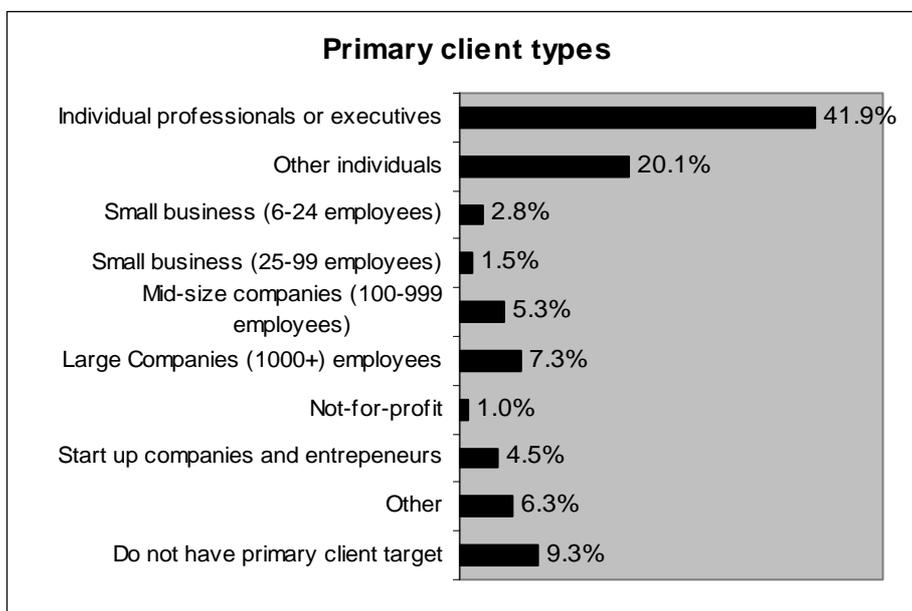
Typical hourly rates vary. Twenty-seven percent of coaches in this study are charging between US\$100 and US\$ 149, with 18.7% charging between US\$150 and US\$ 199. The top fees of US\$ 300 plus are charged by 10.3%, 13.9% are charging between US\$75 and US\$99, 9.8% charge between US\$50 and US\$ 74, and 2.3% are charging under US\$50. A small minority of coaches (2.2%) preferred not to say how much they charged.

Future research could investigate the characteristics of successful coaches, and attempt to determine if such characteristics can be developed through a training or mentoring program. It is disturbing to note that most coaches do not carry business liability insurance (68.9%), and it may be useful for the ICF and other professional bodies to raise awareness of the importance of appropriate professional indemnity insurance.



5. Client Profiles

The majority of coaches in this survey work with individuals rather than companies. Coaches typically work with adults aged 18-64 (88.0%), and those clients are most often women (73.9%). There are three types of clients on which coaches rarely concentrate: adolescents under 18 (86.7%), the elderly over 65 years (74.2%), and students over 18 (70.6%). Clients are typically managers (46.9%), executives (45.9%), entrepreneurs (35.1%), owners of small business (30.1%) and professionals in private practice (28.1%).



When measured as “ever coach”, the popularity of practice areas rank as follows: Career coaching (96.7%), personal/life coaching (96.6%), small business coaching (80.6%), corporate/executive coaching (77.2%), non-profit organisational coaching, (55.6%) and internal coaching (48.1%). When measured as “coach often or very often”, the rankings vary slightly: Life/ personal (69.7%),

career (41.1%), corporate/executive (39.7%), small business (22.3%), internal (15.5%) and non-profit organisations (8.1%).

Among those who “often” or “very often” coach in the more popular practice areas, the top three issues and situations include: Career - career transition (22.6%), big career decisions (17.6%), decision to leave a corporate job (15.9%); Personal/life: clarify and pursue goals (69.6%), values (57.9%), living a balanced life (57.5%); Small business - increase sales or revenues (23.2%), marketing products and services (21.3%), improving customer relations (16.7%); and Corporate or executive - leadership development (45.2%), transitions and change management (25.4%), team building (24.3%). Coaches of non-profits typically work in education (35.7%), health care (32.8%) and philanthropic organisations (27.0%). Internal coaches typically work at companies with fewer than 25 employees (78.7%).

In general, coaches are not adept at evaluating the impact of coaching. Only 31.8% of coaches use client satisfaction surveys “often”. The most used measure of effectiveness used by the respondents is informal client feedback (55.3%). Although most coaches claim to use some quantitative measures (61.9%), only a few use them often (19.1%).

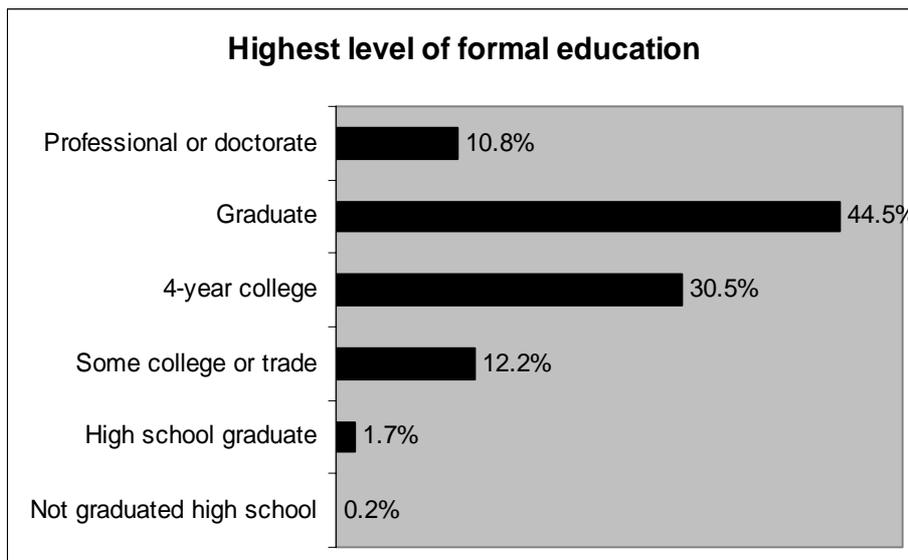
Future research should include rigorous evaluation of return on investment (ROI) for coaching interventions. Virtually all the coaching-related ROI analyses to date have been conducted by coaching providers themselves, with the findings used as marketing materials. Far more independent research is needed. In addition, based on this sample, coaches clearly need to improve their assessment of their coaching engagements. Professional coaching associations may want to consider including explicit training in evaluation processes as part of the core coaching competencies, and as an essential part of any accredited coach training program.

6. Coach Demographics

Most respondents were female (73.1%), and the most common age group of respondents was between 45-54 years of age (41.8%). None were under 25 years old, and only 6.0% under 35. Age appears to be no liability for coaches.

The majority of coaches in this study reside in the United States of America (66.8%), followed by Canada (8.9%) the United Kingdom (8.8%) and Australia (5.1%). Overall, 91.4% of coaches come from English-speaking countries, although there is probably some bias due to the questionnaire only being in English.

Within the individual states of the United States, California has the highest number of coaches (18.2%), followed by New York (8.1%), Colorado (6.3%), and Texas (5.5%)



The coaches in this study are overwhelmingly college educated (85.9%). The majority of coaches have a post-graduate degree (55.3%) with 10.8% holding a Doctorate or Professional degree.

We recommend that, in order to develop solid foundations for a future profession of coaching, professional bodies should encourage a wide range of both private and state colleges and universities to develop and offer doctorate programs in coaching. Furthermore, professional coaching bodies should actively encourage professional coaches to become tertiary qualified in coaching-specific degrees, possibly through the awarding of specific prestige credentials or scholarship programs.

Concluding Comments

Coaching is an emerging cross-disciplinary profession. As such it is vital that a common knowledge base about coaching be developed. To date there has been little coaching-specific literature and not much is known about coaches or the coaching industry in general. Professional and industry associations have an important role to play in fostering the development of such knowledge and sponsoring high quality coach-specific research.

Indeed, this study confirms the cross-disciplinary nature of professional coaching. This study has found that coaches come to professional coaching from a number of prior professional and occupational backgrounds. This diversity is both strength and a liability. The diversity of prior professional backgrounds means that the emerging profession of coaching has the opportunity to draw on wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches to coaching. However, this diversity also means that defining the field of coaching is fraught with complexity. Furthermore, each subgroup of coaches may perceive “their way” as being the “right way”, dismissing other approaches as non-coachlike, irrelevant or ineffective.

The challenge for coaches will be to genuinely welcome such diversity and draw on each other's perspectives and knowledge frameworks, instead of splitting into in-groups and out-groups. One important issue relates to defining standards and competencies that transcend prior professional backgrounds, ideologies and individual commercial agendas. Much work has been done on these issues by professional bodies including the ICF, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and the International Association of Coaches amongst others. This work must continue and jointly agreed standards will form the basis of a genuine profession.

It can be reasonably expected that the relationship between coaching and psychotherapeutic mental health interventions will become increasingly controversial. Thus it will be important to further investigate the skills of professional coaches in recognising and referring clients with mental health issues, and if necessary recommend additional training processes. Conversely, some psychotherapeutic mental health service providers are repackaging their services as coaching. We must be careful that the lines between psychotherapeutic mental health interventions and coaching become more, not less, distinct. Confusion as to the boundaries between professional coaching and the treatment of mental health issues such as anxiety, stress or depression does not serve either the consumer of mental health services or the professional coach. Both professional coaching bodies and mental health associations have an ethical responsibility to address this issue.

Just as we need greater clarity about the differences between mental health interventions and coaching, we also need clarity about the differences between the work of consultants, professional certified accountants and business coaches. In contrast to the role of the professional certified accountant or consultant where the emphasis is on giving advice on business strategy, legal requirements and accountancy systems, procedures and the like, the business coaching relationship is a highly interactive collaborative partnership focused on reaching personal and professional goals within the context of the business goals and objectives. Here the business coach acts as a change agent, a sounding board and facilitates a structured learning environment for individual and organisational development (Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, 2004).

However, the boundary between these different modalities is unclear, and there have been reports that some coaches are giving business-related consultancy-type advice which is inappropriate or which they are not qualified to give (Walker, 2004). On the other hand, some business consultants and professional certified accountants are simply rebranding their services as coaching when they are simply acting in their regular occupational roles. Future research should investigate these issues.

We believe that professional coaching is a dynamic and vibrant emerging discipline with a distinct flavour and methodologies of its own. Clearly professional coaching bodies and associations have a crucial role to play in fostering the research that is a foundation of professionalism. The present study has added to our understanding of contemporary professional coaching and the

work and backgrounds of the coaches themselves. In doing so this study has hopefully furthered the movement towards the professionalisation of coaching.

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Appendix I: Other Professions Prior to Coaching

The following are categorized and tallied from the open-ended responses. Multiple responses were allowed.

Trainer	156	6.8%
Manager	75	3.3%
Entrepreneur/Business owner	70	3.1%
Human resources	63	2.7%
Psychologist/Therapist/Counsellor	54	2.4%
Arts/Entertainment	50	2.2%
Writer/Journalist/Editor	49	2.1%
Advertising/Marketing/PR	48	2.1%
Non-health professional	44	1.9%
Director	38	1.7%
Health professional	37	1.6%
Organisation/Personal Development	36	1.6%
Computer/IT/Web	34	1.5%
Education/Instructor	34	1.5%
Facilitator	31	1.4%
Administrator	24	1.0%
Executive	24	1.0%
Engineer	23	1.0%
Consulting	22	1.0%
Career advisor/Recruiter	20	0.9%
Researcher/Analyst	18	0.8%
Clergy/Spiritual	17	0.7%
Public/Government	16	0.7%
Non profit/Fundraising	15	0.7%
Physical coach/Athlete	14	0.6%
Banking/Finance	14	0.6%
Parent/Housewife	12	0.5%
Real Estate	10	0.4%
Speaker	10	0.4%
Trade	9	0.4%
Travel/Lodging	9	0.4%
Other	53	2.3%

Acknowledgement

A number of individuals made significant contributions to the survey reported herein. Rachel Muller-Lust, PhD, of Wondrance Coaching was responsible for drafting much of the survey. Susan Gill-Weiss of Kanban Consulting Corporation helped edit the survey and handled the technical aspects of implementation. Lorraine Lorimer of Time to Talk, Ltd. and Maria Lesetz of A.I.P. Empowerment Coaching provided timely assistance in a number of roles. Dan Martinage, Executive Director of the ICF, consistently supported the project and its objective and fair reporting. Thank you also to members of the ICF Research & Development Committee and the ICF leadership for their ongoing support.

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