

HR Professionals' Perceptions of Executive Coaching: Implementations, Efficacy, and Efficacy Drivers

Dr Gavin R Dagley,
in association with the
Australian Human Resources Institute

AUGUST 2006

OVERVIEW

Objectives:

HR professionals experienced in the use of executive coaching hold a considerable and untapped body of knowledge regarding structures, efficacy, and drawbacks of the industry. The purpose of the current study was to extend the knowledge-base about the successful use of executive coaching services by tapping into the experiences of HR professionals. In particular, the study addressed three questions: how has executive coaching been used; how well did it work; and what were the factors that predicted success?

Method:

The 17 practitioners who participated in the research had spent an average of 2.5 years in their current roles, and 15 held primary or joint-primary responsibility for the executive coaching programs in their organisations. As a group, these practitioners were responsible for an estimated 1,033 individual coaching programs in the preceding two years, and had spent \$15.4 million on these programs. A 12-page questionnaire provided the structure for the interviews. The questionnaire contained 60 questions and interviews lasted between 50 to 90 minutes.

Results:

Although the practitioners described a variety of structures and approaches, the results indicated that all practitioners rated the programs as beneficial with a range of benefits for the executives and the organisations. The practitioners also observed a number of drawbacks, the most prevalent being difficulties for executives in making time for sessions, and perceptions of executive coaching as expensive.

Average program cost was \$12,600 per executive and average duration was nine sessions over seven months. The practitioners indicated uncertainty around the evaluation of return on investment, but, of those who expressed an opinion, most indicated that they thought executive coaching was cost-effective as an intervention. They also reported, almost without exception, very strong interest in using executive coaching in future.

Regarding the predictors of program success, practitioners indicated that a large range of factors influence the success of programs. Those rated as most important were the skill of coaches; senior management and organisational support; the engagement and commitment of the executive; the quality of the working relationship; and effective management of confidentiality issues. Those factors rated least important were those related to the standardisation of program structure and delivery.

Discussion:

These data indicate a complex relationship between the responses: cost is high, organisational benefit is moderate, and cost-benefit is uncertain. Yet practitioners also indicated strong interest in using executive coaching in the future. The results also appear to indicate that skills acquisition and psycho-educational training, although an important contributor to coaching program success, may not be the underlying and differentiating strength of effective executive coaching. That is, the power and value of executive coaching may well be derived from the ability of coaches to adapt to the unique circumstances, learning styles, and personality of each executive, and from the commitment and courage of the executives to look at lifelong patterns of behaviour.

HR professionals are, however, also subject to the business imperative of being able to demonstrate the financial value of costly programs, and this provides an incentive for more structured and therefore more measurable approaches – whether or not such approaches lend themselves to more successful programs.

The keys, then, to effective executive coaching programs go beyond simply the need for highly skilled coaches. Good programs need effective positioning within the organisation and with senior management, careful selection and preparation of, and expectation-setting for the participating executives, and ensuring that coaching is being undertaken for the right reasons, and that these reasons are explicit.

HR Professionals' Perceptions of Executive Coaching:

Implementations, Efficacy, and Efficacy Drivers

Dr Gavin Dagley,
in association with the
Australian Human Resources Institute

AUGUST 2006

Although the topic of executive coaching has received increasing attention over the last decade, surprisingly little research has involved one of the largest groups of purchasers of executive coaching - Human Resources (HR) professionals. HR professionals who are contemplating the use of executive coaching for the first time, or who are seeking to upgrade or restructure their existing executive coaching programs, have little research-based information on which to draw. Yet those HR professionals experienced with the use of executive coaching hold a considerable and untapped body of knowledge regarding structures, efficacy, and drawbacks of the industry.

Peterson and Kraiger (2004) observed that, considering the amount spent on coaching, corporate leaders want to know what they are getting for their money. First, therefore, among the list of questions that HR professionals have is "does executive coaching work?" Peterson and Kraiger argued that there is a growing body of research that supports the efficacy of executive coaching. There is also evidence that there is a broad range of experiences with regard to executive coaching success.

Assurances that executive coaching "on average, works" are of little use to the applied practitioner attempting to implement a successful program within a particular environment, and with situational constraints. More useful questions, in an applied sense, include: how have executive coaching services been used and applied in the past, how successful have these been, and what are the key factors affecting the success of executive coaching programs? Two recent studies have provided some

insight into the range of approaches and experiences of executive coaching consumers.

Morgan, Harkins, and Goldsmith (2005) reported on results from the "Linkage Best Practices in Coaching Survey", a multi-national, multi-sector, multi-industry survey of organisations, most of which were based in North America. All the respondents came from within the survey organisations, although it was not clear what roles they had in relation to the coaching programs.

The results indicated that coaching was used most commonly for enhancing current performance and correcting performance issues. Major reasons that coaching was chosen over other methods included its customised application, flexibility and timeliness, objectivity and external perspective, and the privacy offered to the participant. The length of individual coaching programs seemed to vary depending on the seniority of the coaching participants, with lower leadership groups' programs averaging 6.6 months, and senior and executive leaders' programs averaging 12 to 14 months. The most important considerations in selecting a coach were, in order: coaching experience, the quality of the fit between coach and executive, expertise in the particular area, reputation, business experience, and cost. The majority of coaching was delivered face-to-face, and 360-degree feedback was the most commonly used tool or technique. In response to a question regarding the effectiveness of past coaching interventions, 75% of respondents rated coaching as 3 or higher on a 1-to-5 scale (5 indicating "very effective" and 1 indicating "not effective").

First ... among the list of questions that HR professionals have is "does executive coaching work?"

The Association for Coaching (2004) completed a web-based survey of UK-based purchasers of coaching services and individuals who had been coached in an organisational setting. Although more than 600 organisations were approached to take part in the study, the researchers received only 42 completed surveys.

Regarding the structure of programs, the researchers found that sponsoring managers were the most common coaching decision drivers, although senior managers determined their own coaching needs in 50% of cases. Programs tended to last between 4 and 7 sessions, were delivered face-to-face (88% of responses), and were focused on developing individuals' business performance (72%). The most common selection criteria for coaches were proven effectiveness and personal knowledge, and external recommendation. Cost was not a major consideration

in coach selection, and the researchers reported that average coaching rates varied between £100 and £300 per hour. Feedback from the executives and their managers was the primary source for measuring program success, and nearly half of respondents indicated that they had used a quantifiable measure of return on investment.

Although the researchers indicated that there was minimal agreement as to what the measurable benefits from coaching were, observed gains from coaching included: increased confidence, better strategies for coping with work demands, improved personal performance, increased productivity, better people management skills, increased job motivation, and improved work/life balance. Responding to a general question regarding the success of coaching, the respondents indicated they believed coaching was an effective development intervention, and these results were driven in part by the opportunity to focus on the individuals' personal requirements in a one-to-one setting.

There was minimal agreement as to what the measurable benefits from coaching were

In addition to studies regarding the perceptions of executive coaching users, a number of researchers have made recommendations regarding "best practice" use of executive coaching. Sherman and Freas (2005) advised that the best way to make effective use of executive coaching services was to ensure that the three parties to the program (sponsors, participants, and coaches) are suitably qualified and engaged. Sherman and Freas (2005) argued that, for sponsoring managers, this means the clear establishment of the reasons for using coaching, the alignment of coaching work with organisational goals, and support for the program from very senior ranks of the organisation. Sherman and Freas argued that coaching, by its very nature, brings discomfort to the surface, and programs require a champion with the clout and staying power to protect them. In addition, they argued that sponsoring organisations must provide an environment that is nourishing and supportive of participants and the changes that they are attempting to make.

Participants in executive coaching programs are best qualified for participation based on the level of their motivation and commitment to engage in the coaching work. That is, suitable participants really want to make changes, and are prepared to do the hard work that such changes require.

Qualifying coaches is inherently a more difficult task for the HR professional. Sherman and Freas (2005) discussed a range of skills that good coaches

use, but conceded that "no universally reliable credential exists to identify capable coaches" (p. 81). Sherman and Freas advised that the most important qualifications for a successful coach were character and insight, and the careful matching of coach to participant to ensure the "chemistry" is right. In addition, Garman, Whiston, and Zlatoper (2000) concluded that it was relatively rare in the press articles that they had reviewed for psychologists to be recognized as uniquely competent practitioners.

The study addressed three questions: how has executive coaching been used, how well did it work, and what were the factors that predicted success?

Anderson (2001), at the conclusion of his study on the return on investment of executive coaching, provided a list of recommendations designed to maximise the benefits from executive coaching programs. These recommendations included; managing the coaching process for consistency and quality, providing advance preparation for participants, ensuring participation is voluntary, allowing participants to select their coaches, providing strong organisational support for the program, ensuring coaches understand the realities of client environment, allowing considerable latitude in the direction of the work, and building performance measurement into the coaching process.

The purpose of the current study was to extend the knowledge-base about the successful use of executive coaching services by tapping into the experiences of HR professionals who have used executive coaching in their organisations. In particular, the study addressed three questions: how has executive coaching been used, how well did it work, and what were the factors that predicted success?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were Melbourne-based Human Resources professionals who had experience of using executive coaching services in their organisations. The 17 practitioners who participated in the research had spent an average of 2.5 years in their current roles, and 15 held primary or joint-primary responsibility for the executive coaching programs in their organisations. The remaining practitioners held administrative or support roles in relation to the coaching programs.

The 17 participants represented 16 organisations from both the public and private sectors, and included

government departments, government commercial entities, local bodies, and service, professional and manufacturing organisations (including eight of Australia’s largest and most well-known trading companies).

Materials

A 12-page questionnaire provided the structure for the interviews. The questionnaire contained 60 questions that were grouped into 17 sections addressing topics detailed in Table 1. The document also contained a standard briefing for participants.

The questionnaire was designed both to classify responses for numerical analysis and to record comments. Existing research, discussions with executive coaches and HR professionals, and pilot interviews provided the source data used in the construction of both the questions and the response options.

The sampling method was opportunistic and based on a combination of the location of the organisation (Melbourne, Australia) and access to the contact details for the relevant practitioner. HR professionals were located through the Australian Human Resources Institute’s mailing list, private contact lists, and from referrals. The practitioners were contacted directly, most commonly by mail. All interviews occurred face-to-face, and, prior to commencement of the interview, practitioners completed an informed consent declaration. Interviews lasted between 50 to 90 minutes.

The study was exploratory and the data are descriptive. For this reason, inferential statistics were not used in the data analysis. Based on the extent of executive coaching use, the organisations fell into one of two distinct groups; those that had spent more than \$1 million on coaching in the preceding two years (“larger programs”), and those that had spent less than \$200,000 in the same period (“smaller programs”). Comparison of results from the two groups indicated few differences. The differences that did occur have been reported separately.

Procedure

Table 1

Executive Coaching Topics Addressed in Research Interview

Topic
definition of executive coaching
history of use in the organisation
role played by the human resources function
organisational awareness and support for executive coaching
participant and method selection
program initiation and coach selection
matching coaches and participants
program structure and content
use of psychometrics
ethical issues
setting of program goals
reporting and measurement systems
efficacy
efficacy drivers
cost/benefit
future use
changes in perceptions resulting from the interview

RESULTS

Definition and Use

At the beginning of the interview, the HR professionals considered Kilburg's (2000) definition of executive coaching, and were asked to indicate how well it matched with their ideas. Kilburg defined executive coaching as "a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually defined set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organisation within a formerly defined coaching agreement" (p. 66-67). All except four of the practitioners indicated the definition matched their own ideas "very well", and the remainder indicated that the definition matched "quite well." All the practitioners agreed that the definition was sufficiently close to their own ideas to be able to use it for the purposes of the interview.

In their comments, practitioners emphasised the importance of outcomes in their definitions. "It's about the development of leadership capability leading to significant organisational outcomes." Another commented that executive coaching is "not just a 'feel-good' exercise, unless 'feel-good' helps the organisation." A further practitioner commented, however, that "coaching is more than about simply organisational gain," alluding to the benefits derived by the executive participants.

These practitioners were responsible for an estimated 1,033 individual coaching programs ... and had spent \$15.4 million on these programs.

Some of the practitioners discussed the sometimes blurry line between coaching and counselling or therapy. One practitioner commented that "we define coaching as working towards future goals and counselling looks to the past." A second practitioner took the view that coaching and counselling could not be so easily distinguished, stating that "our definition of executive coaching ... covers all life aspects. We often need to look backwards before we can look forwards. The definitions we use are very similar [to Kilburg's], but broader. Personal issues can present as professional blockers."

All but three of the HR professionals had used executive coaching for at least two years, with three describing that use as extensive, seven reporting

moderate use, and the remaining seven reporting only occasional use. As a group, these practitioners were responsible for an estimated 1,033 individual coaching programs in the preceding two years (with the participation of 25% of the executive population eligible for coaching in those organisations), and had spent \$15.4 million on these programs.

The practitioners reported that the use of executive coaching in their organisations started either through an identified individual developmental need, through a "strategic imperative," or through the formalisation of the ad hoc use of executive coaching in the past. One of the practitioners reported that his organisation had recently stopped using external executive coaching. "We went through a hump and we are now coming back down. We now use internal systems and processes, rather than the more expensive systems."

Program Outcomes

Efficacy, Benefits and Drawbacks

Practitioners rated the overall effectiveness of their executive coaching programs on a five-point scale, with "5" indicating outstandingly effective, and the remaining points indicating, respectively, "very effective," "moderately effective," "marginally effective," and "not effective". All practitioners rated their programs as at least moderately effective (an average rating of 3.5), with six indicating their programs were very effective, and one indicating an outstandingly effective program. The average rating for larger programs (3.6) was higher than that for smaller programs (3.4), although both averages fell between the "moderately" and "very effective" ratings.

Some practitioners provided estimates of the range in the success ratings of individual programs within the organisations. They estimated that, on average, 11% of programs were outstandingly successful and a further 14% were marginally or not successful. Of the remainder, 47% were rated very successful, and 28% as moderately successful. Practitioners were unable to consistently differentiate program success based on the type of objectives chosen, and three of the practitioners commented that success depended more on the individual executive than on the objectives of a given program.

The practitioners also provided estimates of how they thought the executives would rate the programs. Practitioners estimated executive ratings at 4.1 (or better than "very effective"). Once again, larger programs (4.4) fared better than smaller programs (3.9).

Practitioners were asked to indicate the specific gains or benefits they had noticed for the executives and that had resulted from the executive coaching. Practitioners chose from a list of 20 possibilities, and listed any other gains not covered by this list. (The only additional gain noted was "health/relief from anxiety.") The practitioners allocated two points for

strong gains and one point for some gain. Table 2 presents the list of gains and the total points awarded.

All practitioners rated their programs as at least moderately effective

The most widely supported benefit was a “clearer understanding of own style, automatic responses, and the issues arising from these.” All of the practitioners indicated at least some gain in this area. The other widely supported benefits included communication and engagement skills, ability to cope with stress, and a clearer understanding of both personal professional performance and of organisational issues and how to resolve or overcome them. Practitioners indicated an average of 14 and a minimum of 5 areas of benefit for individuals participating in their programs.

One practitioner commented on benefits from her executive coaching program that were difficult to measure.

“There are intangible benefits. It’s recognition of the individual, time out to review their careers. It’s special. It improves motivation and feeling valued and recognised. People do like to talk about themselves. It can be pretty lonely in executive roles. It is the opportunity to open up, possibly for stress relief. There is a bravado required of executives. They don’t have the opportunity to show any chinks. Executive coaching deals with the wants in all of us without outside scrutiny.”

Practitioners also spoke about the range of coaching experiences for executives. “Anecdotally, I’m hearing ‘I like my coach, I’m getting a lot out of it, he’s challenging me, I’m learning a lot about myself. He’s getting me to commit to things.’ The range of responses goes from ‘I never thought it would be this good’ to ‘I’m not so sure about this, whether it is for me.’”

As separate from the gains made by individuals, practitioners could identify at least one, and an average of five organisational benefits resulting from executive coaching. The list of benefits for organisations from executive coaching was much shorter than the list for individuals, with only seven items. The results are shown in Table 3.

Development of the talent pool and organisational capability was the most commonly identified benefit, with all but one of the practitioners indicating some

gain in this area. The other major area of organisational gain was in talent retention and morale.

One practitioner elaborated on the effect of coaching on morale. “Many of these younger managers thought it was nice to be part of the group above the thick black line.” Another commented that executive coaching “became a badge of honour.” One practitioner commented that these perceptions can be variable, saying that “those who have used [the coaching] view it as positive, but others are less so. They often feel there might be suspicion something is wrong with me.”

Development of the talent pool and organisational capability was the most commonly identified benefit

Organisational benefits related to performance management and remediation, team cohesion, and conflict resolution received only half the support from practitioners as talent pool development. Practitioners described three additional organisational benefits from coaching; career change for an executive, better understanding of organisational strategic direction, and clearer staff meetings and communication.

Practitioners indicated there were a number of drawbacks to using executive coaching. The most commonly reported concerns were difficulties for executives in making time for sessions, and the expense of executive coaching. Table 4 presents the results.

Regarding the expense of executive coaching a few practitioners commented that this was less of an issue than might be expected. Comments included “it’s considered expensive, but that doesn’t matter if it works,” “there has been no push back on costs,” “money [is an issue], but not as much as expected” and “[the executives] will pay once they have started. They don’t question the amount.”

Another common concern was poor translation of coaching outcomes into behavioural changes. The opinion was not universal, with one practitioner commenting that “executive coaching generates long-term snowballing behavioural changes. That is, the benefits increase over time.”

Comments regarding the quality of available coaches included: “there are a lot of quacks in the business,” “lots of quantity but not necessarily quality,” and “it is very difficult to source appropriately qualified and experienced coaches.”

Table 2
Participant Gains from Executive Coaching

Gain observed by HR professional	“Strong gains” frequency	“Some gains” frequency	Total points ^a
Clearer understanding of own style, automatic responses and the issues arising from these	16	1	33
Improved communication and engagement skills	7	9	23
Improved coping with stress / robustness	6	7	19
Clearer understanding of own professional performance	7	4	18
Clearer understanding of organisational issues and how to resolve or overcome them.	3	11	17
Improved ability to deliver feedback	2	13	17
Improved professional relationships - with directors/managers	4	9	17
Improved professional relationships - with subordinates	2	13	17
Improved decision-making skills	2	12	16
Improved assertiveness / self-assurance / leadership strength	5	6	16
Improved professional relationships - with peers	3	10	16
Improved motivation in role	2	10	14
Clearer career plans and actions	4	6	14
Improved work/life balance	2	9	13
Clearer strategic perspective	1	10	12
Quicker to move to action in dealing with issues	3	6	12
Improved change agent skills	2	7	11
Improved measured personal performance	2	7	11
Improved delegation abilities	0	8	8
Improved work throughput	2	4	8

Notes: ^a Calculated by allocating 2 points for “strong gain” and 1 point for “some gain”

One practitioner commented on his reaction to the number of calls he receives from “coaches looking for business, and I think ‘you’ve got to be kidding!’ I would have had 10 calls in the last year, and I would have met approximately half of these.” Other drawbacks raised by practitioners (that were not listed in the questionnaire) were the sustainability of behaviour changes, “managers outsourcing their people leadership responsibilities,” and “getting traction” for programs.

Cost/Benefit and Future Interest

Only five of the respondents indicated that they engaged in any analysis of return on investment for their programs, and four of these indicated that such analysis was informal. The only practitioner who had engaged in formal assessment indicated that one of the methods he used was to compare the cost of coaching and development to the cost of replacing the executive.

Table 3

Organisational Gains from Executive Coaching

Gain observed by HR professional	“Strong gains” frequency	“Some gains” frequency	Total points ^a
Professional development of talent pool / building capability	8	8	24
Talent retention and morale	6	6	18
Effective leadership	4	7	15
Team cohesion	3	6	12
Cultural change	3	6	12
Conflict resolution	1	9	11
Performance management and remediation	3	5	11

Notes: ^a Calculated by allocating 2 points for “strong gain” and 1 point for “some gain”

Nine practitioners were prepared, nevertheless, to make an estimate regarding the cost/benefit of their programs. Only one of the practitioners indicated that she felt the financial returns were less than the program cost, and two practitioners thought that program costs and returns were about equal. Of the remaining six, four indicated returns exceeded cost, and two indicated that returns greatly exceeded costs. Practitioners from larger programs had a more positive view of the cost/benefit of executive coaching than those from smaller programs, with all but one of the practitioners indicating that benefits exceeded costs, and the remaining practitioner indicating that costs and benefits were about equal.

Most of the practitioners had comments regarding return on investment. A common theme was how well practitioners handled cost/benefit measurement. “We don’t do it very well. We need better measures. The industry does not like to be measured. The tools are lacking.” In a similar vein, another practitioner commented “we have not been good at being able to quantify returns. This is partly due to the one-off nature of the work and the restriction of information due to confidentiality.” A third practitioner commented “cost/benefit is really not done. I don’t know how it could be done properly. The view is that [executive coaching] is expensive, but when people are helped, it doesn’t seem so expensive to me.”

Some practitioners commented on why they thought executive coaching represented a good return on investment. “It’s effective. If you spend \$3,000 for program it is cost/effective. For example a

[university-based training] module – what do you get?” Another evaluated the expense on a comparative basis commenting that “As a percentage of salary it’s weeny.” The third practitioner put the matter succinctly. “Senior executives wouldn’t support executive coaching (or pay for it) if they didn’t think it was really worthwhile.” This practitioner’s program was funded entirely from the participating executives’ budgets.

Practitioners rated their interest in using executive coaching in the future on a four-point scale, with “4” indicating strong interest, and “1” indicating no interest. Only 2 of the 17 practitioners indicated anything other than strong interest in using executive coaching in the future, and these two rated their interest at “3.”

Only 2 of the 17 practitioners indicated anything other than strong interest in using executive coaching in the future

One practitioner articulated a theme common to many of the respondents. “There is not a lot around to develop executives. Executive coaching is customised, intensive, and tailored – and you can’t get that off-the-shelf.” Another practitioner commented that “self-awareness is not part of normal executive development, and this is where executive coaching can be helpful. Most executives don’t have the opportunity otherwise.”

Table 4

Drawbacks Related to Using Executive Coaching

Drawback	“Big drawback” frequency	“Some drawback” frequency	Total points ^a
Difficulties for participants in making time for sessions	1	12	14
Considered expensive	4	6	14
Negative perception of coaching (e.g., perceived as a sign of poor performance)	3	6	12
Poor translation of learning to behavioural changes	3	6	12
Difficulty in locating or identifying good coaches	3	5	11
Difficulty in demonstrating relationships between EC and organisational performance	1	9	11
Poor or variable delivery by coaches	2	5	9
Difficulty in generating senior management support	1	4	6
Difficulty in generating participants enthusiasm	0	2	2
Difficulty in successfully matching coaches and participants	0	2	2

Notes: ^a Calculated by allocating 2 points for “big drawback” and 1 point for “some drawback”

Factors that practitioners identified might affect their use of executive coaching in the future were demands driven by organisational change, issues with or the needs of senior leaders, turnover in the leadership, and organisational appetite and endorsement. The most common reason offered by practitioners regarding any future reduction in their use of executive coaching was budget constraints.

Implementations & Efficacy Drivers

The following section presents, in two parts, the exploration of factors affecting program efficacy. The first section provides the quantitative results and the associated comments regarding the importance of particular factors to the success of programs. The second section provides a description of the program approaches and components, including the particular ways that the practitioners have organised and experienced their own programs.

Efficacy Drivers Evaluation

The interview process provided practitioners with two ways of identifying the important factors that influence the success of executive coaching programs. Firstly, practitioners responded to two open-ended questions regarding the factors they felt contributed most to, or detracted most from, the success of

programs. Subsequently, using a 4-point scale, practitioners rated 22 factors listed in the questionnaire for their relative importance to program success, with “4” indicating that a factor was critically important, and “1” indicating that a factor was not important. Table 5 presents the results of these ratings.

In most cases, the factors identified in the questionnaire reflected the factors raised by the practitioners in their responses to the open-ended questions. Any differences have been described separately.

Practitioners considered that the majority of the factors listed in the questionnaire were relatively important, with only 7 of the 22 factors rated below 3.0. The seven factors ranked most important all had average ratings of above 3.7, and differentiation among them in terms of importance was minimal. The need for highly skilled coaches was rated “critically important” by all practitioners. The next six factors were; rapport and trust between the coach and participant, confidentiality of discussions limited to the coach and participant only, senior management support and engagement, participant engagement and commitment, other ethical considerations effectively handled, and careful matching of coach and participant.

A number of the practitioners commented on the importance of having commitment from the participating executives to program success. There must be an “individual willingness to change - an understanding of themselves and motivation to change.” One practitioner commented that executive commitment is more important than the quality of the coach, saying “it’s not about the coaching, but about the courage of the individual. [Otherwise] you can have a great coach who can achieve not very much.”

There must be an “individual willingness to change - an understanding of themselves and motivation to change.”

The four lowest ranked factors all received average ratings of less than 2.5. These factors were having a standard structure for coaching programs, the use of psychometric tools and inventories in the content of each program, collation and presentation of executive coaching results, and having a standard model for the delivery of content.

Other factors discussed in previous research that received lower rankings were determining in advance clear program goals (14th with an average rating of 3.2), and participant choice in the selection of the coach (17th with an average rating of 2.8).

Larger programs differed from smaller programs by more than 0.5 points on five factors. Practitioners from larger programs gave less importance to the use of psychometrics, having a standard model for the delivery of content, senior management support and engagement, and the collation and presentation of executive coaching results. They attributed more importance to the involvement of the sponsoring manager in the review process.

In their initial comments, practitioners identified a number of other areas that had an important influence on program success: organisational factors (including the fit of the program with organisational goals and the inability of organisations to adapt to and utilise the executive’s behavioural changes), negative perceptions of coaching (particularly if it is perceived as punitive or remedial), and resistance to programs generated through compulsory participation.

A number of practitioners commented on organisational aspects that can affect coaching outcomes. One practitioner commented that coaching programs were more complex to implement in his organisation due to “a general culture of not having rigorous and regular, transparent performance discussions. These are not happening enough and this would support the executive coaching. Executive coaching would be more powerful if we could get this right.”

Other practitioners commented on working to get programs to fit the particular cultures in which they operated. One practitioner commented that lawyers “really love documents, without these they struggle to understand what executive coaching is.” Similar comments came from other practitioners working with specialists: “Scientists need hard facts. Was there value in behavioural change?” and “When you work with the engineers you need hard data to prove your results.”

With regard to negative perceptions, another practitioner indicated that program success was affected by “whether [the executives let their colleagues] know what they are working on. Influencing the system around them can really help. ‘I know I can be a [nasty person], but I’m really working at trying to change that.’”

Practitioners commented on working to get programs to fit the particular cultures in which they operated

Using the same list of factors as those rated for importance, practitioners also rated themselves on how well they handled these factors in their programs, using a similar 4-point scale, where “4” indicated a factor was ideally handled, and “1” indicated that it was poorly handled. The six factors that practitioners indicated they had handled best were, in order: allowing coaches content flexibility, confidentiality, ethical issues other than confidentiality, rapport and trust between the coach and the executive, participant engagement, and the use of skilled coaches. All received average ratings above 3.2.

The factors that practitioners had rated as relatively more important tended, as a rule, to have been handled better than those that were rated as less important. Of the six factors rated most important for program success, practitioners indicated they had handled matching of coach and executive (2.8), and gaining senior management support (2.9) the least well, but the ratings indicate these factors were handled at least moderately well. The factors that overall practitioners indicated they had handled least well were formal measurement and reporting (with an average rating of 2.0), and the collation and presentation of results (1.6).

Practitioners from larger programs rated themselves differently from smaller program practitioners in the handling of some factors. In particular, they rated themselves better in their handling of the matching process, the use of a six-month follow-up, and the involvement of the sponsoring manager in the review process.

Table 5

Factors Affecting Executive Coaching Program Success

Factor	Average importance rating ^a
Highly skilled coaches	4.0
Rapport and trust between the coach and participant	3.9
Confidentiality of discussions to coach and participant only	3.9
Senior management support and engagement	3.8
Participant engagement and commitment	3.8
Other ethical considerations effectively dealt with	3.8
Careful matching of coach and participant	3.8
Sponsor/supervisor support and engagement	3.7
Allowing coaches considerable flexibility to individually tailor program content	3.6
Rigorous coach selection procedures	3.5
Careful participant selection	3.5
A range of coaches available to meet the varying needs of participants	3.4
Informal review and debriefing processes	3.3
Determining in advance clear goals for each individual program	3.2
Sponsor involvement in reporting or review process	3.1
Subsequent follow up (eg 6 months later) by coach with participant	2.9
Participant choice in the selection of the coach	2.8
Formal measurement and reporting processes	2.8
Having a standard structure for coaching programs	2.4
Use of psychometric tools and inventories in the content of each program	2.2
Collation and presentation of EC results	2.2
Having a standard model for the delivery of content	1.9

Notes: ^a Practitioners rated importance on a 4-point scale, with “4” indicating factor was critically important, and “1” indicating factor was not important.

The area where larger program practitioners gave themselves lower ratings than their smaller program counterparts was in handling non-confidentiality-related ethics.

Program Approaches and Components
Program Set Up & Initiation

All except two of the practitioners indicated that senior management provided at least moderate support for executive coaching, with 59% indicating strong support from senior management. Practitioners indicated a range of awareness about executive coaching in their respective organisations, with one-third indicating high awareness, another third moderate awareness, and the remainder indicating little awareness. The majority (59%) reported a positive attitude towards executive coaching by executives, with the remaining practitioners indicating that attitudes were neutral.

The majority (59%) also indicated coaching was most often initiated as part of a development program. Other events that resulted in executive coaching programs were executive and/or manager request, and the identification of special needs regarding a particular executive. Practitioners selected executive coaching over other interventions primarily for the customised approach it offers. Other well supported reasons included flexibility in the timing of delivery, the external and objective perspective of coaches, and the privacy offered to the executives. When comparing executive coaching to other intervention options, one practitioner observed that “one size does not fit all!” Most practitioners (71%) provided participants with an interview in preparation for the coaching. Other less common preparation methods included handouts, interviews with the executives’ managers, and 360 degree feedback.

Practitioners selected executive coaching over other interventions primarily for the customised approach it offers.

Coaching Concerns and Coach Selection

Practitioners’ principal concerns in setting up an executive coaching program were validating the expertise of the coaches, assessing the fit between the coach and the executive, and ensuring a return on the financial investment. Practitioners used contacts with colleagues as the primary means of locating coaches, although one practitioner commented on the process of attempting a tendering process.

Do you have 10 pages?! It was a journey of enlightenment. I thought it would be easy.
We put out an expression of interest

document and then conducted interviews. It was a horror show - the shallowness, the fad nature of it all. Everyone had a different model, and a lot were totally unskilled. I abandoned the notion of one service provider, but the process gave me enough information to find what I was looking for.

“We put out an expression of interest document and then conducted interviews. It was a horror show.”

The practitioners looked for strengths in two key areas in assessing coaches: coaching experience and business experience. All the practitioners who responded to this question indicated that extensive coaching experience was very important, and 29% indicated that business experience was very important (and three of those five indicated business experience was useful). The practitioners indicated that these requirements were important for both competence and credibility. One practitioner commented that, in assessing a potential coach, she expected “credibility, expertise, and clarity around what he is coaching. [Coaches need] the ability to deal with the most senior levels in the business.” Another commented that “credibility is an important issue. I won’t put a 25-year-old with just a TAFE qualification in [our coaching program].”

Another practitioner commented on the interaction between the credibility of the coach and the perceptions of the executive. “The greatest concerns are the calibre of the coaches and credibility and acceptance. The executives all think they are special. It’s elitism - ‘no-one knows my job.’ The coach must be able to identify with the pressures of senior executive roles and have previous experience. This is important.”

Practitioners were less definite in their requirements around qualifications, registration as a psychologist, and sector experience. Only 24% of the practitioners thought that formal qualifications were important, with a further 18% indicating such qualifications were helpful. One practitioner commented “I am open about formal qualifications, but prefer to see something. I am not convinced about some of the qualifications offered in the marketplace. I want to see some management and some psychology qualifications.” A second indicated that she had a preference for some sort of qualification, although some of the coaching qualifications offered “were not always worth much.” Another commented that although he preferred coaches to have some sort of qualification, “there are a few old wise people out there.” Yet another practitioner commented that

professional credentials helped in building credibility with potential executive clients.

One of the practitioners touched on the extent of potential coaches' own personal development. "I like to understand the coach's work that they have done on themselves. Self-awareness is a very important part of this... They have to be able to model what we are seeking to develop in our own people."

"The executives all think they are special. It's elitism - 'no-one knows my job.'"

A majority of practitioners (59%) indicated that psychologist registration was useful, but only 24% of the practitioners indicated that registration as a psychologist was an important selection criterion. A minority of the practitioners indicated that they had used only psychologists in their programs, but 41% of practitioners indicated no preference for psychologists. One practitioner indicated that her preferences had changed. "I started out thinking you have got to have psychology training, but have been proven wrong." One practitioner commented on psychology-related fields, saying that "there is a very big difference between executive coaches and life coaches in what they are able to offer."

For those practitioners who did their own selection, interviews, reference checks, and the recommendations of colleagues constituted the vast majority of the selection methods. One practitioner commented that "the selection process is highly subjective. It is based on entirely on what I think will work." Few practitioners indicated that they used extensive or sophisticated selection techniques, although two described their selection processes as "a full on exercise." One practitioner said that he used role-plays as part of the selection process and found this extremely valuable, and another two indicated that they monitored coaches' performances in their early assignments to determine suitability for future work.

Most of the larger programs ran their own panel of coaches. In selecting coaches for his panel, one practitioner maintained that he was not just interested in the individual coaches, but also that the panel reflected "diversity, professionalism, and left-of-centre thinking." Two practitioners said that most or all of their coaches came from external coaching organisations. One of these commented that "I don't select the coaches, but select the organisations based on their stable of coaches. In the selection of the organisations, we do a due diligence process with a

preference for a multinational customer base (if possible), multicultural ability, male and female coaches, the number of coaches are available to meet demand, and methodology."

The practitioners were evenly split in their responses regarding the methods they used to match coach and executive. Half of the practitioners provided executives with a range of suitable coaches and allowed the executive to make the selection. The executives usually conducted interviews with a few prospective coaches before making their final selections. One practitioner offered a possible insight into this preference, saying that "you [the executive] have to choose. I'm not going to be responsible."

The remaining practitioners made the selection on behalf of their executives based on their knowledge of the executive, the issues, and their experience with the coaches. Only one practitioner indicated that his executives sourced and selected coaches for themselves.

Program Structures

The degree of structure used in programs varied extensively. Approximately half of a programs included structure around the number and length of sessions, the method of delivery, and the debriefing and reporting requirements. Only three of the practitioners reported mandating the use of psychometrics in all programs, and only two had standard coaching models. Regarding the use of psychometrics, the practitioners reported that about half of the individual programs used some kinds of metrics or inventories as part of the coaching, with the most common being 360 degree feedback tools and personality inventories.

The practitioners indicated that the average individual executive coaching program consisted of nine sessions (with a range of 4 to 18 sessions, and three programs without pre-determined length). Session lengths ranging from one to two hours (with a median of 90 minutes). Larger programs tended to have a greater number of sessions, with an average of 10 per individual, compared to 8 sessions for smaller programs. Programs had an average duration of seven months (with a range of 3 to 12 months).

Program costs also varied widely. Practitioners provided estimates of the average cost of individual programs within their respective organisations. Total program costs ranged from a low of \$600 for a four-session program, through to \$45,000 for an 18-session program. The cost of an individual program as an unweighted average across the organisations was \$12,600 per executive. Larger programs averaged \$22,100 per executive, and smaller programs averaged \$7,500 per executive.

The average hourly rate for executive coaching across all organisations was \$717 per hour. The median rate of \$488 per hour indicates that some of the higher hourly rates may be skewing the data. Larger programs paid an average of \$1,018 per hour and smaller programs paid \$569 per hour. Hourly rates ranged from a low of \$150 to a high of \$1,650.

Total program costs ranged from a low of \$600 for a four-session program, through to \$45,000 for an 18-session program.

Ethics

All practitioners indicated that they relied “very much” or “entirely” on the coach to manage any ethical issues that arose. Five practitioners reported being aware of ethical issues occurring, and two of these issues were related to conflicts arising from a common executive coach dynamic of having two clients – the organisation and the executive. One practitioner described a situation where a coach might be engaged

to get a particular outcome that the organisation desires – the manager setting the agenda to get a particular outcome, and HR is complicit. ‘If you get this person to leave that would be great.’ [This dynamic] breaks down confidentiality... I would rather tell them directly myself [that they should leave].

This practitioner went on to say that “when the coach identifies organisation blockers, and the organisation does not listen or change” it can create a second ethical dilemma. “It would be career suicide [for the coach] to speak up.”

Practitioners also described the tension that exists regarding confidentiality when the person using the services and the person or organisation paying for them are separate entities. The majority of respondents (82%) indicated that the detailed content of coaching discussions remained confidential to the coach and executive only. The same percentage of the practitioners indicated that confidentiality matters were negotiated explicitly with each executive, and, in all except one program, this occurred prior to the first session.

One practitioner highlighted issues regarding breaches of confidentiality in a different context. “It happens all the time. [During the selection interview with the coach, the coach is asked to] ‘tell me about your coaching experience,’ and the coach offers names and positions of executives from previous work.” The same practitioner also commented that she was “not saying you should only use psychologists, but ethically they have an advantage,”

referring to the ethical requirements of professional registration.

Another issue raised by practitioners was related to multiple assignments. Two practitioners spoke about managers and team members using the same coaches, which created ethical conflicts for the coach. One practitioner reported that the problem was resolved by reassigning one of the managers to a new coach.

Finally, two practitioners discussed issues around the overuse of coaching. One practitioner commented that his organisation had “had experiences of a level of dependency. Four years of intervention and relationship and they should have moved on. The length of time and extent of growth - makes us wonder are we flogging a dead horse?” The second practitioner indicated that the dependency issue may not be driven solely by the coach. “Some [executives] tended to build a dependency - partly the suppliers’ issue and partly wanting more of a good thing.” The first practitioner also commented about difficulties created by “coaches reinventing themselves for more business and then getting deeper into the organisation and it has been really messy. They are then less able to assist the individual and have less objectivity.”

“Tell me about your coaching experience,’ and the coach offers names and positions of executives from previous work.”

Setting and Measuring Goals

A majority of the practitioners (65%) indicated that goals for the individual programs tended to be both set prior to the first session *and* allowed to emerge and change as the coaching occurred. Only two of the practitioners indicated that goals were set prior to the programs commencement and were not subject to amendment as part of the normal course of the assignment. In all cases, the goals were set by the executive, usually in consultation with the coach (82%), and frequently with the involvement of the program sponsors (59%). A majority of practitioners indicated that goals were written. All except one of the practitioners described developmental themes as being the primary coaching objectives. Other objectives were related to performance issues (41%), organisational change (35%), and support issues (35%). Practitioners also described goals related to transition assistance, and succession plans. One practitioner commented on the importance of setting goals that provided realistic expectations for the program. “With regard to talent, either [the executives] have it or they don’t. The talent is within the person and coaching cannot create talent that doesn’t exist.”

One practitioner commented on how initial behavioural goals can be influenced by personal factors that come up during the coaching. “You have to have an initial goal but that may change. You’re not going to have issues from difficult past family relationships as one of the starting goals.”

Most practitioners (76%) used some sort of mechanism for reporting on program outcomes. Reporting methods varied and included formal debriefs, written reports, surveys, and informal discussions. Information was provided principally by executives and their coaches, although about half of the practitioners indicated that sponsors and managers provided reporting information.

“You have to have an initial goal but that may change. You’re not going to have issues from difficult past family relationships as one of the starting goals.”

Some of the practitioners commented on the tension that exists between reporting requirements and privacy. For example, one practitioner commented that “the objectives are very personal. I have told them not to send information through.” Another practitioner commented on the negative impact of a reporting focus, saying “I like to keep reporting a fairly general. Too much reporting limits the value of the coaching.”

Effects of the Interview Process

In discussing the effects of having participated in the research interview, most of the practitioners commented on how the interview had refocused their thoughts on both the importance of reporting results and returns, and the difficulties they have in doing so. Many of these comments seemed to be driven by the need to justify either the existing expense, or the expansion of the program. One practitioner indicated that she was doing her evaluation and measurement “on a subjective level. In this we are prepared to use the ‘feel-good’ factor. Anything else we would evaluate. But how do measure soft skills?”

Another practitioner talked about a similar dilemma.

“I’m cynical about how others have reported on executive coaching. I’m a great believer in process without getting hung up on outcomes. It is less about tangible results and more about building this process into the fabric of the organisation. It’s an input rather than an output. Cost benefit is a judgment ... Building stories is important

and far more powerful than [quantitative] data.”

Another commented on the importance of evaluation to the future of the program, saying that “otherwise in a few years without clear results [management] will question the whole program.” Yet another practitioner commented that “to increase the [executive coaching] program I would need evaluation to justify the big bucks.”

Themes from other practitioner comments regarding the effects of the interview included an increased awareness about formalising the contracting process, instigating greater rigour around sponsors’ involvement, management of confidentiality, and gaining a better understanding of the purpose of coaching.

DISCUSSION

HR professionals discussed their perceptions of executive coaching related to three questions: how has executive coaching been used, how well did it work, and what were the factors that predicted successful programs? Although the data were drawn entirely from Melbourne-based HR professionals, these practitioners represented a broad range of environments and experiences, and, collectively, are responsible for the outcomes from a substantial volume of executive coaching work, and a spend of more than \$15 million in the last two years.

Although the practitioners described a variety of structures and approaches, the results indicated that the practitioners rated the programs as beneficial with a range of benefits for the executives and the organisation. The practitioners also observed a number of drawbacks, the most prevalent being difficulties for executives in making time for sessions, and perceptions of executive coaching as expensive.

The practitioners indicated uncertainty around the evaluation of return on investment, but, of those who expressed an opinion, most indicated that they thought executive coaching was cost-effective as an intervention. They also reported, almost without exception, very strong interest in using executive coaching in future.

Regarding the predictors of program success, practitioners indicated that a large range of factors have important influence on the success of programs. Those rated as most important related to the skill of coaches, senior management and organisational support, the engagement and commitment of the executive, the quality of the working relationship, and effective management of confidentiality issues. Those factors rated least important were those related to the standardisation of program structure and delivery.

Efficacy

Does executive coaching work? As a general statement, the answer is unequivocal – yes, at least from the perspective of the practitioners who are buying services and who are responsible for the programs. All the practitioners rated their programs as at least moderately successful. This result supports the findings of Morgan et al. (2005) who reported that 75% of their respondents indicated that they had found coaching at least moderately effective.

The strongest evidence for the efficacy of these programs is the level of interest the practitioners reported in using executive coaching in the future. Only two respondents indicated their interest was anything less than the highest option offered to them, “strong interest.” Given that the practitioners in the study were heavily invested in their coaching programs, this result may not be surprising. For most of these professionals, however, executive coaching was only one offering in their development suite. Strong support for coaching, if indeed it were both an expensive and ineffective intervention, would last only as long as the first few bad experiences - and many of these practitioners have had extensive experience with executive coaching.

The strongest evidence for the efficacy of these programs is the level of interest the practitioners reported in using executive coaching in the future.

The question of efficacy is, however, multifaceted. How does the organisation benefit? How do the individuals benefit? Was the intervention cost-effective? These more focused questions produced subtly different answers. Although practitioners described a large number of objectives for executive coaching programs, most of these objectives could be described as having developmental themes, whether or not driven by remediation needs. Practitioners’ comments regarding the definition of coaching indicated that the purposes of coaching had two strands, the benefits for the organisation, and the benefits for the individual executives. That is, practitioners seemed to indicate that they were seeking to achieve the organisational and the individual benefits through the personal and professional development of the executives. Differentiation of these strands, organisational versus individual gain, was an underlying theme in the data from the study.

The individual executives seemed to enjoy the greatest range of benefits. Of the top five rated executive benefits, three emphasised the gains from a

clearer understanding of personal and organisational issues. By way of comparison, of the benefits identified in the Association for Coaching (2004) study, only better people management skills (in the form of communication skills) made the top eight in the current study. The remaining benefits identified by these researchers (increased or improved confidence, coping strategies, personal performance, productivity, motivation, and work/life balance) were also identified by the practitioners in the present study, but tended to fall in the bottom half of the ranked list of benefits.

Two reasons might explain the differences in these results. Firstly, the more concrete gains identified in the Association for Coaching study are probably built on a foundation of a clear understanding of personal and organisational issues. That is, the process may be sequential, although the extent of progression along the sequence may vary.

Alternatively, the foci of the review programs might be substantially different. The Association for Coaching respondents may have been participating in programs that focus more on skill acquisition than self-awareness. More importantly, since the data are perceptual and largely unmeasured, there might simply be variability in the results.

Practitioners enumerated fewer organisational benefits, although all practitioners were able to identify some. The biggest organisational benefits seemed to be in the development of the talent pool, and increased morale and talent retention. Cost-benefit, however, was an area where most practitioners expressed uncertainty, and for which they held little, if any, data. Although most practitioners indicated that coaching was seen as expensive, a number commented that cost was not an issue once senior managers started to appreciate the benefits from coaching. The collective opinion of those practitioners prepared to venture an opinion was that benefits, nevertheless, exceeded costs, albeit that the results were equivocal.

Differentiation of these strands, organisational versus individual gain, was an underlying theme in the data from the study.

These data indicate a complex relationship between the responses: cost is high, organisational benefit is moderate, and cost-benefit is uncertain. Yet practitioners, almost without exception, indicated strong interest in using executive coaching in the future. At first glance, this relationship does not appear to make intuitive sense. The explanation may lie in the differentiation of organisational and

individual benefits from coaching. The reasons that these practitioners are so enthusiastic about using coaching in the future may be due to one of two reasons. The first is that practitioners may have witnessed particular and highly valuable gains for individual executives that have little direct and measurable organisational benefit (e.g., extraordinary personal insight or interpersonal behaviour change).

Cost is high, organisational benefit is moderate, and cost-benefit is uncertain. Yet practitioners ... indicated strong interest in using executive coaching in the future.

Alternatively, executive coaching may provide solutions to issues that practitioners struggle to deal with using alternative interventions. The principal reasons practitioners described for using executive coaching as an intervention tends to identify the niche that executive coaching occupies – an intervention that requires privacy, flexibility, an individually personalised focus, and an external perspective. The use of executive coaching due to a lack of alternatives may be particularly evident in smaller programs in which there is a strong remedial component, and which, due to their small size, fall within the discretion of the HR executive and budget, without the need to secure major funding.

The separation of larger and smaller programs on the basis of the amount spent did not provide a good predictor of the variation among the programs. Larger programs (those who spent more than \$1 million in the preceding two years) tended to represent major initiatives in executive development, whereas smaller programs (less than \$200,000) tended to use executive coaching on an ad hoc or one-off basis. Despite these differences, the variability in program objectives and structures did not seem to be aligned with program scale, and there were remarkably few major differences in the overall results based simply on the size of the program. Of the structural differences that were observable, the most obvious were that larger programs tend to have a greater number of sessions per individual program, a longer chronological timeframe for each, and a higher dollar-per-hour cost (which was nearly double that of the smaller programs).

If larger programs were prepared to pay more per executive, did they receive better outcomes? The results indicate that larger programs seemed to have slightly higher overall ratings of efficacy both from the organisational and the executive standpoint, and the practitioners also indicated more favourable cost-benefit estimates. These results, however, should be viewed with some caution as the study was not

designed to make such comparisons. Furthermore, these more favourable results for larger programs do not necessarily imply causality. The higher ratings may be the result of practitioners' greater commitment to executive coaching (resulting in higher ratings for programs that are no more effective), or of small and successful programs that have been expanded on the basis of that success, but without any increase in returns in spite of the greater scale.

HR professionals are, however, also subject to the business imperative of being able to demonstrate the financial value of costly programs. The major theme of practitioners' comments when reflecting on participating in the interview was their concerns relating to poor measurement. The practitioners, nevertheless, indicated that measurement was relatively unimportant to the success of executive coaching programs. It may be, that the imperative for good reporting and measurement is more to do with gaining and maintaining senior management support than with the effective operation of the coaching process. A few of the practitioners touched on the conflict between the highly personal and confidential form of the work and the intrusion that measurement can cause.

HR professionals are, however, also subject to the business imperative of being able to demonstrate the financial value of costly programs.

Given that a great deal appears to have been achieved in establishing executive coaching programs despite the fact that the practitioners felt they had not handled gaining senior management support particularly well, the need for good measurement and reporting may be dependent on the degree of HR discretion in spending on executive coaching. This discretion may be related to the purpose of the coaching. The use of ad hoc remedial coaching, where there is little in the way of other options and a relatively low spend, may not require the same quality of business case justification as a large and expensive development program.

Demonstration of a financial return on investment usually requires a structured approach with highly visible and measurable outcomes. For executive coaching interventions, such an approach lends itself to structured psycho-educational and skill-based approaches. The factors that underpin these approaches did not, however, rate as the most important predictors of executive coaching program success.

Efficacy Drivers

Research that is able to provide an indication that executive coaching “on average” is effective is of little use to practitioners in an applied setting. Given the range of experiences in individual programs described by the practitioners in the study, and also the wide range of structures and presumably delivery approaches that have been used, the valuable applied information relates to determining the factors that seem to have the largest influence on program success.

One of the most important findings of this study was identification of the large range of factors that practitioners rated as important to program success. Of the 22 factors identified in the questionnaire, 15 of these had average ratings of three or above on a 4-point scale of importance. That is, getting executive coaching programs to work successfully is a complex task.

The most highly-rated factors in predicting success for executive coaching programs reflected three needs: highly-skilled coaches, highly engaged and committed participants, and a supportive environment. Sherman and Freas (2005) seem to support this view with their argument that the best way to make effective use of executive coaching services was the alignment and qualification of sponsors, executive participants, and coaches. Regarding the quality of coaches, in spite of the practitioners indicating that good coaches were hard to find, the practitioners seemed to find them. The practitioners rated highly the quality of their coaches, and poor delivery of services by coaches was well down on the list of drawbacks.

The four lowest-rated efficacy factors were those that provided for a highly structured approach: standardized coaching program structure, collation and presentation of results, use of psychometric tools and inventories, and having a standard model for content delivery. Even establishing clear goals in advance of program commencement ranked only 14th on the list of important efficacy drivers, and the majority of practitioners indicated that goals moved and emerged as part of the process of coaching. This may be a further indication of the flexibility required in the method and expectations around the program.

These results appear to indicate that skills acquisition and psycho-educational training, although an important contributor to coaching program success, may not be the underlying and differentiating strength of effective executive coaching. That is, the power of executive coaching may well be derived from the ability of coaches to adapt to the unique circumstances, learning styles, and personality of each executive, and from the commitment and courage of the executives to look at lifelong patterns of behaviour.

Where structure and standardisation may be important is in the process of preparing the organisation and the individual executives for coaching. A number of the practitioners in the present study took great care to match and meet the needs of the organisational culture – documentation for lawyers, data for scientists, evidence for engineers. The practitioners also recommended care and effort in preparation and expectation-setting for the individual executives. It is in the preparation of the executives in particular, that the use of psychometrics and standard methodologies may provide the executive with feedback and insight that are essential for achieving change through executive coaching programs. It appears, therefore, that structured approaches may be particularly valuable for providing a positive context for coaching (positioning, reassurance, preparation, funding, and ongoing support for the program), but less so for the coaching process itself.

These results appear to indicate that skills acquisition and psycho-educational training ... may not be the underlying and differentiating strength of effective executive coaching.

Conclusions

Part of the reason that measuring executive coaching is so difficult is that the major gains appear to rest with the individual, are highly personal, and are subject to confidentiality constraints. This does not represent an argument for the primacy of personal development over skill development in executive coaching. Both are essential components of the coaching process. With the commoditisation of executive coaching and the demands for measurable results, the industry seems to be adopting increasing structure in programs, something that these practitioners have rated as less important to success of programs. Such an approach de-emphasises one of the key strengths of effective executive coaching – skilled coaches using flexible and customised approaches to work with the particular strengths and blind spots of individual executive.

If these conclusions are correct then they create something of a dilemma for HR professionals. Understanding and verifying the competence of candidate coaches is difficult, particularly in the absence of clearly identified and defined competencies. One of the most important and difficult tasks for the professionalisation of the executive coaching industry is for researchers and professionals to provide clear and usable definitions of those

competencies *without* limiting, or over-prescribing the key qualities, skills, knowledge, experience and attributes of competent (let alone exceptional) executive coaches.

“Touchy-feely” “soft-and-fluffy,” “psychologist,” and “remedial,” are not words and phrases that endear executive coaching to the hearts and minds of hard-nosed decision-makers. Neither does “trust me, I know what I’m doing.” Setting expectations, realistic expectations, for both executives doing the coaching, and for those whose budget is being spent, is one of the major challenges for HR practitioners using executive coaching. The development and refinement of a range of effective and practical measurement techniques may go some way to help practitioners to identify and put numbers around the benefits and gains to individuals and the organisation as a whole, and to justify future expenditure on coaching programs. Likewise, the development of qualitative information resources may be an important component of any evaluation exercise.

HR professionals also need to exercise some care to ensure that coaching is not seen as a “silver bullet.” As one practitioner pointed out, coaching cannot unearth talent that is simply not there. Neither can coaching be allowed to be seen as a way for reluctant leaders to avoid management responsibility for performance management. One HR professional provided an insight in this regard. When a manager comes to him and says she is experiencing major performance issues with a subordinate, and the subordinate “really should be doing some coaching,” this practitioner recommends coaching for the manager.

“Touchy-feely” “soft-and-fluffy,” “psychologist,” and “remedial,” are not words and phrases that endear executive coaching to the hearts and minds of hard-nosed decision-makers.

The keys, then, to effective executive coaching programs go beyond the need for highly skilled coaches. Good programs need effective positioning within the organisation and with senior management, careful selection and preparation of, and expectation-setting for the participating executives, and ensuring that coaching is being undertaken for the right reasons, and that these reasons are explicit.

Research Issues and Future Research

The most obvious weakness of this research is that the results are built on the subjective opinions of

practitioners who are highly invested in the success of their programs. As an extension of this, asking these practitioners to comment on the thoughts of other executives on their executive coaching experiences is drawing a rather long bow. In defense of this approach, however, most of the data have been used in comparative rather than absolute terms (e.g., which factors and results are rated comparatively more or less valuable or prevalent than others). Furthermore, it is these same practitioners who are making the purchase decisions around the use of executive coaching, and until such time as researchers are able to provide convincing evidence contrary to these opinions, then subjective reality is reality. A second weakness of the study is that the participant sample is small, geographically limited, and non-random. This limits the generalisability of results.

The most obvious weakness of this research is that the results are built on the subjective opinions of practitioners who are highly invested in the success of their programs.

A possible extension of this research would be to conduct interview programs in other centres both nationally and internationally. Another topic for future research is the exploration and differentiation of psycho-educational components, and personal awareness and development components in relation to the efficacy of coaching programs. Finally, one of the key concerns described by the practitioners in this study was the difficulty in locating skilled coaches. Practitioners would find applied value in research examining the factors that differentiate highly skilled coaches, and the processes that practitioners could use to identify these coaches.

It seems that the most difficult tasks facing HR professionals who use executive coaching, and for executive coaching as a profession, are the clarification and differentiation of the range executive coaching approaches, the purposes for using each, and the benefits that can be expected from engaging in each. Without such clarity, some outstanding interventions and programs, both psycho-educational and personal development-oriented, may end up ineffective and discredited due to weight of unrealistic expectation.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, M. C. (2001). *Executive briefing: Case study on the return on investment of executive coaching*. Retrieved April 2, 2006, from http://www.metrixglobal.net/images/pdfs/metrixglobal_coaching_roi_briefing.pdf
- Association for Coaching. (2004). *Summary report: ROI for corporate coaching*. Retrieved December 20, 2005, from http://www.associationforcoaching.com/memb/AC_SumROI.pdf
- Garman, A. N., Whiston, D. L., & Zlatoper, K. W. (2000). Media perceptions of executive coaching and the formal preparation of coaches. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 52, 201-205.
- Kilburg, R. R. (2000). *Executive coaching: Developing managerial wisdom in a world of chaos*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Morgan, H., Harkins, P., & Goldsmith, M. (2005). *The art and practice of leadership coaching: 50 top executive coaches reveal their secrets*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Peterson, D. B., & Kraiger, K. (2004). A practical guide to evaluating coaching: Translating state-of-the-art techniques to the real world. In J. E. Edwards, J. C. Scott, & N. S. Raju (Eds.), *The human resources program-evaluation handbook* (pp. 262-282). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sherman, S., & Freas, A. (2005). The wild west of executive coaching. *Harvard Business Review*, 82, 82-90.

Dr. Gavin Dagley is a psychologist, former Company Secretary, researcher and executive coach. Gavin completed his Masters degree at Massey University (Auckland) studying cognitive performance in athletes, and Ph.D. at Victoria University (Melbourne) studying career transitions. Gavin spent 15 years in senior financial management and accounting roles before returning to full time study in 1995 to undertake his psychology training. Gavin is director of a private executive coaching practice in Melbourne, Australia. Gavin can be contacted by email at gavin.dagley@bigpond.com or by phone on 0425 795 675.

This research was undertaken with the support and cooperation of the Australian Human Resources Institute. AHRI can be contacted through its website at www.ahri.com.au