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E-Coaching

By [Merry Lee Olson](#)

Innovative use of technology enables business coaching to broaden its reach.

Business coaching has been through a rapid evolution, expanding from executive coaching exclusive to people at the top of an organization into individualized support for people at all levels. But according to Scott Blanchard, the founder and CEO of Coaching.com--an offshoot of The Ken Blanchard Companies--with the advent of technology, the transformation of business coaching has just begun.

"Coaching is about to change its connotation as a one-to-one process to that of being a full-scale organizational initiative that measurably magnifies the benefits of training," says Blanchard. "Organizations spend extraordinary amounts of capital to develop and train their workforce. Consequently, the people in charge of human development are looking for ways to make training programs sustainable, and thus, increase return on investment," he adds.

According to industry research, when training is combined with coaching, individuals increase their productivity by an average of 86 percent, as compared to 22 percent with training alone. "This is because coaching helps people organize their increasingly complex lives, providing focus, a clear direction for setting goals, and the ability to develop meaningful action plans. Coaching helps to ensure that individuals and their organizations achieve targeted goals," says Blanchard.

Enter technology

The quandary has been how to provide effective coaching, which is a personal and private process, to a broader population. Companies that have tried to convert executive coaching into organization-wide initiatives found the process rife with challenges. How can a company train a large number of coaches in a consistent process and bring them up to speed quickly on the critical issues for each initiative? How does a company assess whether people have a personal commitment and are ready, willing, and able to be coached? How will a company set individual goals that are consistent with those of the organization? How does a company measure results?

Blanchard says that his organization found the answer to those questions and others by implementing technology. "As powerful as coaching is at the individual level, most executive coaching programs are not easily expandable to the organizational level," says Blanchard. "A Web-based platform is revolutionizing business coaching by allowing it to be

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scalable."

Chip Bruss, who teamed with Blanchard and renowned coach Madeleine Homan to develop Coaching.com's Web-enabled coaching program, says that technology also makes coaching accessible, consistent, and measurable. Bruss reports that Coaching.com has addressed practical matters such as scheduling, big picture aspects such as obtaining and measuring results, and more sensitive topics such as confidentiality. "Successfully managing these areas within large-scale initiatives is essential to achieving impact and obtaining a return on investment," says Bruss, who now serves as Coaching.com's vice president of product development.

Online benefits

Homan--who is a founding member of the Board of the International Coach Federation--says that a significant benefit of a Web-based program is that it creates a consistent coaching methodology. Most companies that offer coaching programs agree that they improve performance, but they find that coaches' credentials vary. "We've been able to use the Web-based platform to train coaches and certify that they have consistent skills," says Homan. "They're also better equipped because they can draw on the platform's resources." Bruss defines additional resources as built-in learning activities, models, and assessments. "Each coach can tap into a storehouse of resources and become a super coach, so to speak," he says.

According to Homan, the Web-enabled coaching process is significantly different than most of the e-learning approaches that have been developed in recent years. Some organizations want the coaching initiative to be an internal function with coaching coming from their managers. An open platform will support either an internally driven initiative or an external initiative that uses outside coaches rather than managers," says Bruss. "Whether the coaching initiative is managed and delivered through internal or external resources, Web-enabled coaching is much more efficient," says Homan. "By combining technology with coaching, there is tremendous but invisible support."

More important, Web-enabled coaching initiatives can be designed to support a wide variety of learning programs. The technology platform allows companies to adapt coaching to widely-used third-party training and learning programs, and new content can be integrated as needed. "With the support of technology-enhanced programs, coaches can make learning a top priority, closing the gap between awareness and doing. We call this J³ Learning--just in time; just enough; just for me."

And an intuitive Web interface provides a shared workspace for coaches and clients that supports online sessions with an array of self-assessments, exercises, and other resources, including tools to help set goals and record and track progress, assessments to provide baseline data for measuring progress, and tracking mechanisms to produce attendance reports that evaluate effectiveness. Unlike face-to-face sessions, online sessions are digitally stored, so clients can review goals, chart milestones, and review progress over time. "We collect a lot of data that can be analyzed, measured, and tracked over time," explains Bruss. "Through that functionality we have developed a rich database that provides support to other coaches and clients."

Quantitative measurement through data analysis can be as simple as attendance and satisfaction levels, or as complex as productivity improvement and return on investment studies. Measuring ROI may be one of the best aspects of delivering coaching through a Web-based platform. "That isn't a big concern when one person has a coach," says Blanchard. "But if 100 or more people are in a program, organizations need to be able to track and measure results."

For example, some online coaching programs can measure consistency of skills and behaviors by using online assessments that ask a client whether he or she practices given skills and behaviors naturally and effortlessly 100 percent of the time. "[Coaching.com's] database has algorithms that determine the potential areas of focus that are related to those questions that people can't answer yes," says Bruss.

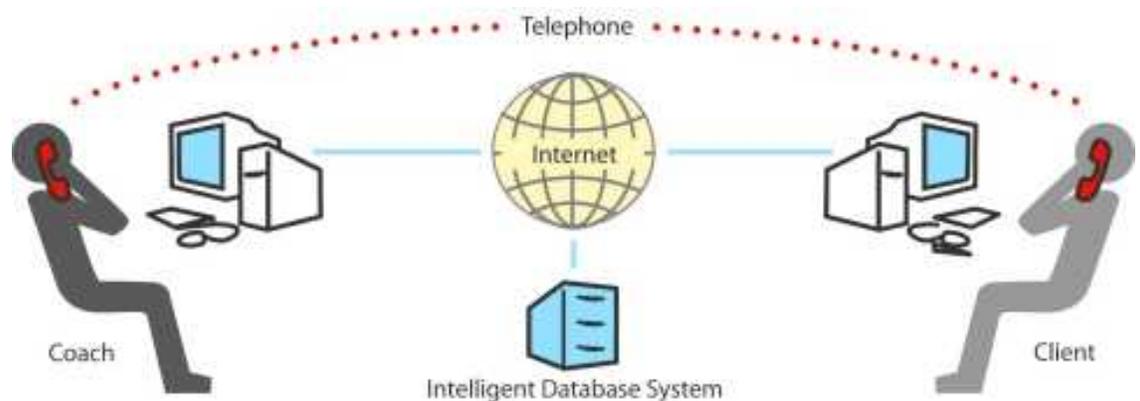
Blanchard, Bruss, and Homan relate several other ways that technology helps structure an organization-wide initiative, such as online scheduling that can increase efficiency and reduce frustrations inherent in trying to schedule large numbers of people within an organization for coaching sessions. "A Web-based program has an interactive calendar that each coach lists times that he or she is available. The assigned clients log-on to the program to schedule sessions, and if needed, make changes quickly and directly without involving other staff people," says Bruss.

Online challenges

But keeping communication between a coach and client confidential is a major challenge for Web-based programs. "Email is an efficient way to communicate, but unfortunately it isn't confidential. Coaching.com's solution was to develop an instant-chat capability that awards a coach and client the convenience of email but assures complete privacy," says Bruss.

He notes that additional benefits of the instant-chat feature include the capability for a coach and client to communicate either in real time or asynchronously, and it stores notes and records progress over time. Although individual coaching conversations are completely confidential, the recording technology allows companies to collect valuable data on organizational strengths, gaps, and trends and view aggregate information that would otherwise be undetected. "

Bruss also notes that it's important to understand that Web-enabled coaching combines old technology with new technology. "Coaching takes place over the phone, so the process is really one of telephone-based coaching with Internet support," says Bruss. The phoned-based approach allows organizations to offer coaching to their geographically dispersed workforces, and it is less expensive than face-to-face coaching. More important, phone-based discussions reinforce the confidential nature of coaching, allowing users to speak about potentially sensitive topics.



But the online database assists the coach during phone sessions by helping to identify focus points that the coach and client can evaluate together. Likewise, it's able to provide

the coach with instant assessments, allowing him or her to quickly drill down and probe deeper. "When the client comes to the coach and says, 'I have a problem,' the coach asks clarifying questions to sort out what issues might be present, and then asks high-yield questions, which are designed to get to the heart of the matter," says Homan.

Bottom line

"One mistake that's been made with e-learning, is that so much emphasis is placed on the technology that it lacks the key elements essential to human involvement and acceptance. Web-based coaching uses technology in a different way-to bring people together, to enhance their conversations, to energize the collaboration between two people," says Homan. "One of the greatest things is the aspect of increasing people's ability to connect with each other as individuals, to hear each other, to be heard, to find their own answers, to communicate at a level that will change lives," she says.

"All things considered, it's evident that technology greatly eases the process of making coaching scalable throughout an organization," says Blanchard. "It allows coaching initiatives to be accessible to a broad population of users without compromising any of the characteristics that make coaching work, particularly that of the special, irreplaceable relationship between a client and a coach," he says.

"We predict the Web-based platform we've developed is just the tip of the iceberg. The ability of technology to support coaching can only get bigger and better!"

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