

## UFHRD HONORARIUM REPORT

# The value of applying focused on-line coaching for professional development: A Pilot Study

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### 1. Summary

- **Purpose:** This UFHRD (University Forum for Human Resource Development) honorarium project is a pilot study to investigate the effects of a novel on-line coaching process focused specifically on enabling individuals take charge of their personal/professional development and have access to tools and resources to enhance their self-directed learning. We identify the principal motivational factors that lead people to engage with self-development coaching, and the advantages and disadvantages of a self-development coaching process that is both externally facilitated and undertaken on-line. We also analyse the self-development decisions and outcomes arising from the process.
- **Research design:** This pilot study utilized semi-structured interviews carried out with participants from Eindhoven in the Netherlands.
- **Findings and recommendations:** The study identified four prime motivators for engagement with self-development coaching: career development, personal development, curiosity and opportunism. Trust in the process arose from its non-directive stance, combined with the external nature of the coaching facilitation. These factors

provide a safe space for self-awareness and reflection necessary for affective as well as cognitive and behavioural self-development coaching outcomes.

- **Research limitations:** This pilot study utilized a small, purposive sample of respondents. Although participants were of different nationalities and at different stages of their professional development, they were mostly expatriates working in the Netherlands. This may be consequential for issues of transferability to other contexts.
- **Practical and societal benefits:** Our findings contribute to debates about the use of technology for coaching and the value and outcomes of self-development coaching. The study has indicated the value of self-development coaching as a 'stigma-free' intervention with utility as a diversity and inclusion strategy directed towards expatriates and other under-represented or minority worker groups.
- **Originality and value:** Self-development coaching is undertheorized and under-represented in professional competence development frameworks in the coaching and mentoring field. This pilot project contributes new insights into the role of coaching as a feature of individuals' engagement with self-directed learning. It also suggests further opportunities for methodological development of the narrative critical incident technique.
- **Structure:** This report explains the background to the project, outlines the research design, and discusses initial findings, recommendations for future research and implications for practice.

## 2. Background

Fostering adaptation to a changing work and economic environment is an important concern for organizations, policy-makers and HRD professionals (Morris, 2018) as individuals are increasingly expected to determine their own career paths and select and enact their own learning contents and methods (Deloitte, 2018; Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003). Self-directed learning is a deliberate process to gain knowledge and skill or to change in some other way (Tough, 1971, p. 1). Self-directed learning is a critical competence that enables adults to adapt to fluid and unexpected social and contextual changes (Kranzow & Hyland, 2016; Marsick & Watkins, 1996). Normative approaches to self-directed learning indicate that individuals should diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify appropriate (human and material) resources for learning, choose and implement strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975). However, self-directed learning is highly contextualised and the processes and practices involved are under-researched and under-theorized (Edmondson, Boyer & Artis, 2012).

Coaching is a one-to-one tailored, learning and development intervention that uses a collaborative, reflective, goal-focused relationship to achieve personal and professional outcomes that are valued by the coachee (Smither, 2011). It is an expanding field of practice in management and business and its applications now extend beyond traditional executive or leadership coaching involving external or organizational coaching practitioners. As an adaptable and tailored learning and development

process, it can provide the coachee with time, mental space, support and guidance to make sense of and change their unique situation through self-awareness and learning (Bozer and Jones, 2018). Recent studies indicate that coaching fosters a range of affective outcomes that enhance individuals' well-being, coping, attitudes, and self-regulation (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2021). However, very few studies have examined the role of coaching for self-directed professional learning and development.

Although traditional coaching processes have been undertaken using face-to-face forms of communication, there is interest, exacerbated by the effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic, in the potential value of online coaching. Online coaching involves coaching practices enacted through digital communication channels where coaches and their clients do not physically meet each other face-to-face (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2020). Although the convenience, cost effectiveness and, in a Covid-19 context, the necessity of online coaching may be attractive, the extent to which client commitment and engagement in the process can be achieved is not yet clear (Pascal, Sass & Gregory, 2015).

The pilot study reported here investigates the process and outcomes of an on-line coaching process focused specifically on enabling individuals to take charge of their personal/professional development to enhance their self-directed learning. The three research questions addressed are:

- What motivated participants to engage with self-development coaching?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of a self-development coaching process that is (i) externally facilitated; (ii) undertaken on-line?
- How does engagement with self-development coaching affect participants' self-development practices?

### **3. Research design**

Analysis of interview data from six participants in a novel on-line coaching process focused on personal and professional development data addressed the three research questions. All participants were resident in Eindhoven in the Netherlands which is Europe's leading innovative top technology region. The Eindhoven region is characterised by a mix of internationals who work in high-tech businesses. Effective self-directed professional development is important in this fast-moving technological and innovative context (Deloitte, 2019).

The research population was all those who had participated in the pilot online coaching process enacted by the first author (n= 9). We invited all members of the research population to respond, directly and in confidence, to the second author if they were willing to participate in an interview. This ensured that the first author (the coach) had no knowledge about which of the clients were participants in the pilot study. Seven members of the population agreed to be interviewed (including one 'no-show') so the sample comprised six participants.

The sample population comprised one man and five women, aged between 30 – 55 years. They fulfilled different roles in high-tech or digital related fields, for example data analyst, business development, marketing and procurement. Most participants were from different regions of the world and were expatriates to the Netherlands.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed with consent, using a secure online conferencing platform. They lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and used an interview protocol (Appendix 1). Data were analysed by the third author using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software.

The research questions were addressed through thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015) and a qualitative narrative critical incident technique (Chell, 2004).

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

In the first stage, data were analysed inductively, with the third author coding key themes in the data which related to participants motivations for self-development coaching and perceived advantages and disadvantages of the externally facilitated and online process (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). Next, all three authors engaged in analytical conversations to identify areas of coding agreement and make refinements as appropriate. Participant's reflections about the effect of the coaching process on their self-development decision-making and outcomes were examined using a narrative critical incident analysis technique (Chell & Pittaway, 1998).

### **4.1 Motivation to engage with self-development coaching**

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts indicates four prime motivators for engagement with self-development coaching: career development, personal development, curiosity and opportunism. TS07's reflection provides an illustration of these motivators, "I didn't have access to a network here having just been here for just about a year. So partly it was my mission to grow in my career, and that's usually what I would have used my network for".

A certain level of opportunism in engaging with self-development coaching is evident across the data set, for example, "I'm open minded. Why not? So let's do it" (TS01) and "I would like to see or hear another approach from an expert. And this is coaching expert" (TS03). However, the most prominent theme, expressed by all but one of the participants, is a commitment to personal development. For example, TS06 indicated they had participated "to help me understand where I stand and what I want to do". TS04 reflected, "...there was an overlap between the personal development and then the psychological challenges I was facing with". Linked with this, four participants, including those who were currently looking for new work, specifically referred to career related concerns. TS04, for example indicated a personal imperative to "improve myself" so that employers "can actually appreciate my background, my experience, and, yeah, trust me with bigger roles". TS07 also reflected that involvement in the process "partly was my mission to grow in my career". In addition, the same participant's reflections indicate an element of curiosity in their motivations. TS02, for example, indicated, "I had a look at her profile and it seemed interesting, and it was also interesting that she had just recently moved from the UK to the Netherlands, to Eindhoven and I'm also based near Eindhoven but I had moved about two years ago". TS03 commented that "I saw on LinkedIn, I do recall, well, this piece could be very interesting".

### **4.2 External facilitation**

Examination of the data relating to RQ2, concerning the advantages and disadvantages of a self-development coaching process that is (i) externally facilitated; (ii) undertaken on-line indicates a

range of comments concerning process feedback. In general, participants did not refer to disadvantages of a coaching alliance (Lai & Smith, 2019) formed outside of specific organizational constraints notwithstanding that, for some issues “I do need to look to like my professional community, because that's so specific” (TS02). Analysis further indicates four particular advantages that participants identified in relation to an externally facilitated coaching process: external perspective, knowledge and expertise, non-directive, and trust.

Four participants (TS1,2,4,7) referred to the benefits of an external perspective. For example “it's good to have an outside view and that gives you a different perspective, like a different lens to look at things through than perhaps what I would do on my own naturally or within my environment and I wouldn't necessarily have people to talk to about these things because they're kind of private”. (TS02) and “at the end of the day, she is helping me achieve. It's not for her. It's for me” (TS04). In addition, four participants (TS1,2,4,6) reported that they had benefitted from the skills, expertise and resources that the coaching process had provided. For example, “I didn't even know that there are actually ways to improve the way you learn things, which obviously there are, and there is a lot of tools” and TS06 reflected that their ‘eyes were opened’ and “I thought, oh, I never thought it is like this and it works. And then ...she has a different approach on learning methods and on education and training”.

All of the interviewees also highlighted the non-directive approach to self-development coaching that they had experienced, which came as something of a surprise for many of them. Expressions like “I felt she would be doing the talking, but I had to be doing the talking” (TS01); “she put me into a position that I should work with myself and understand myself. And I think in the end that was much wiser than, giving me a solution on a plate” (TS06) and “she was allowing me to speak my mind. In a way it was nice because it was organic in a sense, she wasn't moulding it” (TS07) illustrate this theme.

Taken as a whole, the data also suggest that this non-directive stance, combined with the external nature of the coaching facilitation, enabled participants to develop a sense of trust in both the coach and the process, for example, “it's good to have someone ...can trust regarding learning” (TS06) and “when she asked the ‘Why?’ I didn't have to feel defensive” (TS07). TS02 further reflected, “...the business can provide you with skills, but nobody really cares at the end of the day about you, unless you care about yourself”.

## 4.3 Online facilitation

Thematic analysis of the data relating to the experience of an online coaching process indicates three prevalent themes: expanded opportunities, interpersonal relationships, and familiarity.

Half of the interviewees were enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by online communication for learning and self-development in general. For example, “I love it. It's openings. New doors. New perspectives. It's great. It's just amazing” (TS01) and “I think it does open further opportunities as well. Like for example, I wouldn't be talking to you now if we had to make space in a different country. So, so I think in a way having that requirement to meet face to face was quite limiting in a way” (TS02). In spite of this enthusiasm, however, participants also reflected that it had taken them some time to become familiar with online communication processes - “I guess we're still

trying to get used to not working with people face to face” (TS02). Every participant in the pilot study indicated that, whilst they valued online interactions, they missed “the actual interaction with human beings”. TS02, for example, an enthusiast for online opportunities none-the-less highlighted the importance of “the blinking of the eye of the person sitting in front of you ...freeing up space in your mind, in your whole body...[which] enables you to do much more with all the energy there is in that conversation”. Participant TS07 has previously encountered and interacted with the coach at a face-to-face networking event prior to participation in the online coaching process. They indicated that “nothing replaces face to face, being in the same physical room but in the absence of that [the coaching] definitely worked. We had a very good conversation, and the fact that we’ve seen each other’s face helps us just a little bit, if we can’t be in the same room”.

## 4.4. Self-development decision making and outcomes

Research question 3 involved a narrative critical incident technique to analyse participant’s reflections about the effect of the coaching process on their self-development decision-making and outcomes. This process enabled an assessment of the ways in which the self-development coaching process enabled participants to respond through cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes, and the extent to which positive and negative incidents featured in their self-development thinking (Chell & Pittaway, 1998).

In contrast with other critical incident studies in the Business and Management field, the context of this pilot study provides data relating to personal rather than business/organizational incidents as a basis for the analysis. One participant discussed how the self-development coaching process had encouraged them to consider different incidents, both positive and negative. However, across the data set as a whole around half of the participants described important experiences in a negative light and half described incidents in a more positive light. For example, TS02 reflected on the challenges of developing a sense of ‘professional self’ and direction following a relocation experience, “I just want to be where I know I’m comfortable, and actually get work because that’s not easy as I’ve relocated ...and I don’t speak the language either. So there are challenges”. TS04 also discussed their experience of expatriation, but in a more positive light “ If I was still in .... I wouldn’t be able to see as many opportunities or interact with as many people to increase my curiosity or my knowledge....it’s more expensive to stay here.... but what you gain out of it is a lot more”.

These examples also illustrate how the term ‘incident’ is a partial descriptor of the critical experiences that take place over quite prolonged periods (Cope & Watts, 2000) that form the context for the self-development coaching process that forms the basis for this study. For example, expatriation processes take months to enact with subsequent lengthy adjustment periods. Other incidents that participants described, such as career development successes and disappointments, took place over a number of months or years rather than as discrete, moment-in-time incidents. The data also illustrate the complex relationship between experiences and incidents that an individual may describe in either a negative or a positive light. Specifically, participants reflected that the self-development coaching process enabled them to recognise opportunities for implicit as well as explicit learning and forms of self-development. For example, “I think it was helpful to me to have a conversation, and that’s what nice about coaching, see what’s going on, unconsciously blocking you or consciously you want to achieve but you don’t even realise you want to achieve and verbalise it”

(TS07), and “I remember in very much the way she, in the networking event that we met, how she described the learning journey. And that really, let's say opened my eyes and I thought, oh, I never thought it is like this and it works” (TS06). TS04, further reflected on the opportunity for understanding and a constructive context to prompt a re-examination of their situation rooted in both action and reflection. TS04 described their thought-process as: “why am I sitting and just feeling sorry for myself, that someone going through not the same, not the same absolutely not the same, but similar, at least she can easily understand what I may be going through. So I was like, she's trying, why can't I do the same?”

The data further illustrate the potential of self-development coaching to facilitate participants' cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to the personal incidents and events, although overlap between these analytical categories is also evident in the data set. For example, TS07 reflected “I was a bit more purposeful in picking out certain things to read that I had been wanting to” following a recognition that they had been “sitting back, further back” until prompted by “the series of questions which she asked”. This same participant reflected that “it was helpful to me to have a conversation ...see what's going on, unconsciously blocking you or consciously you want to achieve but you don't even realise you want to achieve and verbalise it”. Participants described both proactive and reactive outcomes associated with the self-development coaching process, for example, “my next step might be one with a bigger responsibility for more positions and then leadership... it should be something, I can learn or I need to know ...to fulfil that kind of role properly” (TS03). TS01 described a process of adaptation to the requirements of online working in general, and not just as a platform for self-development coaching, as a process where “I'm discovering like new ways, which is very, very good learning experience, but also new ways of looking at my house. You know, it's my office at home, which I just made fit as a regular office”.

Taken as a whole, therefore, the data suggest that the coaching process stimulated cognitive, affective and behavioural responses that enabled participants to make sense of incidents from their past, reflect on their personal transition process, and further articulate a sense of their ‘future self’. This provided a basis from which participants could envisage future self-development agency, for example, “I am wondering whether I should be working with a coach for future career development” and “she has also connected me with some other people...so I've got some new leads to follow” (TS02). TS01 commented on potential future personal development opportunities, “I think (the Personal Development session) as a part of... a bigger programme, like a larger block or something which companies can offer” (TS01). TS07 also noted that “‘I'd like her to have a chat with our HR to see if she can work with our company...providing this service as I think that individuals and professionals...may be struggling a bit”.

The data indicate the nuanced interactive nature of the processes between coach and coachee in relation to self-directed learning. Coaching is not the only vehicle for introducing self-directed learning; a variety of personal or organizational processes might prompt it. For example, some participants in this pilot study encountered self-development ideas at workshops prior to the one-to-one coaching sessions. The online coaching then further supported their self-development decisions. However, the data suggest that coaching can support self-directed learning through providing a safe space for self-awareness and reflection to encourage affective as well as cognitive and behavioural responses focused on implicit as well as explicit learning processes.



## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on work and working lives has shown that self-directed learning is a critical competence for adaptation to unexpected social and contextual challenges. However, self-directed learning is under-researched and under-theorized. This study examines the potential of online coaching processes to support self and professional development decision making and outcomes, focusing specifically on the 'voice' of those who engaged in this novel online self-development coaching initiative.

A limitation of this pilot study is its focus on self-development in one sector and one geographical region, specifically, high tech professionals in Eindhoven. Although not a feature of the research design, expatriate workers dominate the sample group such that our study represents what Yin (2009) describes as a 'revelatory case' where findings and analysis may generate transferable insights into other settings that present substantial personal and professional challenges.

Analysis of the pilot study data provides for an initial conceptualization of self-development coaching motivators, decisions and outcomes. It also adds to knowledge of online coaching advantages and disadvantages from the coachee perspective. This pilot study suggests that self-development coaching provides a safe space for self-awareness and reflection as a basis for interactive processes to support participants' affective, behavioural and cognitive development.

## 6. Recommendations

Understanding of self-development coaching motivators, decision and outcomes has implications for coaches, coaching professional bodies, coachees and employing organizations. This pilot study provides useful knowledge about the application of narrative critical incident techniques as a means to understand and theorize self-development decisions and outcomes. The study has indicated the value of self-development coaching as a 'stigma-free' intervention, for professionals in expatriate contexts who face specific personal and professional challenges.

The findings and analysis of this pilot study indicate the importance of further research in different sector contexts to:

- Evaluate the utility of self-development coaching as a diversity and inclusion strategy directed towards expatriates and other under-represented or minority worker groups.
- Examine the self-development coaching motivations, decisions and outcomes of professionals in different occupational groups and regional or national contexts.
- Explore employers' stance towards self-development coaching as a feature of organizational HRD culture and strategy.
- Interrogate coaches' perspectives concerning the challenges of online coaching. This should include an assessment of:
  - the technological platform issues, operational and process matters, and the influence of technology on working alliance and relational features of the coaching relationship,

- opportunities for scalable forms of self-development coaching, for example through ‘peer-accountability groups’<sup>1</sup> or AI technology (Graßmann & Schermuly, 2021).

The research agenda outlined here will have substantial implications for the coaching profession. First, online coaching practice development requires urgent evaluation as a means of professional competence development in the coaching and mentoring field. Second, commitment to self-development features as an important part of coaches’ professional competency. However, self-development coaching practices remain under-researched and under-theorized.

## 7. Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> This term describes a gathering of people who share their goals and support each other in reaching them. The group meets regularly to share their goals, to report on their progress, and to offer support to other members. See, for example

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## Appendix 1. Interview schedule

1. What was your motivation to engage with this self-development coaching?  
 Probes:  
 For how long had you been considering engaging with a process such as this?  
 What prompted your interest in this process?  
 What 'triggered' your decision to go ahead with the self-development coaching process?
2. How useful was the actual session(s) in helping you with your particular needs?  
 Probes:  
 What features of this process did you find most useful and why?  
 If necessary – how useful was the pre-session workbook?
3. How important was it to you that the coaching session was external to your workplace?  
 Probe: Why?
4. What were your initial expectations of the process?
5. What were the advantages/disadvantages of the session(s) being on-line?

Probe: How would you describe the process to a friend if they were also interested in personal development coaching?

6. Looking back – what have you done or thought about differently since the session(s)
7. Can you recall one recent experience since you undertook the session(s) that has made you stop and think about how you take forward your personal development?  
Probes: Thinking about this experience, what did you see or understand differently?  
Has your personal development process with me raised new questions for you that may impact the way you tackle your personal learning?