Virtual Coaching: Using Technology to Boost Performance

BY GRACE AHREND, FRED DIAMOND AND PAT GILL WEBBER

Career and leadership development is no longer limited to those in the executive suite. E-coaching replicates the functions of a live session and provides employees at all levels with relevant performance support on demand.

Organizations today recognize that new energy and new direction, as well as new skills and better performance, are needed to succeed. What they may not realize, however, is that employees themselves are reacting to current workplace challenges and want access to relevant performance support as they need it, when they need it. They want coaching that will help them achieve better results — not unlike what senior executives have been receiving for years.

It is possible to move beyond a focus on executive-level coaching and give everyone valuable work-related coaching support. Technology offers organizations new options for helping workers meet current performance challenges, and it is opening the door to the widespread use of innovative solutions.

Filling a Void

In most companies, the performance management cycle is faithfully executed. Planning — setting performance objectives — is followed by periodic assessments, and this cycle is repeated throughout the organization for every employee. Fundamentally, this is a good system: It's hard to imagine managing performance without effective goal setting and appraisals.

But what happens between planning and evaluation? That's when people actually do their work: interacting with customers, designing new solutions, working on teams, resolving problems, delivering services. What kind of active, practical and job-specific support

do people get to help them as they strive to reach new levels of performance excellence and achieve goals?

In most cases, very little. That's why this interval can be called "the void." People urgently need, welcome and appreciate work-related input, feedback and advice — the kind of support active coaching typically offers — but often little or none is provided.

In addition, more and more employees are using the Internet to answer questions and get direction for issues that used to require a manager's input or a leader's expertise. Previously, when people wanted information at work, they would ask their bosses, call experts or network around for advice. And while some still do reach out to find personal resources, for a growing number of information-hungry people today the first place to look is online.

For these folks, having an online coach ready 24/7 — including when work is actually being performed — with rich content, suggestions, practice ideas, tips, techniques and other direct coaching advice is ideal. An electronic coach can serve as a lower-cost tool that replicates the benefits of a live session while allowing content to be accessed privately and conveniently — at any time.

Those who are seeing and experiencing online coaching for the first time have said things such as, "Now I have a way to know what to do even if my boss is gone," and "This helps me get the quick answer I need so I can get back to work."

As more and more corporate decision makers come

to the same conclusions, it is likely that many will open the door to this new form of performance support. E-coaching also may reduce the barrier of cost historically associated with live coaching. Staff at all levels can get the practical help they need to work at their best — all the time.

E-Learning Alone Isn't Enough

A reliance solely on technology-based learning tools will not eliminate current performance challenges. That's because simply knowing the information is not enough. Performance is about doing, and coaching is the best way to help people put what they know into practice correctly, confidently and consistently.

The use of technology to increase the quality and quantity of coaching has traditionally lagged behind the use of technology to support learning for several reasons:

1. The myth that technology-based coaching is not possible — or wouldn't measure up — because an electronic tool cannot truly replicate the functions of a live coach.
2. The belief that only senior-level executives need coaching support to perform effectively.
3. The assumption that managers and others are providing coaching support to all workers when they need it.

That said, technology-based performance solutions are needed and expected. According to a report by Global Industry Analysis Inc., by 2007, U.S. sales of e-learning had grown to more than $17.5 billion, with more than 60 percent of that growth coming from corporate spending. E-learning sales worldwide are expected to exceed $52.6 billion this year, when e-learning will represent a significant portion of the ever-expanding staff development and performance improvement industry.

While classroom instruction still exists, many corporations have supplemented it with online learning applications of all sorts, from online university programs to courses, webinars and simple conferencing tools. Even courses delivered in a classroom or group setting often have online technology components.

Regardless of education or background, more people are using the Internet to answer their questions and tell them what is important. For example, individuals who have never picked up an encyclopedia likely know how to use Wikipedia or dozens of other sites to get information that informs their decisions. People who wouldn't ask their bosses for their views on pressing workplace problems have no trouble seriously considering the views of
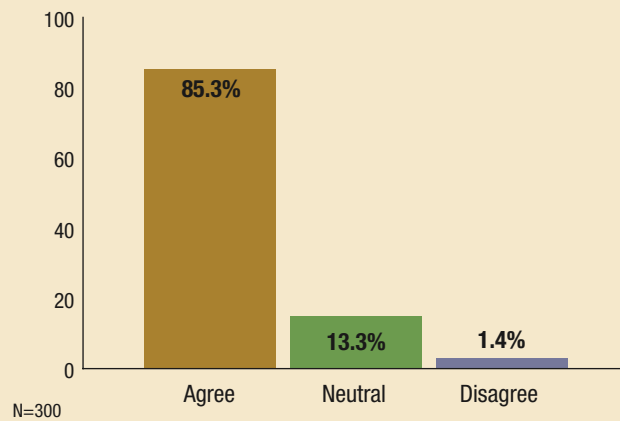
The Impact of Online Coaching

A recent E-Coach Associates survey of 300 U.S. and European users of virtual coaching found respondents felt that:
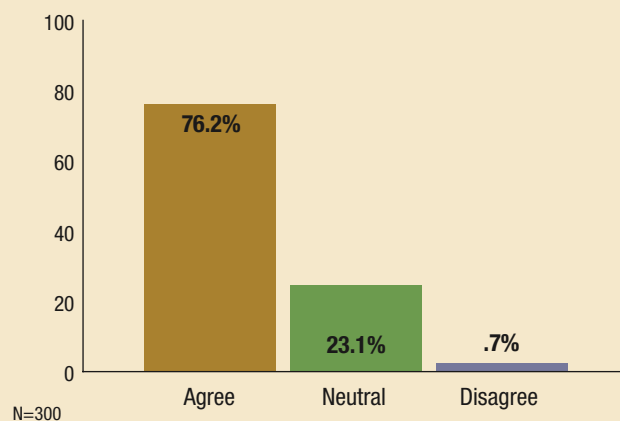
E-coaching content was clear and easy to understand.
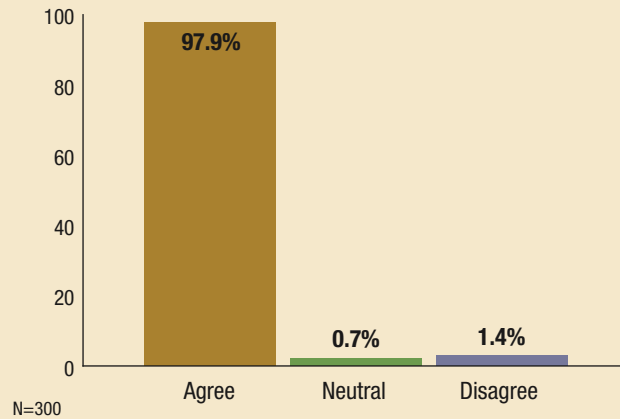
E-coaching content taught me something I didn't already know.

E-coaching content will help me to handle a work-related situation successfully.

Source: E-Coach Associates Inc.

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others on websites geared toward those specific issues. People may resent technology or they may love it — but either way, they rely on guidance and information delivered electronically more than ever.

The CLO's Role

The first thing professionals need to do is recognize that performance will never be improved and sustained without more effective and widespread coaching and support. By immediately recognizing the need for more and higher-quality coaching, they can implement new solutions that make sense economically and culturally.

Initially, for example, learning and business leaders can encourage existing coaches who are working with senior personnel to use technology to expand their reach within the organization. And when employees perform better, the impact on executives is enormous because employees are the ones who do the work necessary to carry out corporate strategies.

Another approach might be to use e-coaching to help train and support managers and leaders to be better coaches themselves. This will help the organization provide sufficient and affordable coaching for everyone and also will strengthen organizational leadership and competency development efforts. Experience shows that providing managers with access to an electronic coaching tool is an ideal way to give them the support they need to develop the coaching skills necessary to help their people perform better.

Future Trends in Performance Excellence

Coaching will begin to catch up with learning as a technology-delivered strategy. Successful organizational leaders will make coaching an essential component of all performance improvement efforts and offer electronic coaching to more workers at all levels to achieve and maintain peak performance.

It's important to note that the widespread use of e-coaching will not eliminate the need for personal coaches. Instead, more will use this technology to augment their work and be more successful. Additionally, some of those who can afford it will continue to use personal performance coaches as online coach-

ing also becomes more robust. But some younger and more tech-savvy executives may actually find working with an electronic coaching tool that is available 24/7 more desirable, and they will gradually transition to using it exclusively.

Further, technology platforms for learning, coaching, managing and enhancing performance will become more integrated to facilitate their use in increasingly complementary ways. And organizations will provide increasing support for managers and leaders as coaches. While we may never reach the point where all managers are great coaches all the time, most successful organizations will keep trying to increase the number of those who are successful at it. They will realize that using technology in combination with the human touch will be the best way to use coaching to help them address performance challenges and improve workplace productivity.

Also, coaching content will continue to grow and expand based as much on input from experts as from the ideas and experiences of users who will be able to add valuable content as they use new electronic coaching tools. Those who design and develop technology-based learning and coaching tools will continue to search for ways to improve performance support for both individuals and organizations. Ultimately, organizations that are able to improve both the technology-supported and personally supported delivery of learning opportunities and coaching will be leaders in workplace performance.

There is no doubt that acceptance of e-coaching will continue to grow. The delivery process for providing coaching electronically will continue to improve, and decision makers in all types of organizations will recognize the value. E-coaching will provide the kind of support all individuals and their managers need to work at their best and achieve important performance objectives. The time is right, the need is great, and the ability to create and deliver what's needed is now possible. **CLO**

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