

ICF Coaching Platforms Study

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Introduction

Coaching platforms are becoming more popular in the coaching profession. As the technology matures, coaches are finding these platforms useful to provide specific client functions, coach functions, lead generation, and for contracting purposes. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) developed a survey to study the use of online platforms that coaches might use as a part of their coaching practice in order to better understand the impact of these platforms on the coaching profession.

Coaching platforms tend to fall into one of two categories (i.e., service and contracting platforms). Coaching service platforms typically utilize a web site or smart phone interface to provide functions such as coach-client matching, scheduling, coaching notes, client journaling, chatbots, and access to psychometric assessments on a subscription basis. Coaching contracting platforms generally provide clients access to a cadre of coaches who are paid on a per-session or per-engagement basis. These contracting platforms will also frequently have ancillary functions that are a part of service platforms. The platform descriptions were provided in the preamble to the survey.

Methodology

The ICF coaching platform survey was developed in English, French, and German. The survey was distributed to an established global research panel of approximately 5,000 volunteer coaches through an ICF email campaign as well as distributed through the ICF United Kingdom, France, and Germany chapters. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to gain insight into the effect these platforms have on the coaching profession. The survey contained 37 questions and took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Results

In total, the survey link was clicked 851 times across all languages (619 English, 194 French, and 38 German). Of these 851 clicks, 277 respondents stated they did not use coaching platforms while 51 surveys were blank (i.e., these individuals did not respond to a single question), and thus these surveys were marked as incomplete. Of the remaining 523 respondents who stated they used coaching platforms, 286 surveys were deemed invalid due to excessively missing data, leaving 237 valid survey responses (173 English, 49 French, and 15 German). The remainder of this report is based upon those 237 responses.

Demographics

Coaches who completed the survey are quite experienced, with 35% having 11 or more years coaching

experience and 32% having 6 to 10 years of coaching experience. Of those having earned coaching credentials, 46% earned a PCC credential, 27% earned an ACC credential, while 6% have earned an MCC credential. The percentage of respondents of this survey skewed more toward MCC and PCC credential-holders than the overall membership of ICF, again, pointing toward a more experienced set of respondents. Of the coaches who provided gender information, 67% were female and 33% male, which is similar in profile to the overall ICF membership statistic.

The respondents skewed to a higher age, with 64% age 41-60 years old and 28% 61 years or older. The coaches were well educated, with 23% having earned a bachelors degree, 61% a masters degree and 11% a doctorate or equivalent degree. Most of the coaches reside in 5 countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, however the total respondents span across 31 additional countries.

Platform Types

Most coaches are using contracting platforms, where the coach is connected with clients and are compensated by each session or engagement. The clients could be individuals seeking coaching or employees of an organization that has employed a coaching initiative within their organization. Some coaches are using service provider platforms, where these platforms allow the coach to manage their clients through a variety of functions (e.g., scheduling, billing, client tracking, etc.). In other words, these platforms provide coaches with ways to manage and track their clients. With that said, contracting platforms (n=107) are of primary use to coaches when compared to service provider platforms (n=16).

Platforms

Respondents collectively provided the name of 66 unique “platforms,” however, some of the platforms included video platforms, such as Zoom. For the contracting platforms, three stood out as the most popular and were roughly equal in popularity: BetterUp, Coachhub, and MoovOne. The MoovOne platform was used almost exclusively by coaches residing in France. While the majority of coaches currently use only one platform (62%), 26% use two, and surprisingly, 12% use three platforms. The most common qualifications required to be allowed access to a platform were coach training and specific credentials.

The most important platform functions for the coach respondents were lead generation, ease of use, scheduling, and client management. Only 10% of the respondents mentioned their primary platform requiring exclusivity of their availability on that platform. When asked what one improvement they would like to see in their primary platform, higher pay and client matching capability were by far the most often requested. Nevertheless, 89% of the respondents said they were somewhat satisfied to very satisfied with their platform.

Ethics

Universally, ethics is a significant area of concern of coaching platforms. Two-thirds of the coaches reported that they are required to sign an ethics agreement for use of their platform, and that 41% of the clients are required to sign an ethics agreement. Of particular sensitivity is the fact that 26% of the respondents stated that individuals working for the platform company have access to the data in the platform. What is not known is exactly what data those individuals have access to, the sensitivity of that data, and how that data is used.

Artificial Intelligence Coaching and E-Learning

Given that artificial intelligence (AI) coaching is in its infancy, it is surprising that 17% of the coaches stated that their primary coaching platform has AI coaching function built in. In a nod to more mature technology, two-thirds of the coaches reported that e-learning is a component of their primary platform.

ICF Involvement

A majority of respondents feel that ICF should be involved with coaching platforms. The primary desire is for some action regarding standards, guidelines, or regulations, followed by a means of ensuring ethical practices.

Platform Considerations

The ICF-France Committee on Coaching and Digital/Artificial Intelligence has developed a set of guidelines to aid in choosing whether or not to work with a coaching platform. Based upon the results of this survey and those guidelines, coaches should consider the following:

1. The particular level of qualification (e.g., specific credential, coaching hours, coach training, supervision, certifications, etc.) the coaching platform requires and if the platform requires evidence of such qualifications.
2. How the coaching platform matches coaches and clients and the criteria used to match (e.g., a computer program, an employee working for the platform organization, or a combination of these), and if the platform ranks the coaches in its directory.
3. If the coaching platform allows sessions to be recorded and if the coach may use those recordings for other purposes such as for supervision, certifications, or self-monitoring. If the platform allows recordings, consideration should be given for where these recordings are stored and how confidentiality is guaranteed.
4. The type of contract the coaching platform offers (e.g., open-ended, monthly, annually, per project).
5. If the coach has to pay to appear in the coaching platform directory.
6. If the coaching platform demands exclusiveness (i.e., not able to work for a competing platform).
7. The proportion of the fee charged to the client, by the platform, that you receive and your satisfaction with that proportion.
8. How the coaching contract and coaching engagement objectives are framed. For example, a four-way agreement (between a representative of the client's organization, a platform employee, the coach, and the client) or a three-way agreement (between the client's organization, the client, and the coach). How the objectives are agreed upon between the platform and the client.
9. How and when the coach can cancel the coaching contract.

10. If the platform contains a feedback system from the client and the level of access the coach has to the client's feedback following their coaching sessions (e.g., directly through the platform, sent by a platform employee, or no access).
11. The type of data monitored by the platform, who has access to the data, and how the data is protected within the platform.
12. If an ethics agreement is required to be signed by the coach and client to use the platform and the terms of that agreement.
13. If the platform provides or offers supervision to their coaches.

Conclusion

While the coaching platform marketplace is a nascent field, it is clear, based upon the satisfaction ratings that coaching platforms are here to stay and there is a wide margin for growth. While a small number of players currently dominate, the long tail of smaller entrants exists. As technology improves and investments flow into the space, smaller players could rapidly overtake dominant players, with a fluid batch of leading contenders over the next decade.