

THE SOCIAL MEDIA COACH

by Lynn Wernham



Individuals and organisations throughout the world are actively involved in the use of social media to support learning yet its potential use within the field of coaching in organisations has presently not been empirically investigated.

The aim of my research was to investigate the extent to which social media tools and materials are currently being used by internal or external coaches to support face-to-face coaching in a public, private or voluntary organisational context. The outcomes from the research provide the coaching community with information that they can use to consider whether social media could be of value in their coaching practice (or not).

117 coaches who work in an organisational context completed a questionnaire and the findings show that over a quarter use social media to support coaching and that there is scope and benefit to using social media tools and materials to support both individual and group coaching in organisations. However

over 50% of coaches indicated that there are a number of disadvantages and barriers that can prevent the use of social media. Key Issues raised by coaches were organisational security concerns, client confidentiality and ensuring that all parties have the necessary technology skills.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research within the context of the organisation were to:

- Identify whether social media tools and materials are being used by coaches to support face-to-face coaching
- Explore which social media tools and materials are being used by coaches and how they are being used to support face-to-face coaching
- Investigate perceived benefits and disadvantages of using social media tools and materials to support face-to-face coaching
- Investigate the barriers to using social media tools and materials to support face-to-face coaching

- Formulate recommendations for ways in which social media tools and materials could be used to support face-to-face coaching

Research Findings

Which Social Media Tools and Materials are Being Used by Coaches and How Are They Being Used to Support Face-to-Face Coaching

Only 28% of participating coaches use social media to support coaching and 72% don't, despite the fact that more than 95% of all participating coaches use social media outside of the coaching process. The most widely used tool by both groups outside of the coaching process is online communities.

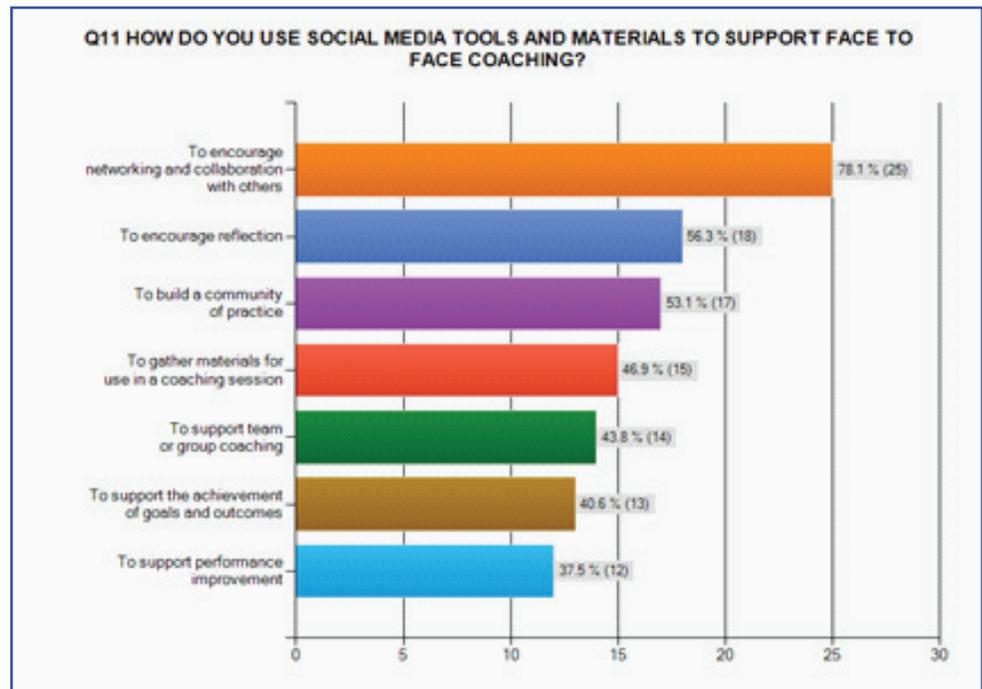
When using social media to support coaching, online communities are also the most widely used tool with 63.6% of participating coaches using it to support coaching. 39.4% of coaches use document creation and sharing tools and 30.3% use micro-blogging tools and multimedia tools to support coaching.

When asked how social media tools were used to support coaching (see table 1), 78.1% of participating coaches use



social media to encourage coachees to network and collaborate with others and 56.3% of coaches use social media to encourage reflection. 46.9% use social media to gather materials for use in a coaching session and 43.8% use it to support team or group coaching. One coach commented "Since these tools are SOCIAL tools and lend themselves much better to group interactions - we should be thinking more about their use in terms of GROUP coaching".

TABLE 1



Some Practical Examples of Ways in Which Social Media is Being Used to Support Coaching included:

- Encouraging the coachee to expand their learning network via Twitter or groups to explore and gather ideas and new perspectives on relevant issues
- Encouraging the coachee to seek out and follow 'experts' who could offer a new perspective to an issue and have dealt with similar issues or situations that the coachee is facing
- Setting up a closed community to support team

or group coaching

- Signposting coachees to online resources, tools and techniques via your blog, twitter or groups
- Introducing LinkedIn to clients to support them in building a professional network
- Using YouTube clips to support coaching sessions
- Introducing private wikis in team or group coaching to share knowledge creation
- Encouraging the coachee to use a private wiki or blog to record reflections and learning

The Benefits of Using Social Media Tools and Materials to Support Coaching

Those coaches who do use social media to support coaching were asked about the benefits they had experienced through their use of social media.

41% of coaches mentioned the benefit of being able to collaborate and share information with both groups and individual clients. One coach stated that "It allows me to share information, articles and blog comments which may be relevant to my clients, as individuals and as groups".

41% highlighted the flexibility of social media tools which can enable "Anytime, anywhere learning."

38% have experienced increased networking opportunities with others; both for themselves and by encouraging their coachees to network with others. One coach stated that "For the coachee, the huge benefit is a whole world of networks, resources and learning."

34% have found that social media offers learning opportunities and additional

perspectives which encourage reflection, develop coachee thinking, offer new ideas and spark new thinking.

21% have signposted coachees "to different resources/tools which they can explore and use to help them achieve their goals."

Coaches who don't use social media to support coaching at present were asked their opinion on the potential benefits of using social media to support coaching (see table 2).

Networking and collaboration with others was both the most

frequently perceived benefit (80.8%) and the most frequent way (78.1%) that social media is being used to support coaching.

The Disadvantages of Using Social Media Tools and Materials to Support Coaching

Coaches who use social media to support coaching were asked about their experience of the disadvantages of using social media to support coaching.

48% of coaches have found no

TABLE 2

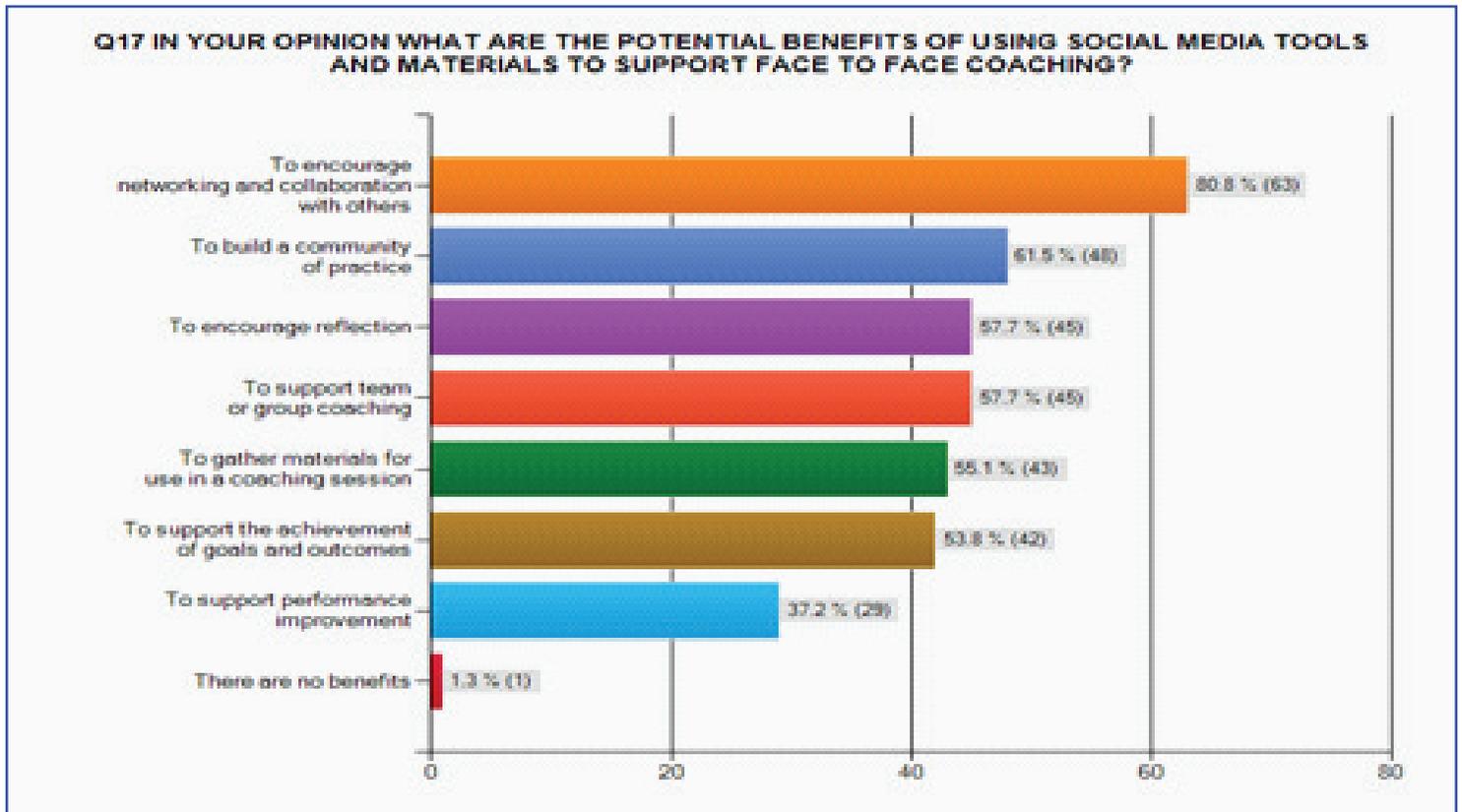


TABLE 3

Barriers to using social media to support coaching	Do use social media to support face to face coaching	Don't use social media to support face to face coaching
Individual clients don't use social media tools	62.1%	38.4%
Lack of skills or experience in using technology	55.2%	49.3%
Client organisations don't allow the use of social media tools at work	51.7%	43.8%
Organisational security concerns	41.4%	46.6%
The technology needed is not available	20.7%	11%
There are no barriers	17.2%	15.1%

disadvantages to using social media to support coaching. However, 28% have found that client confidentiality and security can be compromised and that materials shared via social media can be unreliable. Two coaches stated that "Privacy settings and confidentiality need to be carefully monitored" and "I only use some tools where I can create private groups for such interactions rather than use public social media - although I do use these for more open conversations/discussions with others".

16% have found that using social media to support face-to-face coaching can cause confusion in the coaching

relationship if it was not agreed and included in the contracting process.

8% of coaches have found that the possibilities of social media can be overwhelming and highlighted the need for social media training both for the coach and the coachee in order that potential problems could be avoided.

The Barriers to Using Social Media Tools and Materials to Support Coaching

Table 3 shows that both coaches who do (55.2%) and don't (49.3%) use social media to support coaching identified that the lack of skills or experience in using technology

was a barrier to using social media to support coaching. The most common barrier for coaches who do use social media to support coaching is that individual clients don't use social media tools. One coach stated that "Everybody knows about LinkedIn or Twitter, but few are able to register and start using it".

It appears from the additional comments from coaches who don't use social media to support coaching that the lack of skills in using the technology lies with both the coach and the coachee. Two coaches stated that "I'm not sure how I would use this media to assist with a coaching intervention" and "Delegates misunderstand and underestimate the power of social media for learning and supporting learning/working."

Both groups, in similar proportions have found that organisational security concerns and blocks on using social media tools to be a barrier to using these tools to support coaching. One coach stated that "organisations block access to third party tools and don't see how they can be used". Some of those who have come across these blocks have

used private secure spaces rather than blocked public tools to support coaching.

How Could Social Media Be Used to Support Coaching in the Future?

Responses to this question have been themed in table 4 as follows:

The most common finding related to how social media could be used in the future to support coaching by both groups was to enable the coachee to network, share ideas and build relationships with others. This is consistent with previous findings.

There appeared to be a certain degree of inevitability about its increasing future use in coaching in the context of the rapid evolution of information technology. One coach stated that "As realities become more virtual, social media will increasingly become the norm of conversational learning".

Additional future uses identified by between 1-5% of coaches were: marketing of coaching services, supporting supervision, using iPad apps, using YouTube videos and coaching using Second Life.

Additional Issues Raised

This question raised a number of other issues that link to disadvantages and barriers as follows:

- Social media spaces often have a sales focus and discrimination is needed when using them.
- Social media can blur the coaching relationship and its use needs to be agreed with the coachee.
- When using social media to support coaching, the coach needs to be clear about what they are doing and why they are doing it
- A new skillset is required. One coach stated that "A coach using social media may need to develop a different skillset compared to that of face-to-face coaching".
- Culture change is needed if social media is to be valued and used to support coaching. One coach stated that "I think there would need to be a culture change in my own organisation and another stated "Making collaboration effective requires a massive culture change and we are only just scratching the surface of this change."

TABLE 4

How social media could be used to support coaching in the future Question 20	Coaches who use social media to support coaching	Coaches who don't use social media to support coaching
To enable the coachee to network, share ideas and build relationships with others	10 (37%)	30 (46%)
As IT evolves social media will become more widely used in coaching (it's inevitable)	7 (26%)	9 (14%)
For reflection and contact pre, interim and post face to face coaching sessions	5 (18%)	21 (32%)
To support team or group coaching	6 (22%)	11 (17%)
To broaden accessibility to coaching and learning	4 (15%)	12 (18%)
To support younger coachees	3 (11%)	5 (8%)
To support coach development	2 (7%)	6 (9%)

Recommendations

Both literature in related fields and the findings from this research suggest that there is scope and significant benefits to using social media tools and materials to support both individual and group coaching in organisations. Online communities can be used to support coaching by enabling the coachee to network and collaborate with others. Social media can also offer additional perspectives to the coachee which can provide new ideas and spark new thinking.

However there are a number of disadvantages and barriers that can prevent its use or suggest that it is inappropriate to use. Client confidentiality and security need to be addressed and assured. If social media potentially compromises this confidentiality then social media should not be used to support coaching. To avoid confusion, the way in which social media was to be used to support coaching would need to be agreed as part of the coaching contracting process.

Both coach and coachee need both knowledge and appropriate technology skills regarding social media use in

order that it can be used to support coaching. Ideally both need to be actively using social media at the point when it is agreed that it will be used to support face-to-face coaching.

The barriers of organisational security concerns and blocks would need to be addressed and removed if social media was to become more widely used to support coaching in this context. This may require significant culture change.

Although there are significant disadvantages and barriers in place the research findings and literature in related areas suggest that there is a certain inevitability about the future use of social media which indicates that it will be used

more frequently in the future to support coaching.

Issues such as organisational security concerns, client confidentiality and ensuring that all parties have the necessary technology skills need to be addressed when considering whether social media could be used to support coaching.

Related Reading

[Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Coaching](#)

(Labardee, Nagel & Anthony, 2010)

[Ethical Framework for the Use of Social Media by Mental Health Professionals](#)

(Kolmes, Nagel & Anthony, 2010)

About the Author

Lynn Wernham is an independent business change & learning professional with 20+ years' experience in the design of L&D solutions and frameworks, blended learning, performance improvement, coaching, facilitation, and partnership working. Lynn has recently completed her MA dissertation exploring the extent to which social media is used to support face-to-face coaching in organisations. More about Lynn can be found at <http://2coach.wordpress.com/about/> and <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/lynn-wernham/9/159/6a6>

A full copy of the findings and discussion can be found here:

<http://2coach.wordpress.com/2012/03/12/sharing-my-research-findings-social-media-to-support-coaching/>