STEPPING UP THE COACHING GAME

INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY, EXPERTISE, AND CONTEXTUAL INSIGHT FOR GREATER IMPACT

Thought Leadership

Executive Summary

Post-pandemic scaled coaching alone is no longer sufficient. Organizations now expect fast and tangible coaching outcomes. A decade ago, Korn Ferry surveyed active coaches to identify top coaching needs and essential skills (Moore & Rybeck, 2015). In the summer of 2024, we revisited this research with a new survey that explored current coaching dynamics, virtual coaching trends, and factors influencing coaching outcomes.

The study revealed that in today's fast-paced changing environment, effective coaching must seamlessly integrate technology, expertise, and contextual insights to meet the evolving needs of coaching clients.

Technological advances have, like many digital strategies, increased the accessibility of coaching. However, they have also led to a more generic, commoditized product. The need for "mass customization" remains front and center in the field. Today, coaches are increasingly expected to support organizations and leaders at all levels on complex challenges, demanding specialized knowledge in areas such as

business operations, industry insights, and organizational transformation. As a result, coaching credentials and foundational skills are now baseline requirements—or "table stakes"—for delivering transformational coaching.

An effective coach quickly takes on context, understands the person and their challenge deeply, and then helps them think ahead (while not leading them ahead) to achieve better, stronger, more effective outcomes. To not do this is formulaic, over-simplifies, and will eventually bounce off the coachee no matter how much they like the conversation.

To meet rising expectations, coaches must engage in ongoing learning and professional development. By staying informed on industry trends and acquiring specialized knowledge through continuing education and reflective practice, coaches can better guide clients through the complexities they face. This not only strengthens a coach's credibility but also ensures their coaching remains relevant, impactful, and aligned with the client's unique context.

Introduction

Workplace coaching is undergoing rapid change, driven largely by technological advancements (Passmore & Woodward, 2023). Technology now offers multiple coaching formats and is increasingly capable of performing functions traditionally handled by human coaches (Terblanche et al., 2024).

Despite these developments, the core goal of coaching—supporting employee growth and helping organizations address emerging business challenges—remains unchanged. While integrating new technology is crucial, coaches must stay attuned to the evolving needs of organizations and coaching clients (a.k.a. coachees). Korn Ferry conducted a survey to explore how coaches are navigating these changes, aiming to provide valuable insights into the evolving coaching landscape.

We surveyed over 100 coaches from Korn Ferry's global network of coaches. Of these, 51% were from the US, while the rest represented regions such as Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Although English is the dominant language (81%) in the sample, coaches also deliver services in other languages, including Chinese, Danish, Dutch, German, French, Japanese, and Portuguese.

Nearly 65% of coaches who completed the survey have advanced degrees (master's or doctoral). Half (50%) are certified by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), while 30% have certifications from other accredited programs or recognized professional coaching organizations. Most uncertified coaches have advanced degrees in fields like counseling psychology and industrial/organizational psychology; their experience ranges from 2 to over 35 years, with an average of 16 years.

The coaches in our survey spend an average of 41% of their weekly hours on coaching; as seen in another survey (e.g., ICF, 2024), most coaches hold other roles, such as consultants or trainers.

Our survey findings reveal that most coaches focus primarily on leadership coaching, with nearly all offering this service (see Figure 1). Additionally, coaches provide coaching in areas that include career development, performance enhancement, and team dynamics, often as part of broader leadership or talent management programs.

Figure 1
Distribution of coaching areas.
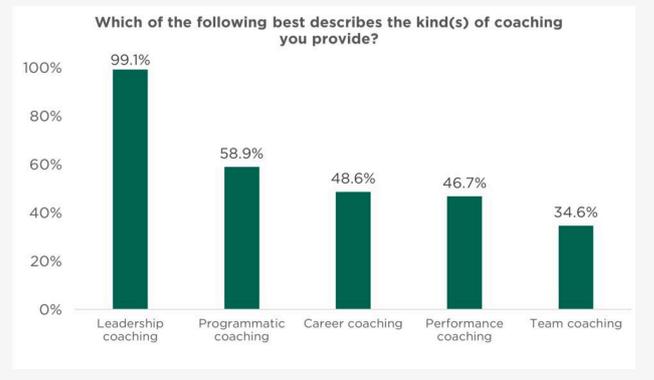
Modality of Coaching

A significant change from 10 years ago is the way coaching is delivered. Virtual coaching has surged since the COVID-19 pandemic (Zielinski, 2022), with online coaching platforms increasing by 47% in the past three years (Worldmetrics, 2024). This rapid growth has spurred the ICF to develop guidelines and standards to assist organizations in evaluating coaching platforms (ICF, 2024). To understand how coaches adapt to this shift, we surveyed participants about their experience with various coaching delivery methods.

Our survey results reflect this broad trend: 85% of coaches use virtual coaching and another 31.8% have adopted a hybrid approach. In contrast, strictly in-person coaching, at 17.8%, is now the minority mode of delivery.

Figure 2
Distribution of primary coaching modalities, post-pandemic.

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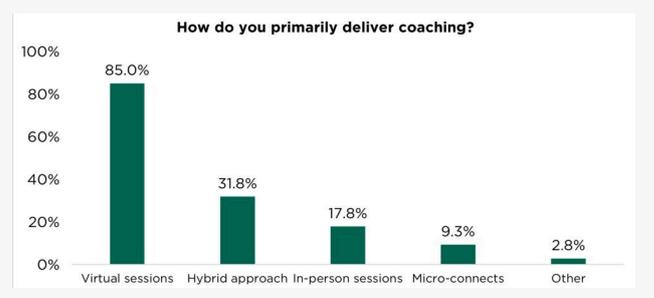
Coaching is inherently a human interaction, and some benefits of face-to-face engagement can be hard to replicate virtually, raising concerns about effectiveness. The most common challenge reported by coaches (27.5%) was difficulty building trust and personal connections. One coach stated, "Building a trusting relationship takes longer," while another coach said, "To connect [on] a deeper level is hard on camera."

Nearly a quarter of coaches (23.1%) struggled with reading subtle cues. One coach remarked, "I need to listen even more intently as I can't tell body language as easily." Some coaches found it harder to stay fully engaged and present (15.4%) or minimize distraction to clients (12.1%).

Figure 3
Distribution of perceived challenges in virtual coaching.


Challenges with virtual coaching
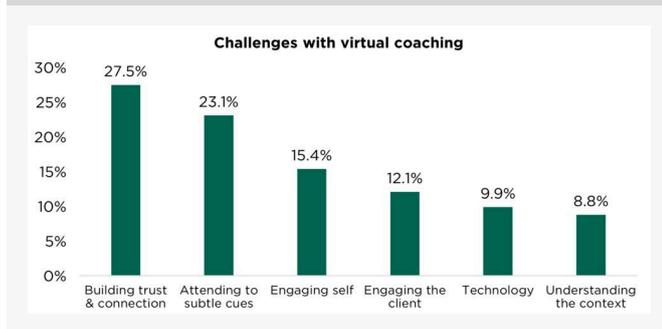
Despite these challenges, most coaches in the survey are actively using technology and recognize its benefits. Over 65% of coaches cited flexibility and convenience as the features they most appreciated about virtual coaching, as it enabled them to better adjust schedules and break down geographic barriers. With no travel time, coaches can now work with more clients (15.7%) and engage with clients more frequently (15.7%). As one coach noted, "When an issue arises, it's easy to put together an ad hoc session on the fly."

Technology platforms also streamline scheduling, organizing, documenting, and sharing information in real time. This "coaching on the fly" allows the coach to meet clients where they are, working within their context to accelerate learning—somethings that may be difficult with formal, in-person sessions.

While some coaches indicated engagement challenges, a larger number (28.1%) reported the opposite. Without the need for travel, coaches can offer greater availability to clients across regions, allowing them to be fully present during sessions. Clients also favor this approach, as being in a familiar space can encourage greater vulnerability. One coach stated, "Connecting with people in their environments, at their home or office, makes them feel comfortable." Another coach shared this sentiment: "Clients seem more relaxed and willing to be more transparent."

Figure 4
Distribution of perceived benefits of virtual coaching.

Positive aspects of virtual coaching
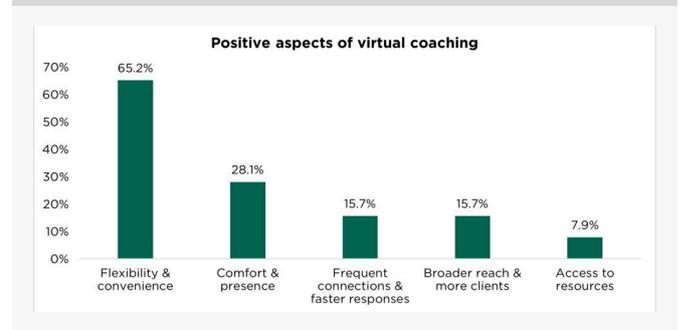
Given its benefits, virtual coaching is widely regarded as effective for leadership development, with 35.3% of coaches favoring virtual sessions and 46.1% preferring a hybrid approach. Comparatively, just 14.7% of coaches consider traditional in-person coaching the most effective. Virtual coaching is now valued not only for its convenience but also for its proven impact.

Figure 5
Effectiveness of coaching delivery modes for leadership development.

Which coaching delivery mode has been most effective for leadership development?

- Virtual Sessions
- Hybrid Approach
- Micro-connects
- Other
- In-Person Sessions
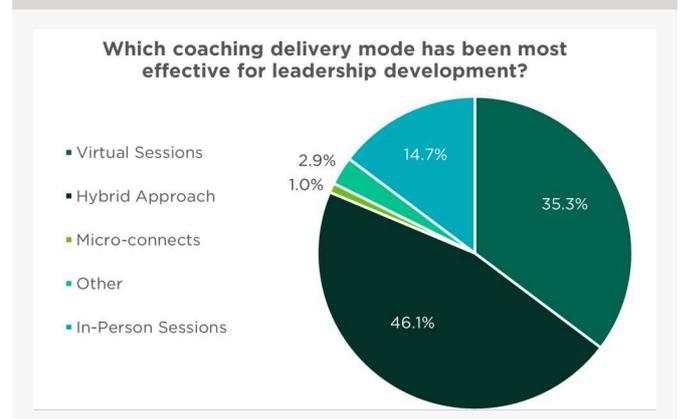
Top Coaching Needs in Today's Workplace

After investigating delivery methods, we turned to coaching content. Coaches were asked to identify from a list the leadership topics they most often help their coaching clients with.

They provided responses for three leadership levels: frontline, mid-level, and senior. The table below presents the rank order of the most common coaching topics for each level. We compared the results to the 2015 Korn Ferry survey to highlight changes over time.

Table 1
The rank order of most common coaching topics (with the top 8 highlighted).

	2015			2024		
	Frontline	Mid-level	Senior	Frontline	Mid-level	Senior
Influencing skills/ managing stakeholders	2	2	3	4	1	1
Motivating/leading with vision and purpose	7	5	6			2
Cultivating change readiness/leading transformation			4		4	3
Dealing with ambiguity/ managing complexity	8			8	3	4
Self-awareness/ emotional intelligence	4	3	1	3	4	4
Communication skills/ executive presence	3	4	5	1	2	6
Strategy/strategic thinking			8		7	7
Building effective teams	6	6	7	6	4	8
Managing interpersonal relationships	1	1	2	5	7	
Delegation/empowerment	5	8		2		
Work-life integration/well-being				7		
Mentoring/developing talent		7				

Note: Numbers are rank orders, where 1 means the most frequent coaching topic.

Several areas have remained consistently the top leadership needs for all leaders:

- **Influencing skills and managing stakeholders.** Author and speaker John C. Maxwell famously said, "The true measure of leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less." The ability to influence horizontally is particularly crucial for senior leaders to build partnerships in the business ecosystem (Boulard, et al., 2021). Without formal authority, they must rely on influence tactics to manage stakeholders and secure their cooperation.

- **Self-awareness and emotional intelligence.** Studies consistently support the benefits of emotional intelligence (EQ) in leadership. It promotes authentic leadership (Miao, Humphrey & Qian, 2018) and effective conflict management (Schlaerth, Ensari, & Christian, 2013), leading to higher employee job satisfaction (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2016). Emotions are a powerful source of energy that can spark creativity and build trust. What's more, research shows that leaders profoundly impact employee energy and engagement in the workplace (Ownes et al., 2016). EQ helps leaders become more aware of their emotions and the feelings of others, cultivating a more empathetic and effective leadership style.

- **Communication skills and executive presence.** Communication creates and maintains the social fabric of relationships, groups, organizations, societies, and world order—and disorder (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). As leadership is inherently social, it revolves around the relationships between leaders, followers, and others, making communication foundational to building and sustaining these essential relationships. Korn Ferry's previous report highlighted that the internet and social media have accelerated these connections, expanding expectations for leaders to show up effectively and coherently—on and offline (Moore & Rybeck, 2015). The importance of communication for leadership continues to be emphasized in the new survey.

- **Building effective teams.** Team as a form of work is prevalent in contemporary organizations (Hu, Yao, & Zhang, 2020). People now spend more time engaged in collaborative work than in the past (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016). Teams are important to organizational success, making team performance a critical element of leadership effectiveness (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008).

Several coaching themes vary in frequency depending on the leadership level. We found the following two topics are more commonly addressed with frontline leaders:

- **Delegation and empowerment.** Being promoted to management requires individuals to transition from delivering outcomes through their own efforts to achieving results through others. However, organizations often promote high-performing individual contributors to management roles without giving them adequate training (Gurchiek, 2023). Consequently, learning how to effectively delegate and empower team members is a frequent coaching theme for frontline leaders.

- **Well-being and stress tolerance.** The request for coaching in these two areas has increased in regularity for frontline leaders—a finding consistent with the 2024 ICF Snapshot survey. The ICF survey also revealed that business or career issues are the most frequently cited reasons for seeking well-being support. This may reflect current employment conditions, with organizational transformation placing disproportionate pressure on low to middle management (Dai & Lang, 2024).

As the demands on leaders grow, **the role of coaches becomes increasingly critical** in navigating the complexities of modern business.

Several other areas hold greater significance for middle to upper-level management.

- **Dealing with ambiguity and managing complexity.** The business environment has become more volatile, with faster-changing markets and declining customer loyalty due to the rising options in service providers and product suppliers (Forrest, Liu & Solano, 2024). This volatility complicates decision-making, placing greater pressure on leaders. Senior executives now face more intricate decisions as they navigate interconnected challenges such as economic uncertainty, geopolitical fragmentation, and sustainability considerations.

- **Cultivating change readiness and leading transformation.** The evolving business landscape has compelled organizations to continuously adapt and change to survive. Once viewed as discrete, organizational transformation is now seen as an ongoing process that demands readiness for change to thrive in dynamic environments (Albrecht & Roughsedge, 2022; Dai & Spencer, 2023).

- **Motivating and leading with vision and purpose.** Transformation takes extraordinary energy, and people go the extra mile for causes they believe in. Leaders must clearly communicate the vision and purpose, especially during times of uncertainty when people may feel disoriented. A compelling narrative ignites the workforce and reinforces their commitment to organizational change (Stouten, Rousseau, & De Cremer, 2018).
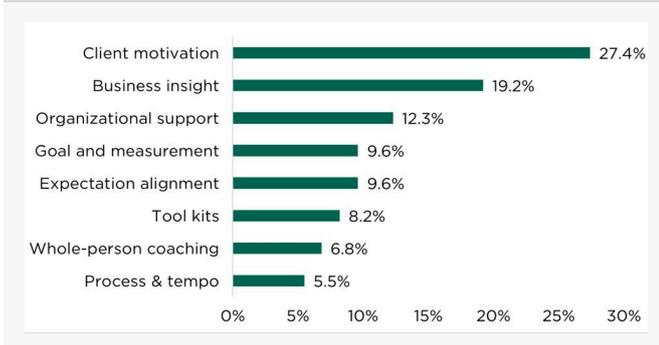
Coaching Success Factors

Coaching has been shown to positively impact learning and development (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023; Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2015). Many studies have explored the conditions for effective coaching, with most focusing on coaching activities or competencies (Boyatzis et al., 2023). Similarly, we asked coaches to identify the most important coaching competencies, and unsurprisingly, participants highlighted those frequently mentioned in the literature. These competencies can be grouped into several broad categories, including building trust and rapport, active listening, empathizing, perspective shifting, goal setting, and managing the appropriate process. Beyond these competencies, we also explored other factors that accelerate coaching effectiveness. Text analysis of coach responses identified several success factors, including:

- **Client motivation.** Over 27% of coaches emphasized the importance of client motivation for effective coaching. One coach asserted, "Clients must be open to and voluntarily engaging in coaching," while another highlighted the value of a client's "openness and willingness to change," as well as their "discipline to practice or activate what they commit to." Therefore, it is crucial for coaches to attend to and address coachee motivation to ensure a positive impact from coaching.

- **Business insight.** Nearly 20% of coaches stressed the importance of business acumen and understanding the client's organization. Coaches who grasp the organizational context can tailor interventions to align coaching goals with organizational objectives, contributing to business success. As one coach stated, "It is not necessary to be an expert in all areas of business—that's not your role. However, it is important to be able to flow with the client as they are sharing business challenges with you." The ability to contextualize coaching is now considered essential for impact. By considering the client's organizational environment, coaches can more effectively structure the coaching process, frame conversations, and ask better questions that lead to new insights and solutions relevant to the client's challenges.

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■ **Organizational support.** Over 12% of coaches emphasized the role of organizational support for learning. Workplace culture, HR practices, and managerial involvement create an environment for the client's learning and development. Coaches can collaborate with leaders, HR, and other stakeholders to provide coachees with opportunities to practice new skills and behaviors.

Though less frequently mentioned, several other factors contribute to coaching success, including tracking and measuring outcomes, aligning expectations, adopting a holistic view of coaching, managing coaching tempo, and using toolkits to support development. For example, when coaching a manager who is transitioning into a new organization, an onboarding framework can accelerate learning and shorten time to productivity.

Figure 6
Factors that enhance coaching effectiveness.

Factor	Percentage
Client motivation	27.4%
Business insight	19.2%
Organizational support	12.3%
Goal and measurement	9.6%
Expectation alignment	9.6%
Tool kits	8.2%
Whole-person coaching	6.8%
Process & tempo	5.5%

SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

Use this checklist to refine your coaching skills:

☐ **Establishing the Foundation**
  ○ Ethics and confidentiality
  ○ Cultivating safety and trust
  ○ Managing expectations

☐ **Active Listening**
  ○ Probing and questioning
  ○ Attending to non-verbal cues
  ○ Maintaining curiosity and openness

☐ **Empathizing**
  ○ Compassion
  ○ Emotional intelligence
  ○ Being client-centered

☐ **Perspective Shifting**
  ○ Tactfully challenging
  ○ Reframing
  ○ Connecting and synthesizing

☐ **Goal Setting**
  ○ Focusing on outcomes
  ○ Managing accountability
  ○ Building confidence

☐ **Managing Coaching Process**
  ○ Being present
  ○ Managing the tempo
  ○ Maintaining flexibility
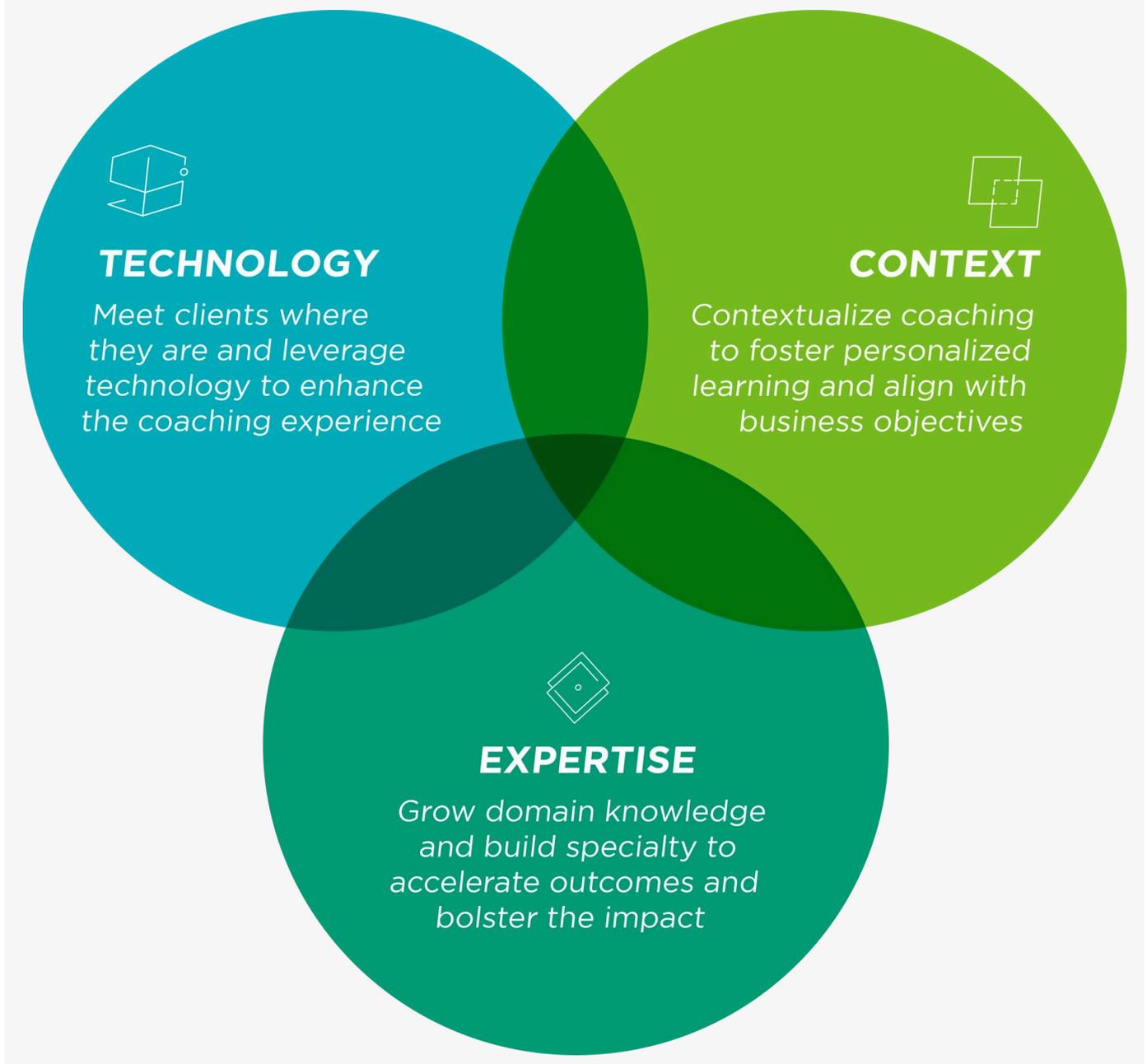
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Coaching in the Age of Constant Disruptions

Today's business world faces a myriad of pressures—from rapid technological change and evolving customer expectations to ESG concerns, economic instability, and geopolitical tensions. This constant flux has led to frequent organizational changes. Indeed, one survey found more than a third of large organizations are always undergoing some form of transformation (Mankins & Litre, 2024).

Ongoing changes are impacting leaders at all levels, undermining leadership confidence and causing burnout. A Korn Ferry survey found that many senior leaders struggle with imposter syndrome (Rau, 2024), while the American Psychological Association reported that frequent changes take a toll on workforce well-being (APA, 2017). As a result, coaches are increasingly seeking to address emerging leadership issues.

Figure 7
Three operational conditions of impactful coaching

TECHNOLOGY
Meet clients where they are and leverage technology to enhance the coaching experience

CONTEXT
Contextualize coaching to foster personalized learning and align with business objectives

EXPERTISE
Grow domain knowledge and build specialty to accelerate outcomes and bolster the impact

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To meet these evolving needs and make coaching more valuable, coaches need to step up their game. Our survey findings underscore three operational conditions of impactful coaching: technology, expertise, and context. The impact of coaching hinges on how adeptly coaches integrate these elements into their practice.

1. Embracing Technology

Our survey findings reveal that coaches have, for the most part, adopted technology, and virtual coaching has been widely accepted. Many coachees appreciate the convenience and comfort of virtual coaching, moving sessions from conference rooms to digital platforms. Coaching conversations now often happen through screens, earbuds, messaging apps, and other technology, transforming how coaching is delivered.

As technology evolves, new tools and methodologies will continue to shape the coaching experience. Coaches must stay adaptable and open to meet clients' growing expectations for tech-enabled coaching (Dai & Wilson, 2024). By leveraging digital tools to handle routine tasks, coaches can focus on high-impact areas such as empathy, emotional intelligence, feedback, intuition, motivation, inspiration and real-time adaptability.

2. Acquiring Contextual Insight

Technology undoubtedly enhances the scalability and efficiency of coaching. However, it also poses the risk of commoditization, diluting the value of workplace coaching.

Historically, coaching was viewed as a one-to-one relationship focused on individual skill development and personal growth. This approach has limitations for two reasons. First, coaching now includes broader objectives, such as accelerating organizational agendas, which dyadic interactions alone cannot meet. Second, learning and development do not occur in isolation; organizational context—particularly, social dynamics—influences coaching outcomes. Coaches must interact with the client's organization as a whole to ensure the environment supports learning and behavior change, and that the coaching is integrated with other talent initiatives to drive organizational transformation (Ackermann, Baltzley, & Gagan, 2024).

This shift also suggests that coaching is not just transactional, but an ongoing relationship. Coaches work closely with an organization over time to understand its culture and develop a historical perspective. This longer-term engagement allows coaches to better serve their clients by providing contextually relevant support. By staying connected with the organization, coaches can track progress over time, adapt their services as needed, and ensure that coaching interventions align with the evolving needs of both coachees and their organizations. Sustained involvement strengthens the coaching experience and contributes to both individual and organizational growth.

3. Building Domain Expertise

Leadership skills fall into two categories: generalizable and situational. Generalizable skills (e.g., influencing, building effective teams, and delegation) apply broadly across different contexts. Situational skills (e.g., managing vision and purpose, leading transformation, and dealing with complexity) are more context-specific and require a nuanced understanding of particular organizational challenges.

Coaches are increasingly needed to help with high situational skills. Supporting leaders in these areas requires coaches to take anthropological approaches to delve into the client organization's social, cultural, and business context. This was reflected in the survey results, where coaches emphasized the importance of gaining knowledge about client organization and its business. Accumulating domain knowledge enables coaches to effectively combine their facilitator role with expert guidance to accelerate a leader's learning. In a fast-paced environment, organizations value coaches who can support leaders and deliver quick outcomes.

As a result, coaches must engage in ongoing professional development to broaden their skills, keeping up with industry trends, business operations, and areas such as change management and cultural transformation. Developing domain expertise both enhances a coach's credibility and allows them to align coaching with an organization's business priorities, fostering effective leadership development and driving success.

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SELF-REFLECTION TOOL

Use this checklist to level up your coaching game:

- ☐ **Embrace Technology**
  - ○ Stay updated with tech trends
  - ○ Develop digital literacy
  - ○ Attend continuing education courses and workshops
  - ○ Join tech communities
  - ○ Experiment with technologies
  - ○ Follow updates in coaching standards and guidelines
  - ○ Partner with tech-savvy colleagues
  - ○ Find tech-savvy mentors
- ☐ **Acquire Contextual Insight**
  - ○ Build broad relationships in the organization
  - ○ Map key stakeholders
  - ○ Delve into the history of the organization
  - ○ Learn the organizational culture
  - ○ Understand organizational strategy and priorities
  - ○ Leverage data analytics
  - ○ Understand talent strategy and initiatives
- ☐ **Build Domain Expertise**
  - ○ Choose industries to focus on
  - ○ Stay informed about industry trends
  - ○ Gather competitive intelligence
  - ○ Identify your passion and strengths
  - ○ Find niche areas that align with your passion
  - ○ Acquire domain knowledge related to niche areas
  - ○ Find mentors who are experts in select areas
  - ○ Build frameworks and tools to support your practice
- ☐ **Create a Reflective Coaching Practice**
  - ○ Carve out time to evaluate the role of self as coach
  - ○ Identify specific coaching competencies to develop
  - ○ Seek out a buddy coach for continual development and ongoing feedback

Conclusion

Technology is advancing quickly, reshaping the future of coaching. With coaching extending to high-value activities, human coaches become even more indispensable. The synergy between technology and human expertise often leads to effective and efficient coaching outcomes, combining precision and scalability with empathy and nuanced understanding. As the demands on leaders grow, the role of coaches becomes increasingly critical in navigating the complexities of modern business.

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About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organizational structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.