

TECHNOLOGY IN COACHING: Ready To Upgrade?



Part 1 of mini-series | Estimated reading time: 10 mins

What part does, or could, tech such as apps play in coaching? In this first article of a mini-series, **Carol Braddick** shows how a wide range of mobile apps complement conventional coaching and play a valuable role in leaders achieving the goals of their coaching programs.

This first article includes a small sample of tools that offer the types of functionality that can be useful in coaching. The caveats to keep in mind here are: the supply side of this market of tools is vast; the mention of a specific product is not an endorsement and; there are no hyperlinks to product sites.

About the Author

Carol has over 25 years' experience developing managers, leaders and teams. Her business, Graham Braddick Partnership, works with a global network of executive coaches and consultants who design and deliver customized coaching and development programs.

What products can coaches bring from a growing market of apps, online tools, biometric trackers, wearables and workplace sensors? How can these tools enrich coaching programs?

This three-part series on tech in coaching will cover:

Part 1:

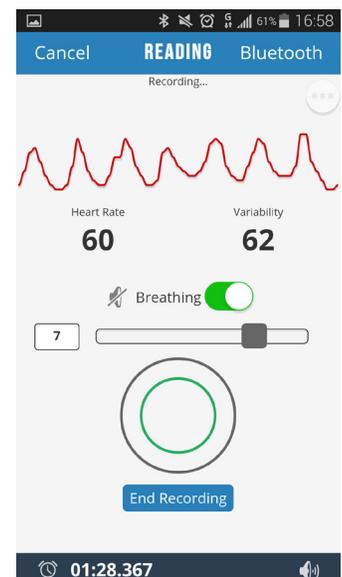
Digital delegation using tools that complement 1:1 coaching

Part 2:

People Analytics and HR Tech: how can these enrich coaching?

Part 3:

Is the future of coaching digital?



Digital delegation 1: From coaching goals to coaching results

Over a decade ago, a coaching client compared my email reminders to working with a friendly Jiminy Cricket. Now, there is an app for those reminders. There are thousands. Leaders are already using productivity, task and time-management apps on their mobile devices that they can repurpose to support their coaching programs. Take a closer look next time you see headlines such as “These 5 Apps Will Make You Super-Productive” or rankings of tools by gurus. Ask a digital native which productivity and personal development tools she uses.

When a leader starts working with a coach, they first create their coaching plan. This is a key step in building their relationship and anchoring the coaching in changes valued by the leader and organization. They likely complete HR’s template of coaching objectives, action steps, success metrics, accountability partners and timeframes.

More than simply a digital version of HR’s template, tech products can support coaching at different points across the coaching process such as:

The coaching plan

Apps help leaders break down big development goals into a plan of tasks, behaviors and habits. Products such as GoalsOnTrack and Strides engage users in the process of working on goals with their features that include regular check-ins and rapid, dynamic feedback. Most apps provide a personal dashboard of targets, progress and trends. In a coaching session, a leader and coach can use these data as a starting point for exploring patterns in the leader’s implementation of his plan. Guided by the organization’s governance of coaching programs, the leader shares his coaching plan with his HR Business Partner (HRBP) using HR’s template and or a report from his technology tool of choice.

Values

Apps also potentially help a leader focus on her values and how these are demonstrated at, and outside, work. A leader using Lifetick enters her values, then goals that support these values. Leaders can share their values, goals and progress with their coaches, colleagues, family and friends. Users of the Mitra app from The Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at MIT set up their core values and rate themselves daily on how they lived their values. They also track their feelings over the day. Through analytics displayed on her mobile, a leader can see the patterns in alignment to her core values and associated patterns of feelings. In the coaching session, the leader and coach work together to pull insights from these data and the leader’s observations.

Habit formation

A web search on “habit app” will deliver pages of tools based on research on how cues and reward cycles help us establish new habits. It is also possible to integrate an external resource such as The Tiny Habits program from the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University into coaching programs. In a free five-day program, participants work on establishing three micro-habits and





learn about the science of creating new habits. A Tiny Habits coach emails participants daily to ask about progress, share tips on habit formation and encourage actions for the next day. The coach contracted to work with the leader is still the leader's coach. He works with the leader to debrief the Tiny Habits experience and apply it to his broader coaching goals.

Reminders

Leaders may already have reminder features in their digital diaries, phones, watches and digital assistants such as Alexa, Siri or Cortana. Some are probably using these already, or tools such as Clear, Wunderlist or Todoist to prompt healthy behaviors, such as taking a break from sitting. Alternatively, they can set up their devices to prompt macro-actions such as the reflection discussed below. Leaders can also use apps in combination with reminders-through-association. For example, a leader assigns a private meaning to an everyday object, eg this blue pen (cue) is my private prompt to stay aware (intention) of my body language on videoconferences. She sets up the app to deliver the image of the blue pen at selected points or to display the pen as the device's wallpaper. Research shows that this association technique is also effective when change involves opportunistically performing a behavior at an unknown future time — a potential good fit for leaders. (Rogers et al, 2016).

Engaging coaching stakeholders

Most apps give your leaders the option to select and engage partners, such as their HRBP, for their work on their goals. As members of the leader's inner circle, stakeholders receive progress updates and provide an ongoing feed of observations, support and challenges. A team progress tool such as IDonethis gives team members working on development goals a daily team forum for communicating their "dones", which can include development "dones". This tool was originally based on Theresa Amabile's work The Progress Principle. (Amabile et al, 2011).

Managing moods

The Mood Meter app from Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence enables leaders to track their emotional states as they carry out their action plans. It prompts users to select from a set of 100 feelings and consider the sources of their feelings. Then, users choose a research-backed strategy for self-regulation. Or they can upload their preferred strategies, quotes and images. In the coaching session, a leader and coach work together to explore patterns in the leader's feelings and the effectiveness of different self-regulation strategies.

Reflecting on change efforts and results

Reflection is key to a leader's understanding and codifying of the mindset and knowledge that enabled successful changes and will generate future successes (DiStefano et al, 2016). In digital journals such as Day One and Journey, leaders can load up text, photos, drawings or handwritten notes that preserve these reflections for discussion in a coaching session. Many apps can be set up with customized reflection prompts designed by the leader and her coach that support both mindset and behavior change. For example, a leader working with the powerful Kegan Lahey Immunity to Change process could set up her Immunity Map on her mobile device. (Kegan et al, 2009).

Evaluating coaching success

Tools can also help establish a record of coaching outcomes — the qualitative and quantitative results, changes in mindsets and behaviors — across the arc of the coaching program. This record is backed up by input from the leader's stakeholders, including her HRBP. In the final section of this article, we will look at measuring the impact of tools on coaching outcomes.

Digital delegation 2: Biometric devices in coaching

Let's say you have identified high performers to work with coaches on:

- building their capabilities in self-monitoring and consciously using techniques to boost their resilience and preserve their effectiveness
- understanding their stress chain of triggers and the emotional, physiological, cognitive and behavioral reactions that ensue.

Biometric devices bring useful data to these leaders and their coaches. No longer limited to clinical settings or the niches of elite sports or The Quantified Self, these devices have reached a consumer-friendly juncture of convenience, efficiency and price. Coaches and leaders have choices of biofeedback tools, which include neurofeedback tools, designed to:

- detect and report on physiological states that are relevant to these and other coaching objectives
- report patterns in such states using data visualizations that may be especially appealing to leaders
- intervene — directly, physiologically, or through suggestions — to assist users in returning to a more resourceful state
- help users develop the skills to self-monitor and access resourceful states.

With faster, better and cheaper ways of monitoring important indicators of resilience, such as heart rate variability (HRV) and cortisol levels, it is easier for coaches to partner with their clients on using biometrics. HRV, for example, is widely endorsed as a valuable biometric of heart fitness, physiological resilience and behavioral flexibility (Fernandez et al, 2013; Moore, 2016).

Organizations such as HeartMathUK train consumer users and professionals such as coaches in the science of HRV, use of the pulse sensors, data interpretation and techniques that enable users to be in performance ready states. These techniques, such as paced breathing and the activation of positive emotions, are complementary with somatic approaches to coaching. The DIY user has several choices such as Coherence Heart Trainer™ or fitness apps that include HRV (SweetBeat, ithlete or Firstbeat).

The measurement of cortisol, aka the stress hormone, in saliva has already moved from clinical settings to the workplace. For example, by analyzing the tone of voice of a study participant, specialists in workplace sensors accurately predicted salivary cortisol levels and stress levels in the speaker both at the point of the vocal sample and in the future (Konnikova, 2014). Studies of traders' levels of cortisol and testosterone have shown the influence of these hormones on their risk tolerance and decision making (Coates, 2013). In the near future, we will be using a smart phone app that reads the results of a test strip (think at home pregnancy test). In about five minutes, leaders and coaches will have cortisol assay results delivered via their mobile devices.

A consumer wearable from Microsoft looks at multiple physiological measures and intervenes. Described as a Mood T-Shirt in the general press, it captures heart rate, skin temperature and



Let's say a client asks you for a recommendation on biometric devices?

How will you respond?



physical movement, interprets the wearer's emotional state, eg "stressed" and conveys this finding to him. The intervention for our stressed wearer includes: vibration pulses, removal of heat from his body and soothing, slow music.

What is happening in our stressed leader's brain before the t-shirt intervenes? Here too, coaches, leaders and consumers have choices of neurofeedback devices that detect brainwaves and report the user's brain state to a mobile device. EMOTIV, for example, measures six states, including focus and arousal. Muse positions its products as brain sensing to help users develop more regular and effective meditation.

Some neurofeedback products also intervene to shift the user's state. Product providers in this niche use different combinations of visuals, sounds, guided meditations and real-time neurofeedback to assist users in returning to a performance-ready state. Thync, for example, uses neurosignaling to stimulate specific brain pathways that induce a calm or energized state in the user. The promise from some companies is that, with practice, users can bring on this state on demand.

This measurement of electrical brain activity provides only a limited snapshot of overall brain health. Leaders who shift their stress levels from high + prolonged to variable + positive challenges are building their brain health. Their brains — and their performance — benefit from this shift now, just as better sleep, nutrition, exercise and hydration support their performance now (Moore, 2016). Devices that measure a set of brain metrics that provide a composite picture of brain health and function are not yet at a consumer price point but they are in development. (Fernandez et al, 2013).

Which is more effective as coach: delegating data collection, analysis and interventions to a smart, stylish neurofeedback headset or helping a leader develop her somatic intelligence and skills in DIY interventions such as adjustments in posture or breathing?

This may not be an either/or choice but instead an opportunity to develop a customized leader-specific blend of somatic coaching and biofeedback tools. Working both with self-detected and device-generated data, leaders can make stronger linkages between their inner states and their performance and impact on others. It may be useful to start with hard baseline data from a device. For example, most participants in a resilience program that measures sleep quality at the outset are "absolutely horrified by the lack of quality sleep". (Zelezinski, 2015).

How will your sleep deprived leaders find time for all of this? Google Calendar Goals addresses this speed bump. Designed by leading behavioral economist Dan Ariely, Goals had its start as the Timeful app, though as Google Calendar Goals, it is now part of what may be "one of the largest behavioral science experiments ever" (Harris, 2016). Goals helps users find time to carry out the intentions that typically get short shrift.

Using machine learning, it works with a set of goals ranked by users to serve up suggestions for using open time slots. It works with time dynamically, taking account of sudden changes such as an urgent teleconference as well as fluctuations in alertness during the day. By enlisting a smart app to find the time and schedule it, leaders are more likely to carry out their good intentions and manage the short-term distractions competing for their attention.

As Goals and other apps use machine learning and integrate contextual data from wearables and workplace sensors, they will generate prompts that are even more customized for the leader and her coaching program. For example, they may facilitate the stakeholder engagement that is so valuable in coaching by alerting a leader that one of her coaching accountability partners is available to meet next Thursday at 15:00.

Faster, better, cheaper coaching?

How would greater use of technology impact coaching effectiveness and coaching costs? Studies of the factors that influence coaching effectiveness tell us two important things.

1. The quality of the leader-coach relationship matters. (deHann et al, 2014).
2. It is difficult to isolate the impact of what the coach brings — her techniques and tools. (Sonesh et.al, 2015).

Given 1) It is important that coaches use tools such as apps in ways that strengthen the relationship. What would this look like in practice? We would see coaches that:

- select tools that complement their coaching philosophy and model
- learn about leaders' digital preferences, explain the benefits and pitfalls of using technology and support leader's informed, intentional use of tools
- become trusted curators who bring resources such as technology tools that are relevant to coaching objectives
- are skilled in facilitating leader's awareness of patterns in the quantitative and qualitative information from devices, their self-reported experiences, stakeholders and the context of the leader
- enable clients to shift from this awareness to insights and actions
- work with leaders on how best to use devices' default and custom notifications such as a ping that alerts a leader and coach about progress or a setback
- help the leader become a better DIY coach, including how she uses technology post-coaching.

Given the difficulty of gauging 2) , the discrete impact of specific coaching methods, Wilson's view on evaluating interventions is particularly useful: "don't ask, can't tell" (Wilson, 2015). Nonetheless, "happy sheets" from leader-users will still be useful. Partnerships with coaching dyads using tools will also give insights into how tools and the data they generate potentially affect coaching timeframes and costs.

"Don't ask, can't tell" still leaves a valuable option: organizational buyers of coaching services need to continue their due diligence on coaches and tools. Due diligence on technology should consider:

- profile of the user base of a tool, eg broad base of consumers or niche group such as professionals generally in good health, stand-alone users or users working with specialists such as sports, wellness or leadership coaches
- user satisfaction, ongoing engagement and results
- scientific underpinning of the tool and ongoing behavioral testing



How could using the types of technology covered in this article add to the coaching relationship?

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- potential for partnerships among product providers, organizational buyers of coaching, coaches and leaders on product trials and user feedback
 - user support, training and certification, especially if knowledge of neuroscience and biology is needed
 - lessons from digital and mobile behavior change applications in health care, mental health or positive psychology
 - data protection.

HR still has a key role in sourcing and qualifying coaches. In this role, HR should ask about a coach's experience using technology to support the coaching process and coaching outcomes.

When using tools such as those discussed in this article, leaders will bring more data — reports from devices, results from experiments and possibly more observations on themselves — to coaching sessions. Leaders and their coaches will still use sessions for what we already recognize as good coaching, e.g., harvesting insights; making room for goals that emerge during coaching; looking at where a leader gets stuck; updating personal leadership narratives; and evaluating their coaching partnership. With technology in the mix, the outcomes of coaching promise to become ever richer.

Note from the Author

For coaches and organizational buyers of coaching services:

What tools are you using?

How do these fit with coaching?

We'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch: carol@carolbraddick.com  

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