

'More Process, Less Insight?'

Trends in Executive Coach Selection_____

Executive Summary

Coach selection is a make-or-break part of any organisation's investment in executive coaching. This survey examines how selection of external executive coaches has changed and how it could be improved. It holds up a mirror to changes that are occurring in selection—and executive coaching overall—as the coaching market matures.

The survey sample includes 40 major buying organisations and nearly 300 experienced executive coaches. The majority of survey participants are based in the UK; many operate internationally. Based on their input, the survey reveals that:

- There are fundamental tensions between an organisation's purchase of a professional service such as executive coaching from a commercial market and the individuality of the coach-coachee relationship. The nature of this trusting, confidential relationship between coach and coachee makes selection especially challenging and successful outcomes difficult to predict.
- Although buyers have a much better understanding of their objectives for using coaching, and of coaching in general, their understanding is still limited—as seen by the ways they buy coaching. Originally intended as customised development for individual executives, coaching is at risk of becoming the 'fast food' of development.
- Buyers talk of wanting to find coaches that collectively offer variety and a range of options for their executives' different needs—a set of 'Swiss Army knives'. But coaches experience the selection processes buying organisations use as misguided, with a narrow focus on seeking standard, risk-free, one-dimensional 'tools'.
- Coaches support buying organisations using more consistent and rigorous approaches to coach selection. However, they also indicate that buyers' efforts to achieve greater consistency and rigour have led to a detrimental focus on safety and homogeneity in the set of coaches selected by organisations.
- Buying organisations are losing opportunities in selection processes to strengthen their brands and build coaches' interest in working with them. The involvement and knowledge of buyers, and the selection processes they use, inform coaches' perceptions of buying organisations—favourably and unfavourably.

- Selection has become a niche in the market as organisations outsource activities to new external parties and existing players that have added selection, such as assessment centres, to their USPs. Among some coaches, there is real concern about the: credibility of these entities; distance they place between coaches and buyers; and risk that buyers' knowledge of their organisations is lost in the outsourcing of steps in coaching to external parties.
- In the face of conventional wisdom that coaching has no barriers to entry, the survey confirms that a clear set of 'filters' has evolved in selection. These filters consider 'hygiene' factors, such as qualifications, and factors more relevant to coach effectiveness, such as experience, track record and references.
- Personal referrals and recommendations are still widely used by buyers and coaches. In effect, they are a proxy for the evaluation of coaching engagements. They will likely continue to dominate selection decisions as indicators on which buyers will rely. After all, most buyers know whether they will ask a coach back into their organisations.
- Qualification and accreditation schemes are losing ground among buyers as indicators of the quality of coaches. Of scant interest to coachees, the maze of these schemes still confounds buyers and coaches. Buyers and coaches—the stakeholders of the intermediaries promoting these schemes— would like their needs to have priority over the competition among these organisations for market pre-eminence.
- The survey results are awash with comments from buyers and coaches on the need for greater transparency from everyone in the market— about conflicts of interest, experience, programmes, and capabilities. It is ironic that a market built around a 1:1 relationship that depends so heavily on openness is in danger of falling short of a principle so often expressed in the many training programmes, mission statements and codes of ethics available in the market.

With great thanks to the buyers and coaches who gave their time and input to the survey,

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The full survey report can be downloaded from www.carolbraddick.com