



## **THE FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Blended Online Coaching

Organizations and businesses invest large amounts of money in the professional development of their employees. Providers of soft skill training and courses benefit from this trend: According to research by Technavio, the soft-skill training market will grow by 10% per year until 2020 (with a turnover of 15 billion dollars in 2015). The coaching market also continues to grow, according to the International Coach Federation (ICF). Between 2011 and 2015, the market grew by 6%. According to the 2016 ICF Global Coaching Study, the total revenue from coaching-related services is \$ 2.4 billion worldwide.

**A**t the same time, we notice that organizations are becoming increasingly critical as to what they spend their learning and development money on.

Training programs can be very expensive and time-consuming. Moreover, questions are asked about the effectiveness of professional development programs. Research into 'transfer of training' shows that such questions are justified given the low transfer of training during leadership development programs. To illustrate, a meta-analysis of Powell and Yalcin (2010) investigating the effectiveness of training programs for managers over a period of 50 years (1952 to 2000) showed that effects are moderate and that manager training programs have not become more effective over time.

In addition, participants in this type of program often have little time, a high workload and struggle with work-life balance (Ladyshevsky, 2014). Such factors can influence the development experience of participants and thereby the transfer of training (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Cromwell & Kolb, 2004).

Because each individual has unique development needs and the 'one size fits all' approaches often do not suffice, internet-based coaching has the potential to be a flexible and agile development approach that may be highly effective (Hamlin, Ellinger & Beattie, 2008; Jarvis, 2004). Previous studies showed positive results of behavioral change interventions delivered via the internet (De Janasz & Godshalk, 2013; Ladyshevsky et al., 2014; Ruwaard et al., 2007; Wentz, Nyden & Krevers, 2012). The call for alternatives in a digital world is also confirmed in the Deloitte report on Global HR Trends 2016. This report shows that learning is one of the most important trends in HR. Here, a trend is an area in strong need of attention and investment. The report concludes with the growing insight that learning must be integrated into a world where employees can continuously develop themselves, using innovative and flexible platforms that align to their personal agenda (Josh Bersin, 2016).

Accordingly, in our work, we see that the increasing digitalization of our work and focus on effectiveness and profitability creates a growing interest in online coaching and eLearning interventions.

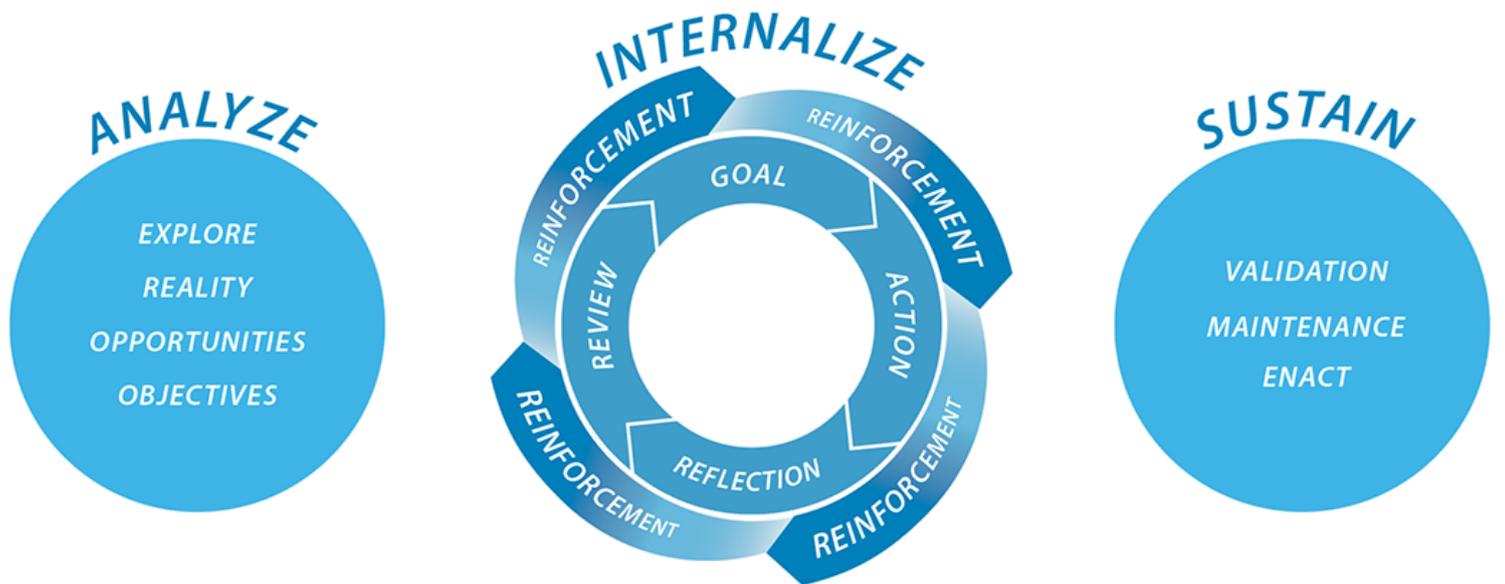
Challenge is that research and practice on online interventions are at an early stage, and only few methods and techniques for online guidance exist. In this article, we will explain our approach to online guidance (blended eCoaching) in the context of professional growth. In addition, we demonstrate how professional behavioral development can be realized.

## The blended online approach

Two meta-studies have shown that coaching in the workplace is an effective tool to improve the functioning of employees (Jones, Woods & Gyllaume, 2015; Tea Tree, Beersma & Van Vianen, 2014). Online coaching can easily offer this kind of real time support.

The online coaching approach of eCoachPro is defined in line with Smither's definition of internet-based coaching (2011): It is a one-to-one learning and development intervention that is delivered through virtual channels where the relationship is collaborative, reflective and goal-focused. The central focus of this approach is achieving professional results that are valuable to the client. The ABC model for sustainable behavioral development provides direction and structure for coaches and online coaching programs.

Development-oriented efforts are often aimed at increasing awareness, development and behavioral change of the client. The belief that people cannot change is a frequently held misconception. It is reinforced by the fact that many behavioural interventions ignore the specific opportunities and obstacles that help or hinder positive change in the client. Conversely, an approach that focuses on reaching a goal while taking small steps, is in line with how people naturally learn. A recent study by Stanford University shows that a frequently made mistake is 'trying to take big leaps instead of baby steps'. The ABC model focuses on these important small steps.



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The model consists of three main stages: Analyse, Internalize and Sustain. The first stage involves investigation and introspection. The second stage consists of implementing the new behaviour in your everyday life. The third and final stage relates to maintenance and preservation of your new skills and behavior in your day-to-day setting. Within each separate stage, the client takes small and specific steps in his or her own daily setting. In this way, the development process is a relevant, daily (working) context, with online coaching that is highly personalized and supportive at any time and any place.

### In practice

During the coaching program, the client is professionally and intensively supervised by a certified eCoach. The main focus during the coaching is the individual development goals in a relevant daily context. The coaching is tailor-made and is offered in continuous form. This encompasses a frequent and structured dialogue between coach and client. Various channels are used for this purpose, such as a coaching platform, video calls and texting.

The primary process of coaching is completely different from offline coaching: Instead of a face-to-face dialogue that takes place at regular intervals, an online dialogue is created that consists of small pieces and gets an asynchronous and continuous character. During the process, the power of questions, exercises, behavioral experiments, controlled reflection and transfer of knowledge (articles, photographs and short films) are used.

Working in such a goal-oriented way creates guidance that corresponds to the natural way people learn. The client becomes very committed to the process, which makes the program intense and ensures a steep learning curve. Writing is key in the blended online coaching program.

## Testimonial of a coach

“I was drawn to the concept of eCoaching because of my linguistic and literary background. As a coachee, I had already experienced eCoaching as a powerful tool. eCoaching has a couple of benefits, such as the independence of time and place of the program. You can contact your coach at any time. You can immediately share a concern or your goal; You don't have to wait until the next meeting. Another benefit is that you can read the whole dialogue again when you feel like it. The power of the written word!”

Brigitte Balling – Head of Mobility & Employability booster ING

One of the most powerful tools in the blended coaching program is the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. The asynchronous aspect in the blended coaching program is possible because coach and client write each other. Brigitte Balling mentions a number of advantages in the context of time and place accessibility. In addition, there are a number of powerful elements (benefits) such as an increase in reflection time, structuring of thoughts and being able to reread the texts and insights. Characteristics like healing, structuring and gaining insight are related to writing. Pennebaker (2001) investigated the advantages of expressive writing. “By writing, the client is concerned with himself and his environment in an intensive and consistent manner, giving more meaning due to relevant situations and experiences. When writing down an emotionally charged event into a linguistic structure, a cognitive change takes place. The process of writing and reformulating structures and organizes the event in the mind, making it less emotionally charged. In this way, writing mobilizes the power of the self-reliance of the client. Writing is associated with improvements in insight, self-reflection, optimism, a sense of control and self-esteem (Ribbers, 2015).

## Methodical Writing

The eCoachPro method provides a method where strategic, connecting and structured writing – with attention for relationship and objective reading – are central. It is specifically developed for the purpose of text based (e-mail) coaching, in which writing is the predominant means of expression.

The method has been developed based on classical scientific language theories such as the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), the speech act of Searle (1976) and the four principles known as the Gricean Maxims (Grice, 1975). The method also emphasizes efficient language use and message design.

The method consists of two successive processes. The first process contains the steps one needs to take to analyze the client's messages. The second process helps the coach to formulate a message to the client. Positive reinforcement of the client works stimulating and motivating in his development process. In practice, we experience an enormous appreciation for this reinforcing approach. Another important step in this process is performing an accurate, objective language analysis. The coach abstracts the needs of the client by means of the speech acts of Searle. The second process is concerned with the communication of the coach and is aimed at writing strategic, connecting and concise messages. The linguistic strategies of Brown and Levinson (1987) are used deliberately and actively to reduce the social distance between client and coach during the coaching program and to strengthen their relationship.

## Conclusion

The methods and techniques as described above make it possible to align individual goals with strategic business goals. In this blended online coaching approach, strategic soft skill goals and personal challenges and goals can be integrated to realize new preferred behavior on the work floor.

## Bio

Drs. Anne Ribbers is psychologist, researcher and executive e-Coach. She is co-founder of eCoachPro & Pluform and responsible for Global coaching at eCoachPro. She is researcher in the field of online coaching at Tilburg University and co-author of the book on coaching titled: 'E-coaching: theory and practice for a new online approach to coaching'.

Ir. Marc Coenen is entrepreneur with a strong background in digital transformation and people development in corporate settings. With his broad experience and knowledge about the implementation of online services (ING and Allianz), he is director of Pluform.com. Pluform is a platform for online personal development that makes it possible to bring regular coaching, treatment and intervention programs online.

Reference: Magazine 'Positieve Psychologie'. Would you like to read more interesting articles or the entire theme number? Download the entire magazine (in dutch) here: **Magazine Positieve Psychologie – Theme: Online**

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