

INPLASY

The effectiveness of work-focused coaching: the protocol for a meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - No formal external sources of support supplied.

Review Stage at time of this submission - Formal screening of search results against eligibility criteria.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 20 January 2025 and was last updated on 20 January 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective To evaluate the effect of coaching focused on the adult client's work role. We are searching Business source complete, Emerald Journals, ProQuest, psycArticles, PsycINFO and Web of Science for randomised controlled trials (RCTs) published up to 31st December 2024. We included randomised trials of coaching versus either an alternative development intervention or a no intervention condition. Our primary objective is to determine the effects of executive and workplace coaching on individuals and organisations based solely upon data from RCTs. Our secondary objective is to assess the quality and risk of bias of executive and workplace coaching RCTs to date and identify recommendations to increase the rigour of future coaching research.

Rationale Coaching has been estimated to attract billions of dollars of revenue for some years now. A rigorous meta-analysis (MA) of the evidence

regarding the size and nature of coaching's impact can allow organisations and potential clients to determine the probability of gaining any beneficial return from investing their resources. Existing MAs with similar stated objectives have contained primary studies that used quasi-experimental designs or coaching studies in domains other than the workplace (such as life coaching). Given the calls for more rigorous or robust evidence within coaching psychology, a gap remains for an up-to-date coaching MA featuring solely RCTs from studies conducted in a work context.

Condition being studied The term 'coaching' is variously defined and has increasingly been used to cover a range of interventions in numerous contexts. We define coaching as a voluntary intervention involving a series of future-focused, structured, purposeful conversations characterised by open questions, listening, summaries, reflections and affirmations intended to facilitate the client in generating and acting upon strategies which result in developing greater self-awareness,

enhancing personal responsibility and achieving meaningful progress towards a desired change. This definition is useful in demarcating coaching's space in relation to other 'helping-by-talking' interventions, such as counselling and therapy, 'line manager-as-coach' activities, where the 'coach' has formal supervisory authority and the intervention is arguably less than 100% voluntary or developmental interventions, such as training, mentoring and consultancy, where the provider is required to have some non-trivial lived experience or technical knowledge related to the client's need. Recognising that 'work' is broader than full-time payrolled activities, we draw on Warr's (2013) definition of the term to include unpaid, intern or voluntary roles, adult students working on an academic qualification or even jobseekers working on obtaining their next employment opportunity. Therefore, we assert work-focused coaching to relate to any adult (18 or older) client engaging in coaching with a clear intended focus on their work role. This differentiates work-focused coaching from domains such as life coaching, health coaching or amateur sports coaching.

METHODS

Search strategy Searches will be restricted by language (English only), date (up to 31st December 2024) and publication status (peer-reviewed only). Searches using the broad term 'coach* + randomised' will ensure initial responses are of broad relevance and can then be assessed against the inclusion criteria. The following databases shall be searched: Business source complete, Emerald Journals, ProQuest, PsycArticles, PsycINFO and Web of Science.

Forward and backward searches using the identified studies will be conducted. Specialist coaching publication archives shall be manually searched. In addition, coaching researchers with published RCT research on work-focused coaching effectiveness will be contacted to ensure that any 'in press' RCTs can be included in this review.

Participant or population Clients of adult age (18 or older) in individual coaching relationships predominantly focused upon their working life. This criterion would allow the inclusion of coaching clients who are unemployed, working in unpaid roles (such as interns or volunteers) or working as students in higher education at the time of the coaching intervention. Clients would also need to present as neurotypically functioning. This meant research featuring participants with diagnosed mental health conditions such as schizophrenia would be excluded.

Intervention The intervention will need to be labelled as 'coaching' by the researcher (as opposed to, for example, counselling, mentoring or training), but studies will not be excluded due to any particular coaching approach or technique. Recognising the complexities and inconsistencies in use of the term 'coaching', regardless of how the intervention is labelled in the source literature, it needed to meet this amended version of Bozer and Jones's (2018) definition of 'workplace coaching': coaching where the coach holds no formal position of authority over the client, is not required to have technical knowledge or lived experience of the client's role and with a primary focus on client roles and activities which hold a purpose beyond enjoyment of the task itself. Where studies include non-coaching experimental conditions, the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions (Higgins et al., 2022) guidelines shall be adhered to, with data from all relevant groups extracted and included.

Comparator The comparison being made needs to be between individual clients working with a coach and individuals not working with a coach. This allows for non-treatment comparators and non-coaching comparators. Studies comparing two differing coaching approaches will therefore be excluded. The participants will need to be randomly assigned to conditions. Although blinding is considered desirable in clinical RCTs (often involving the use of a placebo), there are pragmatic restrictions when seeking to apply blinding to coaching research, meaning studies will not be screened for this MA on the basis of the presence or otherwise of blinding.

Study designs to be included Randomised controlled trials, where participants are randomly allocated to conditions at either a group or individual level. Although blinding is considered desirable in clinical RCTs (often involving the use of a placebo), there are pragmatic restrictions when seeking to apply blinding to coaching research, meaning studies will not be screened for this MA on the basis of the presence or otherwise of blinding.

Eligibility criteria Produced in the medium of English; published in a peer-reviewed journal up to 31st December 2024; participants present as neurotypical adults engaging in one-to-one work-focused coaching.

Information sources Research databases: Business source complete, Emerald Journals, ProQuest, PsycArticles, PsycINFO and Web of Science.

Manual search of five specialist research publications: Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice; International Coaching Psychology Review; International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring; Philosophy of Coaching; The Coaching Psychologist.

Forward and Backward search using all included studies.

Communication with any published RCTs concerning work-focused coaching.

Main outcome(s) Statistical analyses will be performed where feasible to produce a meta-analysis of pooled estimates of effect size (including 95% confidence intervals), tests for heterogeneity and sensitivity analyses. Publication bias will be assessed for categories of outcome measures using funnel plots of effect size versus sample size for each included study (where sufficient data is available).

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis The Cochrane risk of bias tool (www.cochrane-handbook.org.) will be used to assess the risk of bias independently by two reviewers, including the following items: random sequence generation, allocation concealment, blinding of participants and personnel, blinding of outcome assessment, incomplete outcome data, selective outcome reporting and other bias. In case of disagreements, two reviewers will resolve through discussion or a third individual will be involved. Two reviewers will independently assess the quality of outcomes using GRADE. Disagreements will be resolved by discussion between two authors or consulting the third individual.

Strategy of data synthesis In accordance with PRISMA reporting criteria (Page et al, 2021), sample size, mean, standard deviation, effect estimate and precision data will be extracted from each study for individual-level outcomes only. The mean difference (MD) will be used to analyse continuous outcomes where data permits, else the standardised mean difference (SMD) will be used. Uncertainty will be expressed using 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). Recognising that heterogeneity is inevitable in MAs, we will adhere to the Cochrane handbook (Higgins et al., 2022) guidelines and assess heterogeneity by identifying I^2 and Q values. We note the Cochrane recommendation to consider P values of < 0.1 to be statistically significant. Any potential for publication bias will be examined using funnel plot.

Subgroup analysis Subgroup analysis will potentially be conducted on coaching/no

intervention vs. coaching/alternative intervention studies and also on studies of high vs. non-high quality.

Sensitivity analysis Our analysis will include studies at high risk of bias in any domain. We will detail where high risks have been identified using established tools.

Language restriction English-only studies will be included.

Country(ies) involved United Kingdom.

Keywords coaching; meta-analysis; randomised controlled trials; RCT; work.

Dissemination plans The findings will be submitted to peer-review journals for publication consideration. The findings will also be used in other dissemination activities, such as conference papers and gray literature.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Jonathan Passmore - Independent screening and study selection, independent data extraction, independent assessment of risk of bias, independent quality assessment, consultation and discussion with co-author, consultation on data analysis and interpretation of statistical analysis. Co-author of protocol and article text drafts.

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