

In the past few years coaching has been a very popular option for career-changers. Some would argue it has led to new coaches 'flooding the market', and an industry driven more by providing coach training and business resources for coaches than by coaching itself. In some circles, becoming a coach is advertised as a 'business opportunity' or even a route to instant fame and fortune. So how on earth do you know what you're getting?

It's fair to say that coaching has a PR and image problem. This in itself is problematic because many coaches do not have the business know-how to change how the profession is seen (and those who attempt to teach them are seen as 'cashing in' on vulnerable coaches). As someone who has built a successful coaching business in the last six years and helped some coaches along the way, I feel very passionately about the marketing of coaching. So let's initially focus mainly on workplace coaching and see where this PR problem comes from.

A large number of people who provide coaching in the workplace have trained in life coaching or personal coaching. This causes issues straight away because the training often teaches: 'You don't need to have experience in what the client is going through – just follow the process'. While it may be true that where the coach doesn't have a similar background and can be 'curious', (prospective clients haven't attended a course that says: 'You don't need experience'. They expect their coach to have it).

Coming from a sales and marketing background, when I retrained as a coach in 2004 I found it relatively easy to get clients. I could understand what was happening for my clients and could speak the language.

It became apparent when I attended my training that not everyone coming to coaching has a business background or knows where to start, so alongside my own practice I helped other coaches and wrote a book on the subject – 'Niche marketing for coaches' (Thorogood, 2007). You could argue I was 'cashing in', but it was more about doing what I could to educate newly qualified coaches – to save them either wasting money on things that weren't

working or freezing 'rabbit-in-headlights' style. While many of these coaches did have a talent, they lacked the know-how to market themselves or even identify what that talent was. It is still amazing how many people go into coaching to 'leave the old me behind', and throw away all the knowledge, contacts and common sense that will help them to make a living as a coach.

Often when working with coaches, I find we have to undo all the 'you can be anything you want to be' wishful thinking



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and focus on what they're good at, what they're not and what needs to be done, then break it down step by step to make it happen. Incidentally, not knowing how to do something (in particular, how to get clients) isn't a 'limiting belief' – it's reality, and no amount of denials or affirmations will change it.

HRM Coaching has produced a piece of research entitled: 'Has the coaching bubble burst?' and it's interesting to see so many

people say they would give advice along the lines of 'treat it as a business', 'choose a niche', 'specialise', and 'do more marketing' if they could go back and talk to themselves when they launched. I think most coaches know this, but they're stuck.

Coaches are told time and time again that 'all good coaches have a coach'. I agree up to a point. Pure non-directive coaching is suited to certain personal development situations but certainly doesn't replace the need for all coaches to get down-to-earth solid business advice. Every year countless people have a 'bright idea' for a business but no idea how to develop it or run a business. It doesn't stop them wading in with a large investment, then winding it all up within a few years if they haven't sought help and advice in time. People get so caught up in their enthusiasm that they don't always stop to do the necessary research to find out if there's a market for what they have in mind, whether people want it and if they are prepared to pay for it.

For the coaches who treat their practice as a business, there is plenty of work out there. Organisations are commissioning the services of external coaches who can demonstrate the value they bring and offer tangible benefits. Sadly, a proposal promising to help someone 'achieve their dreams', 'be all they can be' or 'feel better' is difficult to get signed off by the finance director. As a coach you should be able to back up your claims. You also have to focus on results, talk in real-world language and specialise. In order to change how coaching is seen, we have to become more business-like.

View this article on www.trainingzone.co.uk after the World of Learning Conference & Exhibition on 28 & 29 September 2010.

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The topic of coaching will be addressed in the World of Learning free seminar programme and also within a free workshop 'How to develop internal coaching skills' on 28 September.