

E-Coaching: Conceptual and Empirical Findings of a Virtual Coaching Programme

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Abstract

This article presents current empirical findings on a virtual coaching programme combining telephone coaching with an internet-based coaching programme. Within this study, 14 clients received three coaching sessions with a professional coach. Data was collected through interviews and by questionnaire. Findings indicate that this particular coaching format delivers positive results. Furthermore, some of the participants describe decisive advantages in both technological modalities (phone and internet-based coaching) in comparison to face-to-face coaching. Nevertheless, findings also indicate that a blended approach, combining this technology-mediated coaching approach with one or more face-to-face coaching sessions, appears as most promising.

Key Words: e-coaching, virtual coaching, telephone coaching, blended coaching, evaluation

Introduction

The widespread use of the internet has changed our society profoundly. There are more and more aspects of our life that are determined by the internet and only a few resist the use or at least the exploration of its possibilities.

With coaching becoming a well-accepted form of continuing education, practitioners began exploring the benefits of modern media in its application. The seventh Sherpa Coaching Survey for instance (Sherpa 2012) indicates that in 2012, only 41% of coaching was conducted face-to-face, 31% of coaching was delivered through telephone, 14% with the help of webcams and Skype, 11% in the form of e-mail coaching and 3% as video conferencing in high-definition quality. A growing trend towards tele-coaching can also be observed in China (Bresser 2013). The ICF Global Coaching Study 2012 shows that in North America, telephone coaching has even become the most preferred method of contact, whereas in Western Europe telephone coaching at only 9% is not very widespread yet (ICF 2012).

Nevertheless, coaching through modern media appears to be a growing phenomenon (Grant & Zackon, 2004; ICF, 2007) and a further increase in its use is predicted (Frazee, 2008). But what does

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this mean in detail? What do we mean exactly, when we speak of coaching through modern media? Is it phone coaching or Skype coaching or e-mail coaching or synchronous text-chat? And finally: what do we think about combinations, for instance, telephone coaching enriched with e-mail coaching and/or synchronous text-chat, or about the combination of Skype and synchronous text-chat? Is it appropriate to use one term for all these different possibilities? Which term is most suitable: e-coaching, virtual coaching, online coaching, distance coaching, or remote coaching? Do these terms refer to different formats or aspects of coaching or should we use them interchangeably?

E-coaching is a term which is often used interchangeably with virtual coaching, distance coaching, online coaching, remote coaching etc. As the discourse on e-coaching is recent, there is an apparent lack of consensus around its meaning. Clutterbuck (2010) for instance refers to e-coaching as a developmental relationship, which is mediated through e-mail and may be supplemented by other media. An alternative definition considers e-coaching as a technology-mediated relationship between coach and client, with the purpose of facilitating client growth (Hernez-Broome, 2010).

We define e-coaching as coaching mediated through modern media and argue that e-coaching is characterized by replacing face to face communication with modern media. We discern the following technological modalities: (1) audio communication (telephone), (2) video communication, (3) synchronous text-based communication, and (4) asynchronous text-based communication. These communication modalities can be enriched with e-coaching tools. Here we can discern three types: (1) text-based tools, (2) pre-prepared pictures, videos, and audio-documents, and (3) virtual reality platforms. These e-coaching tools can also be used in face-to-face communication. In this case we speak of *blended coaching*.

Drawing on this definition, this article presents the concept and first empirical findings about a special form of e-coaching combining telephone coaching with synchronous and asynchronous text-based communication. The following section provides a short literature review. We then go on to present the concept of this format, the methodology and research questions which guided our study, followed by our findings.

Review of empirical research in e-coaching

The following review aims to examine the literature surrounding of e-coaching research and to set a context for the present research study. For this purpose, we have reviewed a number of empirical studies, mainly representing U.S. doctoral research which focused on diverse aspects of e-coaching experiences and outcomes such as the coach-client relationship and sustainability of outcomes (Ghods, 2009), goal attainment (Poepsel, 2011), and coaching media selection (Charbonneau, 2002).

Our review revealed coaches' and clients' fairly positive attitudes towards distance coaching (Berry, 2005; Frazee, 2008; Ghods, 2009). Among technological modalities used for delivering distance coaching, telephone was considered to be most frequently used (Berry, 2005; Grant & Zackon, 2004; Poepsel, 2011) and its efficacy in the coaching intervention has been supported by empirical evidence (Ghods, 2009). Similarly, with regard to text-based coaching modalities, research yielded encouraging findings (Poepsel, 2011; Wang, 2000).

However, no empirical coaching study is known to have examined coaches' and clients' experiences with e-coaching models that involve both, telephone and online text-based support. Yet, as this paper aims to demonstrate, supplementing telephone coaching with text-based tools can enhance the coaching process. The following two sub-sections provide a brief overview of research in telephone coaching and online text-based coaching modalities.

i) Telephone coaching

Literature has acknowledged telephone coaching as a way of enabling coaching on-demand, providing access to expertise, serving geographically dispersed individuals, reducing cost (Frazee, 2008), promoting follow through and accountability (Charbonneau, 2002). In addition to recognizing these benefits, clients' and coaches' personal experiences with telephone coaching have been positive, as evidenced by empirical research (Ghods, 2009; McLaughlin, 2013) and suggested that telephone coaching may be a viable option and comparable to face-to-face coaching (Berry, 2005).

Using a sample of 102 coaching practitioners, Berry's (2005) quantitative research compared face-to-face with telephone coaching, in terms of working alliance and change. The findings of this study indicated coaches' equal preferences for telephone and face-to-face coaching. Congruent with Berry, McLaughlin's (2013) qualitative research examined the experience of six executive coaches with telephone coaching and highlighted the potential of telephone to deliver effective coaching and to enhance intimacy and disclosure. Findings from all six semi-structured interviews carried out in McLaughlin's study suggested that telephone as a medium added depth to the coaching process, and the experience with telephone coaching was considered to be comparable, if not more powerful than face-to-face coaching.

Whilst Berry's (2005) and McLaughlin's (2013) studies illustrated the viability of telephone coaching from coaches' perspectives, Ghods (2009) research complemented these findings by examining the perspective of coaching clients and their observer raters, which involved the coach, boss and peers of the clients. Employing a sample of 152 clients and their observers, Ghods' (2009) quantitative study concluded that client satisfaction, the coach-client relationship and positive coaching outcomes were correlated and indicated that coaching outcomes were sustained six months after completion of the telephone coaching programme. As suggested by the findings of this study, clients reported satisfaction with the coaching they received, feeling comfortable to disclose information over the telephone and being able to develop a strong relationship with their coach.

Indeed, establishing and maintaining a strong coach-client relationship has been highlighted as a critical factor for the success of the coaching intervention (Charbonneau, 2002, De Haan, 2008). However, in regard to whether telephone can facilitate a strong coaching relationship, research findings are contradictory. Whilst Ghods' (2009) findings suggested that the coaching relationship can endure distance and develop over the telephone, Charbonneau (2002) found that telephone coaching was perceived to be less effective than face-to-face and less appropriate, particularly when the coaching concerned sensitive or behavioral issues. Charbonneau's (2002) qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews with 10 executive coaches and their 10 clients to examine factors affecting media selection, suggested that at least initial face-to-face contact was essential for building a relationship. A later study by Frazee (2008) partly confirmed the difficulties of rapport building over distance, while at the same time it indicated that technology offers increased accessibility and frequency of communication, and thus, potentially facilitates a more human process than face to face coaching.

Nevertheless, despite the evident skepticism with regard to establishing a strong coaching relationship over the telephone, the same studies by Charbonneau (2002) and Frazee (2008) pointed out that the obstacles associated with telephone coaching, such as the lack of visual cues, can be overcome by verbalizing the process to the client and by paying attention to the subtle parts of the conversation (Charbonneau, 2002; Frazee, 2008).

The following section discusses findings about online text-based coaching as established by empirical research.

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ii) Online text-based coaching

Coaching delivered at a distance through text-based communication may involve media, spanning synchronous media, such as instant messaging and white boarding tools, to asynchronous communication media, such as email and weblogs. The efficacy of online text-based coaching is under-researched. We have found no research that has examined the effectiveness of synchronous text-based media in coaching. With regard to asynchronous text-based tools, a mixed methods research conducted by Frazee (2008) explored the reasons for using tools such as, electronic file sharing, emails, screenshots and online collaboration tools for facilitating and supporting the coaching process. Using a convenience sample of 191 workplace learning and performance professionals and coaches advocated the benefits of asynchronous tools, reporting cost-effectiveness, ease of use, and confidentiality afforded by such tools.

The only empirical study that has investigated the effectiveness of online text-based coaching however was Poepsel's (2011) quantitative research. A sample of 42 participants was employed for this experimental control study and was randomly assigned to either, a waitlist control group or an experimental coaching group, which received an 8-week online coaching programme, delivered through asynchronous online message boards and structured coaching exercises. The findings suggested that participation in this online coaching programme increased participants' subjective goal attainment and well-being.

iii) Consequences

The notable paucity of research on the effectiveness of text-based coaching implies the need for further empirical investigation, a need that is also apparent in telephone coaching research. Our review of the literature suggested positive evidence in regard to satisfaction with telephone coaching programmes, and illustrated first indications that telephone may be an effective medium for delivering coaching, adding intimacy and depth to the process (McLaughlin, 2013), and leading to positive and sustainable outcomes (Berry, 2005; Ghods, 2009).

In the context of this review, this study aims to evaluate an e-coaching approach combining telephone coaching sessions and an online text-based coaching programme. In particular, the study focuses on the evaluation of client satisfaction, goal attainment and on the evaluation of structure and process aspects in regards to this specific coaching format (see section 4). Through this evaluation, our study purposes to extend the existing research, by shedding light into the experience with telephone coaching combined with a text-based programme.

Virtual Goal Attainment Coaching (VGC) – Theoretical Concept

Our study focuses on an e-coaching format combining telephone coaching with an internet-based programme. The internet-based programme consists of sets of questions which the client answers in writing, synchronously or asynchronously. Even though e-coaching is a very new field, two web-based programmes have already been developed: The Virtual Coaching (VC) was developed by Harald Geißler (<https://www.virtuelles-coaching.com>) and has been continuously improving since 2006, and CoachMaster (<http://thecoachmasternetwork.com>) was developed by Robert Griffiths and has been available since 2012.

Our study focuses on "Virtual Goal Attainment Coaching" (VGC) which is one of the eight modules of the Virtual Coaching (VC) programme, each focusing one different coaching needs (Geißler, 2012). VGC is thus, not suitable for all coaching issues, rather it is suitable for clients who have a relatively clear goal, and need coaching support to achieve it as best as possible for what they need coaching support. To clarify the clients' specific coaching needs the Virtual Coaching (VC)

programme offers a self-coaching module, consisting of a sequence of questions, which the client answers in written before contacting the coach.

Similar to Griffiths' CoachMaster™ programme, the Virtual Coaching (VC) program is structured through series of pre-set questions and is conceptually based on behaviorism (Eldridge & Dembkowski, 2013), on cognitive behaviorism (Palmer & Williams, 2013) and the double-loop learning theory (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

The pre-set coaching questions in the Virtual Coaching (VC) are in a specific sequence and can be reflected and answered in written by the coachee, thereby serving as a preparation for the session or as a written record of the coaching process. This process has the didactic function of a micro-self-coaching, as by taking initiative and concentrating on their coaching issue, clients need a strong self-commitment. This internet-based coaching programme is thus characterized by two special features or innovations: Firstly, a didactical and structured use of modern media and secondly, a pre-set didactical framework, which structures and guides the coaching process.

Similar to the other Virtual Coaching (VC) modules, VGC is also characterized by the fact that the first coaching session has a different nature in terms of its structure and content than the subsequent sessions. The main aim of the first session is the development of the knowledge necessary to enable the coachee to achieve its coaching goal (see figure 1). Based on the conceptual foundations of behaviorism, the first session can be justified as serving the clarification of the clients' goal, of the current conditions that can influence goal attainment and particularly, of the available and potential resources and identification of the steps that need to be followed over the next weeks to reach the goal. To carry out these objectives, the first session is guided by 15 set coaching questions, which provide a framework for the process and content of the coaching discussion. This framework reminds a corridor, in which coach and coachee are orienting towards clarifying the coaching needs of the coachee, but having at the same time considerable free space for individually tailoring the discussion.

From a behaviorist viewpoint, the first step in the first coaching session is to support the coachee in identifying a specific coaching goal, the "result goal" (Figure 1). For learning and psychological reasons it is important to formulate the goal so concretely that the client can state the degree of his or her achievement at anytime. These small steps of self-evaluation make the client aware of even the smallest successes he/she achieves and are essential for a self-motivated management of the process.

With the result goal clients identify which of their capabilities they can use to optimally reach it. The client is also asked to identify a learning goal. The function of the learning goal, particularly through the lens of double-loop learning is to further develop the client's goal-oriented capabilities and thus, to optimize the way that the result goal is achieved. Like the result goal, the learning goal needs to be precisely formulated, so that the client can determine his/her actual goal achievement degree. This self-evaluation requires self-observation of clients' own actions and of their mental processes, which they can only become aware of through introspection. This way, the VGC relates also to cognitive behaviorism.

Figure 1: Screenshot 1 - The Result Goal

	A	B
1	My result goal <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is my result goal, i.e., what should change positively and by when do I want to reach it? 2. How important is it for me — expressed on a scale from 0 to 10 – to attain this goal? (10 = extremely important.) 3. How challenging is the result goal - expressed on a scale from 0 to 10? 	The first two or three main steps of attaining my result goal <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Step 1: 2. Step 2: 3. Step 3:
2	My capabilities <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which my most important capabilities that I momentarily have and which I can use to reach my result goal? 2. Are there forces within me, and if yes, which are the forces preventing me from reaching my result goal? 	My learning goal <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which ones of my capabilities should I develop further in order to achieve my result goal? - What would be my learning goal? 2. What would I have done differently if I had already reached the above mentioned learning goal I set?
3	Next steps for reaching my result and learning goal <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Which concrete steps do I want to follow for attaining my result and learning goal over the next 1, 2, or 3 weeks? 2. When I have completed those steps, to what percentage will I have reached my result goal? 3. When I have completed those steps, to what percentage will I have reached my learning goal? 	Further support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do I need support for the next steps? What support do I need exactly and who from? 2. When do I want to check how well I have implemented the steps I've just planned: in 1, 2 or 3 weeks?

The second session, as well as all subsequent coaching sessions of the VGC, is guided through coaching questions, whose main aim is to support learning transfer (Figure 2). This occurs in two main steps: The first is to reflect on how the goal-oriented steps which were planned in the previous session can be implemented. This step involves answering in written eight pre-set coaching questions, through which, the aim is to identify how important it is for the client to implement the planned steps, what facilitated and what prevented their implementation, and to what extent have the result goal and the learning goal been accomplished.

It is advisable, although not essential, that the coachee answers these questions through self-coaching (Green & Grant, 2003), to prepare for the subsequent telephone coaching with the coach and increase its efficiency. Regardless however, of whether this opportunity is taken or not, the coach is responsible for guiding the coachee through his/ her self-reflection. According to the behavioristic and cognitive behavioristic learning principles, it is important to reflect on the extent of achievement of both, the result goal and learning goal, and to support and encourage the client also for smaller achievements. Furthermore, during the second session it is important to re-think about the identified goal and to fine-tune it if necessary, or to encourage clients' reflection of the conditions and resources available for attaining their goal. After having reflected on the current conditions and available resources, on how the result and learning goals can be optimally reached and having considered the consequences of the next goal-directed steps, the second step can then be carried out. This iterative process of reflection and planning next steps is apparent in all subsequent coaching sessions.

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Figure 2: Screenshot 2 – Supporting Learning Transfer

	A	B
1	Reflections <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How many weeks back I am reflecting on when I am answering these questions and the questions below? How important were for me – expressed on a scale from 0 to 10 - the steps I have planned within the time period I am now reflecting upon? (10 = extremely important) 	Next steps <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Which concrete steps do I want to follow over the next two or three weeks?
2	Conditions for implementation <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What facilitated the implementation of my planned steps ? What prevented me from implementing my planned steps ? 	Looking at the next weeks <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How important - expressed on a scale from 0 to 10 - are for me the steps I just planned? How difficult - expressed on a scale from 0 to 10- will the implementation of my planned steps be? (10 = extremely difficult) To what percentage will I have achieved my result goal when I have completed these steps 100%? To what percentage will I have achieved my learning and goal when I have completed these steps 100%?
3	What have I actually done <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What have I done concretely to achieve my result goal? What have I done concretely to achieve my learning goal? To which percentage have I reached my result goal? To which percentage have I reached my learning goal? 	Further support <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Do I need support for the next steps? What support do I need exactly and who from ? When do I want to check how well I have implemented the steps I have just planned: in 1, 2 or 3 weeks?

The structure of VGC is not only based on the theoretical concepts of (cognitive) behaviorism and the double-loop learning theory, but also on the findings from empirical research focusing on coaching effectiveness (Greif, Schmidt & Thamm, 2010). The VGC module's questions which guide the first session focus mainly success factors, such as clarification of goals, result-oriented problem reflection, result-oriented self-reflection and activation of client resources. All subsequent sessions focus on the support of transfer into practice.

Based on the characteristics of VGC our main research questions are:

- How do clients perceive the *structure* of the VGC?
- What are clients' expectations in terms of *process* quality in coaching, and to what extent can VGC fulfill their expectations?
- How satisfied are clients with the VGC and how do they judge the degree to which they achieve their goals?

Research questions

The evaluation of coaching measures can be differentiated in the three quality dimensions, structure, process and outcome. This differentiation is oriented towards current evaluation approaches (e.g. Ely, Boyce et al. 2010, Greif, 2013).

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Up to now empirical coaching studies primarily focused on the research of issues regarding the outcome dimension, such as client satisfaction and goal-attainment, as well as on single aspects concerning the process dimension, for example the coach-client-relationship (see section 2). Our study focuses on the special format of “Virtual Goal-Attainment Coaching” (VGC) and explores the dimensions, *structure* and *process* quality as well as the *outcome* quality.

The *structure* quality is a very important criterion in the field of coaching. It includes the human, material and spatial resources and it says something about the conditions found in coaching. The question here is which resources are needed for coaching. In addition to the human, spatial and material resources, the provided technological structure is also of relevance. In our study this implies the use of telephone and the internet-based programme. The internet-based programme is structured by pre-defined questions. In the scope of this study, the structural characteristics of this special VGC are analyzed. For this purpose, our study is guided by the following research questions which focus on the particular structural characteristics of the VGC (see main question 1 in section 3):

- Telephone-coaching: How do clients evaluate the audio-contact and the non-existing visual contact between coach and client?
- Internet-based coaching programme: How do clients evaluate the structure of the internet-based coaching programme (structured through pre-defined coaching questions)?

The *process* quality refers to coaching activities which are necessary to achieve a certain goal. Here the question is, how coaching is carried out. The process dimension contains factors in the coaching process, such as the quality of the coach-client-relationship and the quality of interaction and interventions. In our study the process variables refer on the one hand to the clients’ expectations of a qualitatively good coaching in general and on the other hand to the experienced quality of coaching after participating in VGC. Specifically our study is guided by the following research questions with reference to the process quality (see main question 2 in section 3):

- How important is coaching for clients in terms of process variables, such as building up a trustful relation, talking about psychologically profound aspects, stimulating a constructive self-reflection and constructive dealing with emotions, as well as emotional security and tangency?
- How is the clients’ attitude towards virtual coaching in regard to these process variables before experiencing the VGC?
- How do the clients evaluate these process variables after having experienced the VGC?
-

The *outcome* quality refers to the satisfaction with the coaching, as well as the degree of success achieved through it (goal attainment). In our study we do not only look at the outcome after the whole coaching, we also have a look at the outcome of each coaching session. Regarding the outcome of the VGC we raise the following research questions (see main question 3 in section 3):

- How satisfied are the clients with each coaching session (1, 2 and 3) and how satisfied are they with all coaching sessions?
- How satisfied are they with the coaching results?
- How satisfied are they with the coach-client relationship?
- How ready are clients to recommend this special coaching format to others?

Our study specifically examines how sustainable coaching is, by analyzing clients’ satisfaction with personal development, in terms of the coaching reasons and the development of goal attainment

degrees, up to one year after the three coaching sessions. This leads to the following research questions:

- How does the goal attainment degree referring to the result goal as well as to the learning and developmental goal develop over the period of one year?
- How does the satisfaction with the personal growth regarding the coaching issue develop over a period of one year after the coaching has ended?

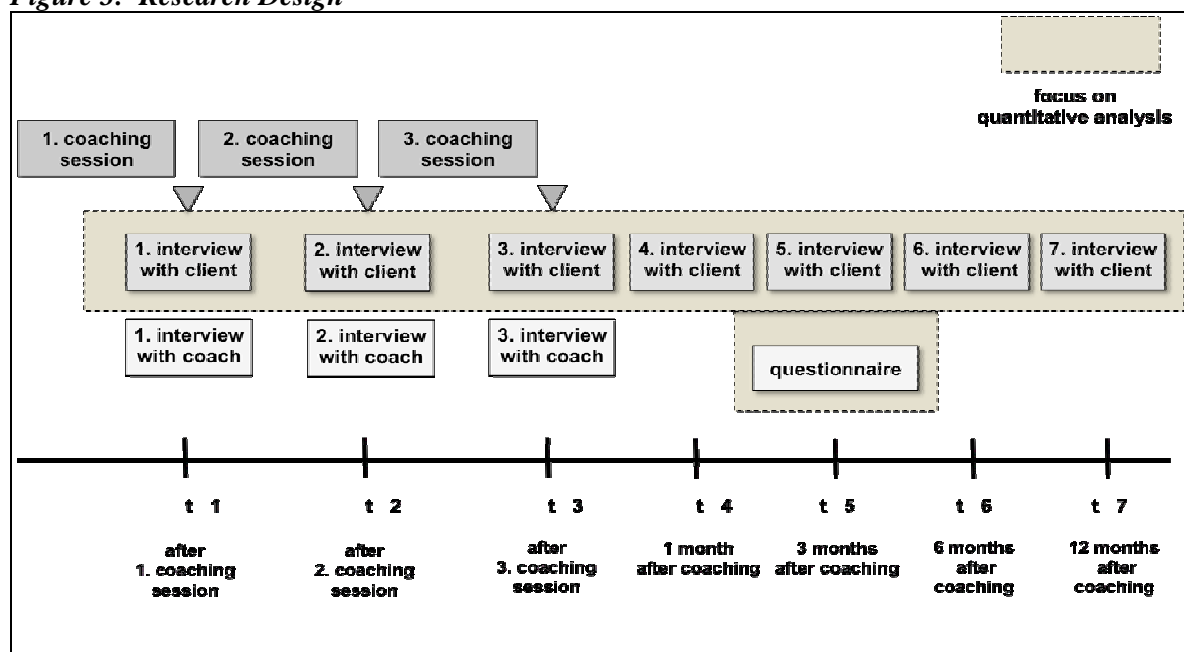
Research Design

The research design is as follows: The total sample of clients who took part in the VGC is $N = 14$. From this total sample are $N = 8$ females and $N = 6$ males. The average age is 48 years. All study participants are either self-employed as external consultants or work as experienced specialists or managers in companies or public organizations.

From the very beginning, clients have been informed to receive three coaching sessions in total. One person from our research group took over the task to coach the participants. Every telephone coaching session was recorded and screenshots were made of clients' written responses in the internet-based coaching programme. The two other persons of our research group conducted interviews with the clients and with the coach after each coaching session. Furthermore, the researchers carried out four more interviews with the clients, one month, three months, six months and one year after the whole coaching. Three months after the last coaching session, the clients were also asked to fill out a questionnaire in addition to the interviews.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the process of the study (t_1 to t_7) and the times when the instruments were deployed. In this article the research focus lies only on quantitative aspects of the interviews with the clients (1 to 7 interviews) and on the questionnaire, which was distributed three months after the coaching had ended (see the marked parts in Figure 3).

Figure 3: Research Design



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The interviews are semi-structured and the questionnaire contains closed questions based on a Likert scale with different values to which the participants could give answers. Even though the main part of our data is qualitative, in this article we focus only on the quantitative aspects. The data was evaluated with the help of a statistical programme, in order to calculate average values, minimum and maximum, and percentile estimations. The qualitative analysis (e.g. analysis of meaningful moments and problem solving processes) of this study will be carried out at a later point and is not part of this article.

Quantitative research results: structure, process and outcome

In relation to the research questions presented in the section above, quantitative results on the VGC are presented using the following three dimensions: Structure, Process and Outcome.

- Structure
- Process
- Outcome
- The variables for which data has been collected are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Overview of variables and times of data collection

	Points of data collection						
	Interview on Coaching 1	Interview on Coaching 2	Interview on Coaching 3	Interview 1 month after	Interview 3 months after	Interview 6 months after	Interview 12 months after
Structure							
Telephone coaching - Advantages (concentration, feeling secure) - Request for visual contact (punctually, permanently) Internet-based coaching programme - Impact of documenting results on coaching effectiveness - Usefulness of the being able to prepare coaching - Dis-/advantages of the strongly structuring approach					X ¹		
Process							
Building up a trustful relation Talking about psychologically profound aspects Stimulating a constructive self-reflection Stimulating to deal constructively with emotions Feeling emotionally secure Being emotionally touched					X ²		

¹ This data has been collected on the bases of a questionnaire distributed 3 months after the coaching and not the interview

² This data has been collected on the bases of a questionnaire distributed 3 months after the coaching and not the interview

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Outcome							
Satisfaction with first, second and third coaching session	X	X	X				
Satisfaction with entire coaching			X				
Satisfaction with results of coaching			X				
Satisfaction with coach-coachee relationship			X				
Satisfaction with personal change/evolution after coaching				X	X	X	X
Readiness to recommend VGC			X				
Degrees of goal attainment		X ³	X ⁴	X	X	X	X

Structure

Based on a questionnaire distributed three months after the coaching ended, the study participants were invited to rate key characteristics of the “Virtual Goal-Attainment Coaching” (VGC) approach. One item battery focused on the use of telephone through which this coaching has been carried out. Another item battery emphasized the internet-based coaching programme and its pre-set questions that were used in the coaching.

Telephone Coaching

Results to the question on how participants perceived the telephone based coaching approach and in particular not seeing, but only hearing their coach show a heterogeneous picture (see figure 4):

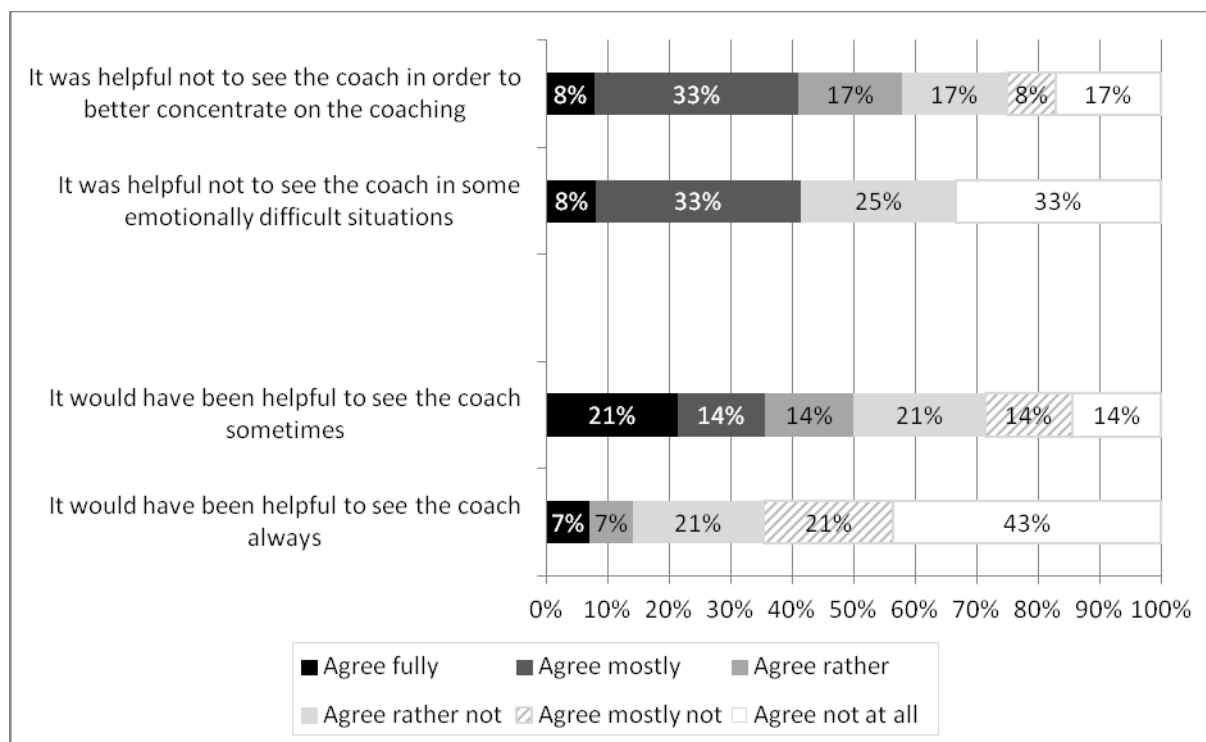
- With the statement “it was helpful to hear, but not see the coach as it was easier to concentrate on the coaching topic” disagreed 17% of the participants completely, 8% mostly and 17% rather. On the other hand agreed 8% of participants fully with this statement, 33% mostly and 17% rather.
- With the statement “it was helpful to hear, but not see the coach as it permitted a feeling of security in emotionally difficult situations” agreed 33% of the participants not at all and 25% mostly not. On the other hand agreed with this statement 8% of the participants fully, 33% mostly and 25% rather.
- With the statement “it would have been helpful to see the coach when needed” 21% of the participants fully agreed, 14% mostly and 14% rather agreed. With the statement “it would have be helpful to always see the coach” agreed only 7% of the participants fully, 7% mostly and at least 21% rather.

Our interpretation of these findings is that in general participants didn’t mind not seeing their coach. For some, this was even related to certain advantages (better concentration, feeling emotionally secure). However, we argue on the basis of these findings for a blended coaching approach meaning that it may be making sense – depending on the clients need – to carry out some of the sessions face-to-face.

³ This data has been collected in the coaching and not the interview

⁴ This data has been collected in the coaching and not the interview

Figure 4. Advantages of not seeing the coach and request for visual contact (N = 14)



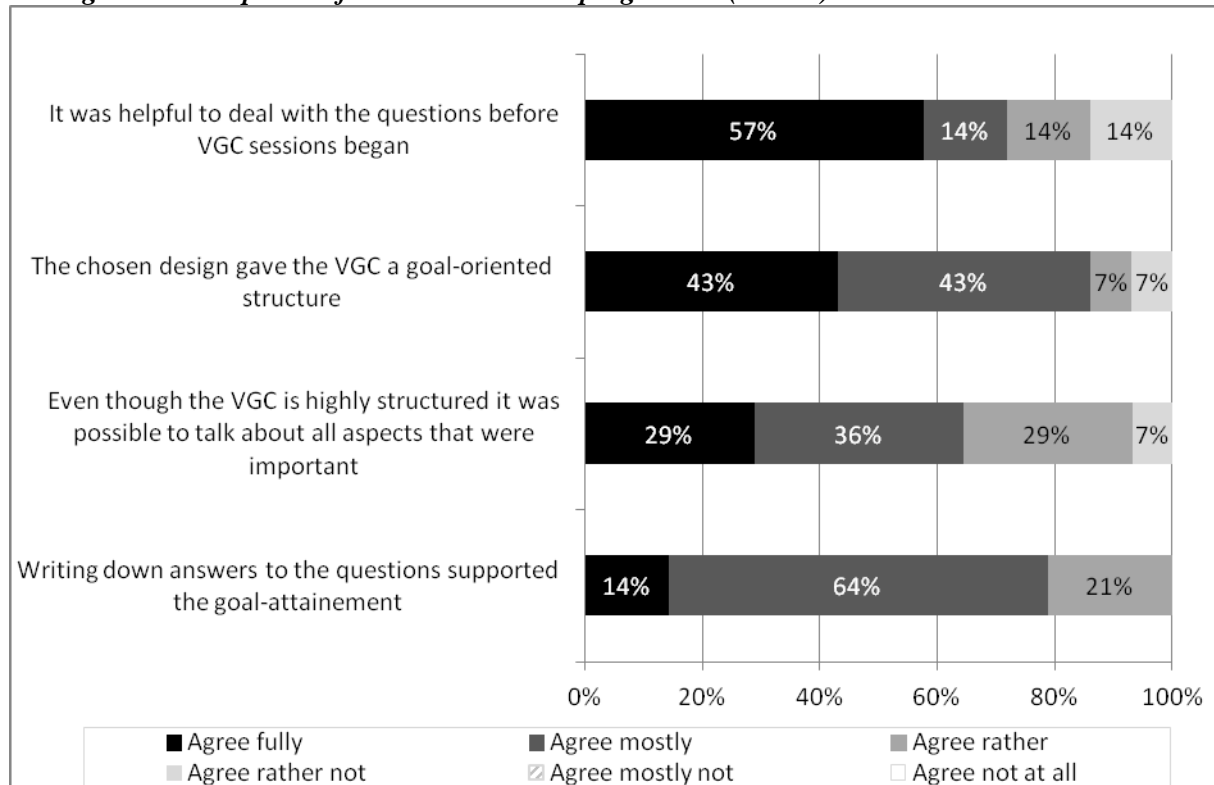
Internet-based coaching programme

Results to the questions on how the participants perceived the internet programme and the programme's questions indicate a positive picture (see figure 5):

- With the statement “it was helpful to be able to deal with the questions before the coaching” 57% of the participants fully agreed, 14% mostly agreed and 14% rather agreed (in total 86% agreed).
- With the statement “the VGC has a goal-oriented structure” 43% of the participants fully agreed, 43% mostly agreed and 7% rather agreed (in total 93% agreed).
- With the statement “it was possible - even though the VGC is highly structured - to bring in all relevant aspects” 14% of them fully agreed, 64% mostly agreed and 21% rather agreed (in total 93% agreed).
- With the statement “documenting answers supported the effectiveness of the VGC” 29% of the participants fully agreed, 57% mostly agreed and 21% rather agreed (in total 100% agreed).

We conclude that the VGC is an effective and goal-oriented coaching approach because of its strong structuring character, based on the pre-set questions in the internet-based programme and the request to document important insights within the same.

Figure 5. Perceptions of the internet-based programme (N = 14)



Process

In addition to the rating of structuring elements of the VGC, the participants have been invited to focus several *process variables*, namely:

- Building up a trustful relation
- Talking about psychologically profound aspects
- Stimulating a constructive self-reflection
- Stimulating to deal constructively with emotions
- Feeling emotionally secure
- Being emotionally touched.

Participants have been asked to rate these variables from three different perspectives:

- Importance of these variables for the participants in any kind of coaching (importance)
- Degree to which participants believe that these variables can be realized also in a virtual coaching (attitudes)
- Influence of the above attitudes after experiencing the VGC (attitude change).

i) Importance of the process variables

Also by the questionnaire distributed three months after the coaching, the participants have been asked to rank the importance of these variables on a scale from 0 (= “not important at all”) to 10 (= “extremely important”). For a better overview, the answer modalities have been summarized as

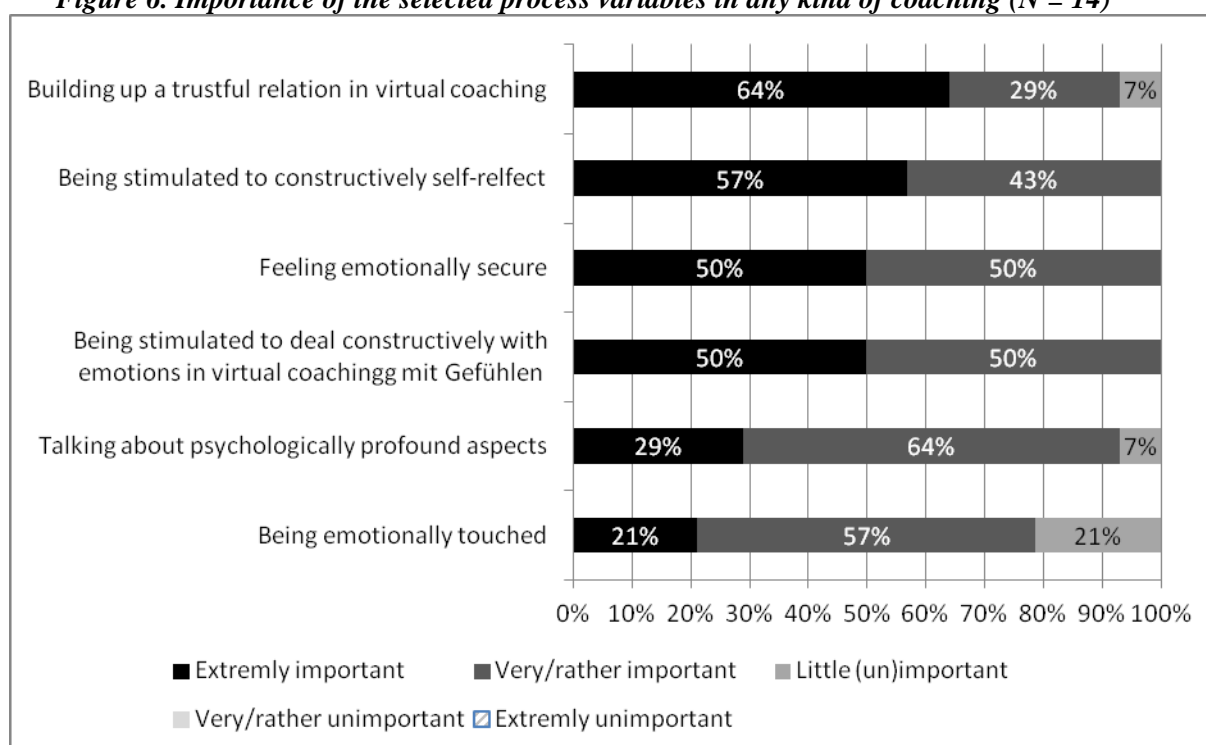
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follows: “extremely important”, “very/rather important”, “little (un)important”, “very/ rather unimportant” and “extremely unimportant”.

The analysis of the data indicates that for a large majority of the participants it’s in general in coaching “extremely” or “very/rather” important that

- a trustful relation is being built up,
- a constructive self-reflection is being stimulated,
- feeling emotional secure is ensured,
- dealing constructively with emotions is being stimulated,
- talking about psychologically profound aspects is possible,
- they are emotionally touched.

Figure 6. Importance of the selected process variables in any kind of coaching (N = 14)



Based on these findings we conclude that the process variables we selected are also of importance for the participants.

ii) Attitudes towards virtual coaching in regards to several process variables

After the importance of these process variables in general, participants were asked whether or not they believed that these qualities of a coaching process can also be realized in a virtual coaching.

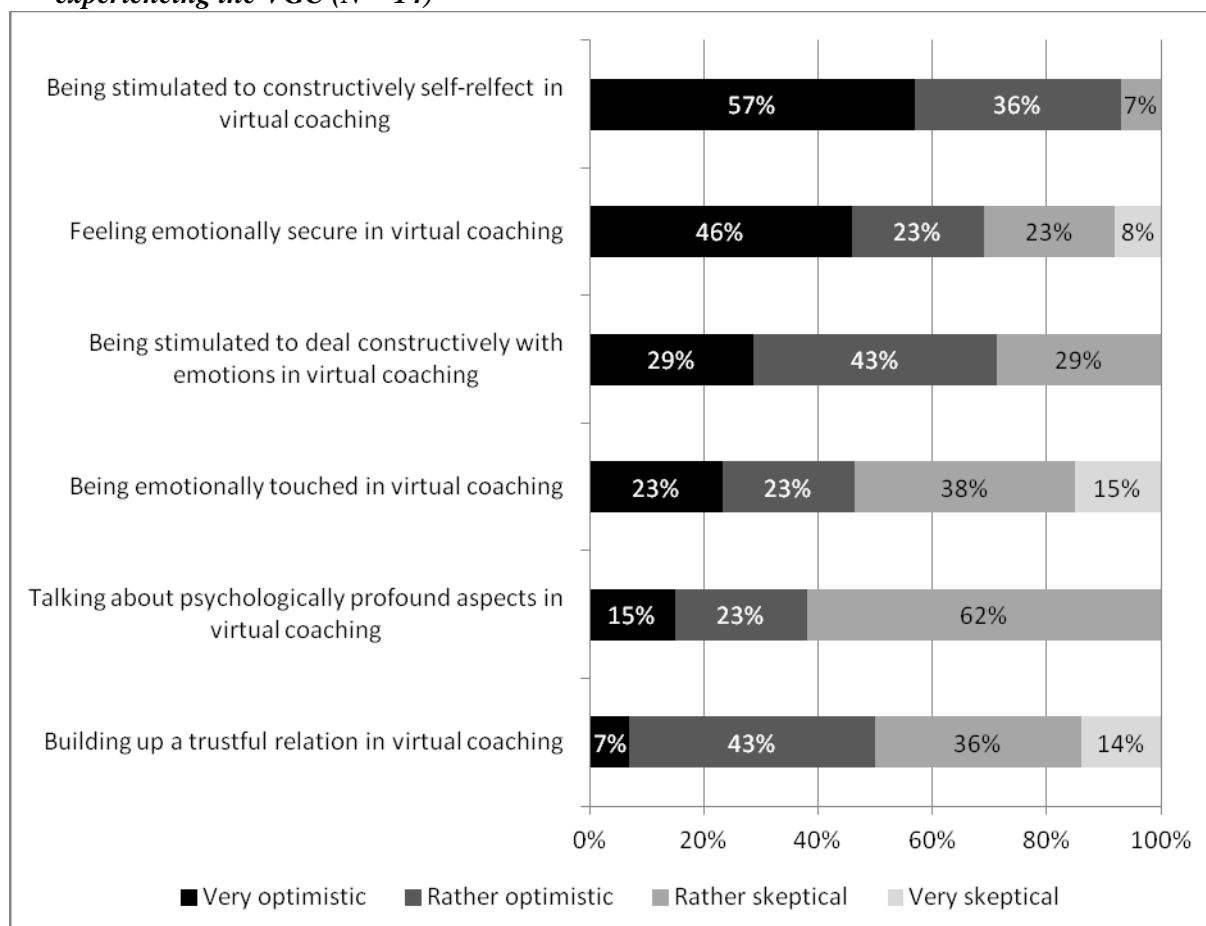
The data presented in figure 7 below shows an ambiguous picture. On one hand it shows that the majority of the participants began the coaching with strong concerns:

- Before the experience with the VGC, 62% of the participants were rather skeptical, whether talking about psychologically profound aspects would be possible in a virtual coaching,
- Before the experience with the VGC, 38% of the participants were rather skeptical and 15% very skeptical, whether they would be emotionally touched in a virtual coaching,
- Before the experience with the VGC, 36% of the participants were rather skeptical, and 14% very skeptical, whether a trustful relation would be built up in a virtual coaching.

On the other hand it seems that participants have decided to participate in this coaching because they felt confident in regards to the following process variables:

- Before the experience with the VGC 57% of the participants were very skeptical and 36% rather optimistic that a constructive self-reflection would be stimulated in a virtual coaching,
- Before the experience with the VGC 46% of the participants were very and 23% rather optimistic that they would feel emotionally secure in a virtual coaching,
- Before the experience with the VGC 29% of the participants were very and 43% rather optimistic that they would be stimulated to deal constructively with their emotions in a virtual coaching.

Figure 7. Attitudes towards virtual coaching regarding several process variables before experiencing the VGC (N = 14)



We believe that some of these findings can be generalized, namely that people who have not made personal experiences with virtual coaching are generally skeptical about it. Furthermore, we argue that it is a particularity of this sample – and can therefore not be generalized – that skeptical attitudes have been outweighed by positive expectations. This is not to be expected true for the entire population since people participating in this research project were most likely more positive towards virtual coaching than the average.

iii) Influence on client's attitudes towards various process variables based on their VGC experience.

The third item battery emphasized the experience participants made with the VGC (see figure 8). For this, a rating scale with 6 degrees ranging from “agree fully” to “do not agree at all” was introduced.

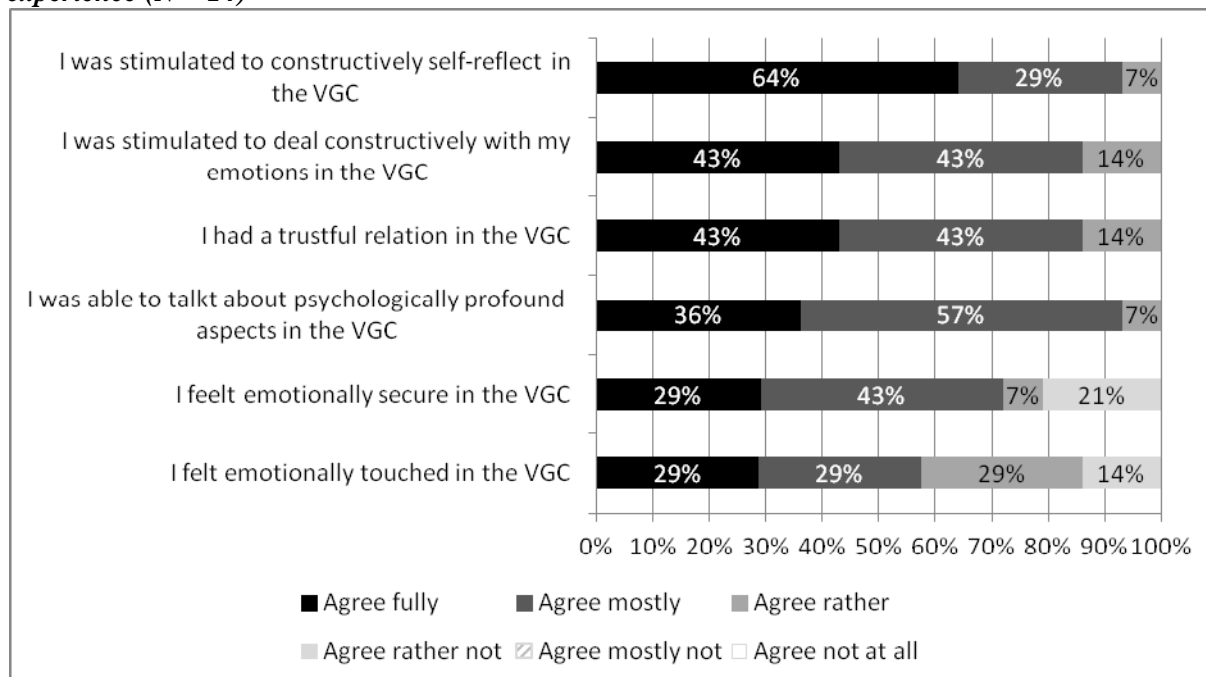
When we compare the results of this item battery to the battery of items before (attitudes towards virtual coaching), we observe two findings. The first finding is that prior positive attitudes have been partially surpassed with the experience of the VGC:

- Prior to the VGC experience, 57% of the participants were very and 36% rather confident that in virtual coaching a constructive self-reflection will be stimulated. After the experience, 64% of the participants confirmed this estimation fully, 29% mostly and 7% rather (100% confirmation).
- Prior to the VGC experience, 29% of the participants were very and 43% rather confident that in virtual coaching dealing constructively with emotions would be possible. After the experience, 43% of the participants confirmed this estimation fully, 43% mostly and 14% rather (100% confirmation).
- Prior to the VGC experience, 46% of the participants were very and 23% rather confident that in virtual coaching they would feel emotionally secure. After the experience, 29% of the participants confirmed this estimation fully, 43% mostly and 7% rather (79% confirmation).

The second and without any doubt most impressive result is finally that clients have overcome prior skepticism for the following aspects:

- Prior to the VGC experience, 62% of the participants were rather skeptical that in virtual coaching it would be possible to speak about psychologically profound aspects. After the experience, 36% of the participants fully believed that this was possible, 57% mostly and 7% rather (100% confirmation).
- Prior to the VGC experience, 36% of the participants were rather and 14% even very skeptical that in virtual coaching a trustful relation can be built up. After the experience, 43% of the participants fully believed that this was possible, 43% mostly and 14% rather (100% confirmation).
- Prior to the VGC experience, 38% of the participants were rather and even 15% very skeptical that in virtual coaching they would be touched emotionally. After the experience, 29% of the participants fully believed that this was possible, 29% mostly and 29% (86% confirmation).

Figure 8. Influence on client's attitudes towards various process variables based on their VGC experience (N = 14)



Outcome

During the interviews, participants were asked to rank their satisfaction with the following aspects on a scale ranging from 0 (= “not satisfied at all”) to 10 (= “fully satisfied”):

- coaching-session 1, 2 and 3,
- entire coaching (session 1, 2 and 3 together),
- results of the coaching,
- coach-coachee relation.

Furthermore, the participants were asked if they would recommend the VGC. Finally, participants also estimated several times⁵ both to which degree they have reached their result and learning/developmental goal and how satisfied they were with their personal development once the coaching has ended.

Satisfaction with the VGC

The satisfaction with the entire coaching is high with an average of 8.1 (min. = 5, max. = 10). Nevertheless, one person rated the coaching with 5 only. The ratings for the satisfaction with the results of the coaching are slightly higher with an average of 8.5 (min. = 7, max. = 10). The rating of the coach-coachee relation is with an average of 7.9 (min. = 6, max. = 10) lower than both prior ratings. Remarkable further is that the average rating for the satisfaction with each coaching session increases from session 1 to session 3 (session 1 = 7.4, session 2 = 7.8 and session 3 = 8.1). This

⁵ Measuring moments: coaching session 2 & 3, interviews 1, 3, 6 and 12 months after coaching

continuous increase may be partially explained by that the prior rather skeptical participants became, with every concrete experience, more confidence about the quality of the VGC (see also the results on *structure*). Finally, all 14 participants would (rather) recommend the VGC.

Degree of goal-attainment at coaching end (coaching session three)

The degree (in %) to which participants estimated goal-attainment regarding their result and learning/developmental goal is another outcome indicator. The result goal has been estimated achieved to 61% in average (min. = 0%, max. = 100%). The learning/developmental goal with 68% (min. = 12%, max. = 100%) slightly higher. We believe that this difference can be explained by participants using different levels of expectancy and time horizons when rating their satisfaction with results and the goal-attainment degrees.

Goal-attainment degrees and satisfaction with personal development over time

Another perspective on the evaluation of the coaching outcomes results from looking at the evolution of the goal-attainment degrees and satisfaction with personal development over time and beyond coaching (see table 3, 4 and 5). Data for these variables has been collected in coaching-session 2 and 3 as well as in the interviews 1, 3, 6 and 12 months after coaching ended.

The analysis of the data indicates that both result and learning/developmental goals evolve in similar ways when looking at the average values. Secondly, it can be observed that for both types of goals and a large majority of the participants, the estimated goal-attainment degrees constantly increased or remained at least stable from the first (coaching session 2) to the measuring time 6 months after coaching ended (interview). Exceptions can be observed for participants E and L. Their estimated goal-attainment degrees for both the result as well as the learning/developmental goal dropped down when measuring 6 month after coaching ended but recovered again for the last measuring moment 12 month after the coaching. For participant O, the estimated goal-attainment degree for the result goal dropped down in the last measuring point 12 months after the coaching. The same happens for the participant S regarding the learning/developmental goal when estimating the values 6 months after coaching ended. Explanations for these drop downs will be further analyzed in the qualitative part of this research project.

Participants have also been asked how satisfied they were with their personal development once the coaching has ended (1, 3, 6 and 12 months after coaching). Data analysis shows that the participants are generally satisfied with their development (averages: 1 month after coaching = 8.3, 3 months after coaching = 8, 6 months after coaching = 7, 12 months after coaching = 8.1). Deviations can be observed mainly there where the goal-attainment degrees dropped down as mentioned above. This is particularly true for participants E, L and S, partially also participant O.

Table2. Satisfaction, readiness to recommend and degrees of goal-attainment (during and after coaching)

	A	C	D	E	F	H	I	L	N	O	Q	R	S	U	Mean	Min	Max
Satisfaction with coaching session one	7	10	8.5	9	7.5	8	8	5	8	4	8	8	7	6	7.4	4.0	10.0
Satisfaction with coaching session two	9	7.5	8.5	*	8.5	7.5	8	9	7	8	*	9	8	3	7.8	3.0	9.0
Satisfaction with coaching session three	7	7	10	10	10	8	8	10	7	9	9	9	4	6	8.1	4.0	10.0
Satisfaction with the entire coaching (session one to three)	8	8	8.5	10	10	8	8	8	7.5	9	8.5	9	6.5	5	8.1	5.0	10.0
Satisfaction with the coaching results	8	7	10	8	10	8	8	9	8	10	9	9	8	7	8.5	7.0	10.0
Satisfaction with coach-coachee relation	6	8	8	*	10	7	9	8	8.5	9	9	6	8	6	7.9	6.0	10.0
Readiness to recommend VGC	Yes	Yes	R.Yes ¹	Yes	Yes	R.Yes	Yes	Yes	R.Yes	Yes	Yes	R.Yes	R.Yes	R.Yes			
Degree of result-goal-attainment at coaching end	30%	20%	100%	50%	20%	90%	70%	75%	90%	50%	70%	90%	0%	100%	61%	0%	100%
Degree of learning/developmental-goal-Attainment degree at coaching end	20%	90%	100%	50%	80%	90%	80%	75%	90%	30%	70%	90%	12%	70%	68%	12%	100%

* = missing data, ¹ = Rather Yes

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Tab. 3: Evolution of the result goal

	A	C	D	E	F	H	I	L	N	O	Q	R	S	U	Mean	Min	Max
Goal-Attainment at the moment of coaching two	5%	0%	100%	10%	10%	50%	60%	70%	30%	5%	30%	40%	0%	75%	37%	0%	100%
Goal-Attainment at the moment of coaching three	30%	20%	100%	50%	20%	60%	70%	75%	65%	50%	70%	80%	0%	100%	61%	20%	100%
Goal-Attainment 1 month after the coaching ended	30%	35%	100%	*	40%	70%	80%	60%	65%	50%	70%	75%	0%	100%	60%	0%	100%
Goal-Attainment 3 months after the coaching ended	45%	35%	100%	80%	70%	90%	80%	60%	95%	70%	75%	90%	0%	100%	71%	0%	100%
Goal-Attainment 6 months after the coaching ended	60%	60%	100%	20%	90%	95%	80%	30%	99%	80%	80%	99%	0%	100%	71%	0%	100%
Goal-Attainment 12 months after the coaching ended	60%	*	100%	80%	90%	96%	**	50%	100%	60%	85%	100%	10%	**	76%	10%	100%

*Missing data, **Interview not realized yet

Tab. 4: Evolution of the learning/developmental-goal

	A	C	D	E	F	H	I	L	N	O	Q	R	S	U	Mean	Min	Max
Goal-Attainment at the moment of coaching two	5%	50%	100%	50%	60%	40%	70%	70%	50%	25%	50%	60%	0	15%	50%	5%	100%
Goal-Attainment at the moment of coaching three	20%	90%	100%	50%	80%	60%	80%	75%	55%	30%	70%	60%	12%	70%	61%	23%	100%
Goal-Attainment 1 month after the coaching ended	20%	92%	100%	*	100%	70%	80%	60%	60%	60%	70%	90%	45%	70%	71%	45%	100%
Goal-Attainment 3 months after the coaching ended	45%	92%	100%	70%	100%	90%	80%	60%	95%	70%	80%	90%	50%	70%	78%	45%	100%
Goal-Attainment 6 months after the coaching ended	55%	100%	100%	50%	90%	95%	80%	30%	99%	80%	85%	99%	20%	70%	75%	30%	100%
Goal-Attainment 12 months after the coaching ended	55%	100%	100%	75%	100%	96%	**	50%	100%	80%	90%	100%	30%	**	81%	30%	100%

*Missing data, **Interview not realized yet

Tab. 5: Satisfaction with further personal development once coaching has ended

	A	C	D	E	F	H	I	L	N	O	Q	R	S	U	Mean	Min	Max
Satisfaction with personal development 1 month after	*	8.0	10.0	*	10.0	8.5	7.0	8.5	6.5	9.0	6.5	8.0	7.0	10.0	8.3	6.5	10.0
Satisfaction with personal development 3 months after	7.5	8.0	10.0	8.0	10.0	9.0	8.0	9.0	8.5	7.0	7.5	9.0	3.0	8.0	8.0	3.0	10.0
Satisfaction with personal development 6 months after	7.0	9.0	10.0	3.0	9.0	8.0	8.0	0.0	9.0	9.0	8.0	8.0	2.0	8.0	7.0	2.0	10.0
Satisfaction with personal development 12 months after	7.0	10.0	10.0	8.0	9.0	9.0	**	10.0	8.5	7.0	8.0	9.0	2.0	**	8.1	2.0	10.0

*Missing data, **Interview not realized yet

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Discussion and outlook

Our study focused on e-coaching, a format with a significant future potential that is still in a nascent state. Covering the whole width of this new field was beyond the scope of our research. We therefore focused on a particular approach combining telephone coaching and a process-guided internet programme. The particularity of this virtual coaching programme is not only that it is delivered through modern media but also that it is processed through a set of pre-defined questions.

One of the most important contributions of our research is that the ambivalence, apparent in previous research studies (focusing telephone coaching only), was clarified. As a matter of fact, empirical research suggested ambivalence mainly from the coach side, as coaches believe on the one hand that telephone coaching is problematic since visual cues, essential for building a trusting coaching relationship, are missing. On the other hand they feel that this deficit can be compensated by the enhanced concentration on dialogue itself. In the pre-post differences of the perspectives of clients, this ambivalence was also revealed in this study. Clients were rather skeptical before programme start but changed their opinions in a positive direction with the concrete experience of the VGC.

Further research shall analyse to what degree these positive experiences are related to the coaches particular skills and to what degree to the internet-based programme. Further research therefore has to be carried out by comparing the here presented approach with telephone coaching only. Furthermore, research could also explore the role of such a internet-based programme when combined once with telephone coaching and once with face-to-face coaching.

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