E-coaching for Management Development in Hong Kong: an Examination of Market Potential and Business Value from Knowledgement Management Perspective

Joseph Kim-Keung Ho

ABRS Management and Technology Institute

Abstract. E-coaching is increasingly being seen as a relevant management development and an organizational development effort in Hong Kong. The overall macro-environmental trends favour its adoption. This paper conducts brief literature review, which confirms this phenomenon. The challenge for corporations, individuals and coaches is to create conditions that favour the emergence of critical success factors (CSF) for effective e-coaching practices. The existence of these CSF ensures successful realization of business value of e-coaching. In this paper, some notions from knowledge management are employed to refine existing knowledge on the business value of e-coaching and on the approaches on realization of business value of e-coaching as described in the coaching literature. Organization development (OD) is then recommended for companies that are interested in e-coaching practices, as OD can create a favourable organizational climate and culture for such practices. In this brief and exploratory review, some of the supporting viewpoints are based on the writer's own observations as a management education trainer.

Keywords: e-coaching, knowledge management, organization development, IT, critical success factors, business value, systems thinking

1. Introduction

Coaching is a major short-term based management development activity. Most people would agree on its importance in human resource management. This paper examines a more contemporary aspect of coaching, namely, e-coaching. To explain the objectives of this paper, it is useful to briefly explain to the readers the context of this piece of work. And, this has to do with the main job of this writer as a management trainer.

The writer is an independent trainer on various management and Information Technology (IT) subjects. From the experience of this teaching experience, this writer finds much dissatisfaction with the examination-oriented approach of management education. At the same time, the management education sector in Hong Kong has offered more education programmes that make students' course assessment based on course-works and work-based assignments. Besides offering part-time management

degree programmes, a few profit-making management educational centres have also shown keen interest to offer corporate training as another major product line to their business. When these two products, i.e., management education programmes that rely on work-based assignment and corporate training services, are considered together, quite naturally, the product notion of tailored management coaching to private individuals and corporations becomes quite attractive as an enhanced service product for these profit-making management educational centres. Because of this development in the marketplace, this writer becomes involved in evaluating this service product for one of the management educational centres.

The writer expects substantial business potential of tailored/ personalized management coaching services in Hong Kong and such management coaching services will increasingly be delivered in the form or e-coaching, i.e. coaching via the Internet. The first objective of this paper is, thus,

- To examine the market potential of e-coaching for management development in Hong Kong
- To ensure business success, another task needs to be taken up, which makes up the second objective of this paper, namely:
- To examine how to realize the business value of e-coaching for Hong Kong companies that adopt it.

These two topics (as expressed in the form of two objectives of this paper) should be of interest to people who are involved in management development, including individual management educators and management education centres.

2. Market potential and key players in e-coaching

To start with, there is no single definition on coaching. Among others, the definition from Hawkins, and Smith (2006) appears useful for the discussion in this paper: "Coaching is the focused application of skills that delivers performance improvement to the individual's work in their organization, through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the executive, and help them to contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short-term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback."

There are different types of coaching, based on their different focus, namely, skills, performance, development and transformation (Hawkins, and Smith, 2006). From a product-oriented perspective, Corporate Coaching Partners (http://www.corporatecoachingpartners.com/), a management coaching specialist, offers a range of coaching services to clients as follows:

1. Strategic Business Coaching
2. Executive Coaching
3. Development Coaching
4. Feedback Coaching
5. Team Coaching
6. Coaching Training

Current status of e-coaching is also described in the literature. For instance, Olson, principal of Solutions4Leaders, which is a virtual company that delivers management coaching, notes that Web-enabled coaching is efficient, capable of supporting a wide variety of learning programs, and an intuitive Web interface. It offers a shared workspace for coaches and clients, supporting online sessions with exercises, self-assessments/ goal-setting and tracking tools as well tracking mechanisms to produce attendance reports (Olson, 2001). This account describes the e-coaching offer and its value proposition to customers from a e-coaching service provider.

On the qualification-awarding realm, coaching program is offered from the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) (www.i-l-m.com), which is also available in Hong Kong. Market awareness of this program in Hong Kong appears to be quite low at this point while ILM appears not aggressive in promoting their programme in Hong Kong either. According to the information published in their website, ILM is the only awarding body to provide qualifications aimed at developing the coaching/ mentoring ability of managers and training professionals. The assessment of its programme is work-based, not examination based.

Two other major players are companies and individual managers who are interested to coach or to be coached. The literature on management coaching notes the following major observations that describe the current status as related to these two major players, i.e., coaches and coachees (Longenecker and Neubert, 2005):

- Reliance on classroom training is declining while coaching is increasing employed in modern workplace;
- Effective coaching helps create a results-oriented culture, facilitate organizational learning, and create additional effective coaches;
- Coaching is generally agreed to be an important managerial practice, yet "most people will only have one or two bosses in their entire career who takes coaching seriously..".
- The rapidly changing environment requires rapid leadership development, which, in turn, requires organizations be staffed with managers to be coached and, who, in turn, coach others.

The overall picture emerging from the literature on e-coaching and its major players can be summarized in the following rich picture (re: Figure 1), which forms the basis for subsequent market assessment of e-coaching and discussion on business value realization of e-coaching in Hong Kong.

Figure 1 describes a situation where the major players share much common interest to adopt and practise e-coaching to meet their own self-interests. An assessment of the market potential of e-coaching needs to examine the specific driving and hindering forces from the macro-environment. In this respect, Hill and Stephens (2003) identified three main trends in the 21st Century, namely: the new consumer, generation differences and multiplicity of selves. In this paper, two major underlying forces noted are globalization and development trend in e-commerce, which increase the complexity, knowledge-intensity, uncertainty and dynamism of the macro-environment. In this case, both corporations and individuals sense the need to continuous develop their capability to absorb new knowledge and innovate. Coaching is increasing seen as a relevant response strategy for corporations and individuals. Similarly, Hill and Stephens (2003) suggested mentorship as an appropriate response from corporations.
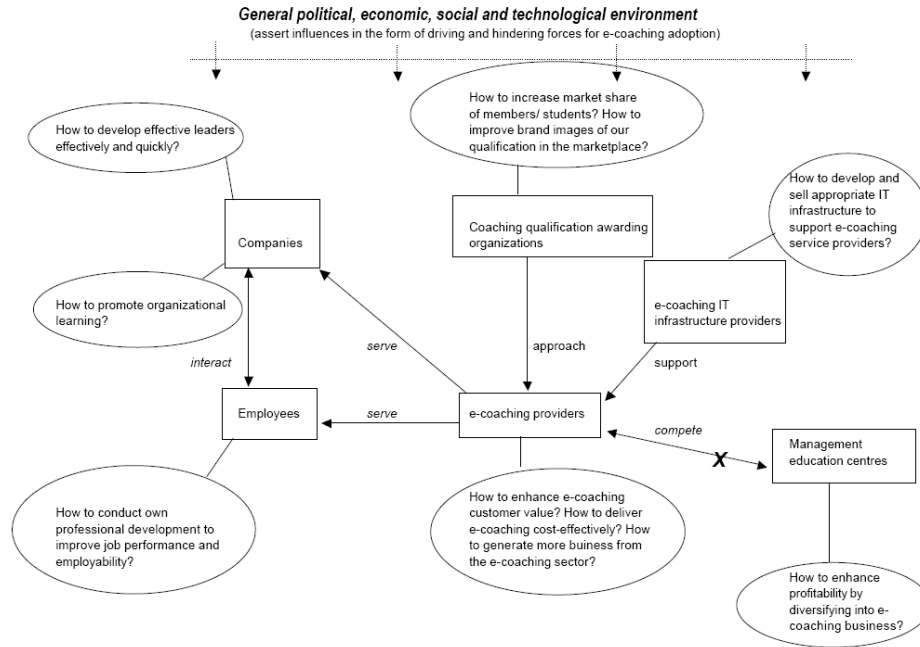
Fig. 1. A Rich Picture on E-coaching and its major player in general

The e-opportunities of coaching can be discerned in terms of the information content of products, information intensity along the supply chain, and information dispersion along the value chain (Feeny, 2001). For coaching practice, the first two factors are experiencing an upward trend while more globalized coaching service will tap into consulting talents and related business best practices that are unevenly dispersed globally. At the same time, companies and individuals are now more web-ready and e-capable. Thus, the e-opportunity for e-coaching is also increasing.

The prevailing examination-approach of professional development offered in the educational sector in Hong Kong, which promises students to gain recognized professional qualification with low risk and high speed can hinder individuals' and, subsequently, corporations' ability to take up e-coaching.

Coaches are not the same as advisors; they do not give correct answers to help coachees to solve their problems quickly: As Lang (2007a) puts it, a coach must "avoid giving advice because advice would take ownership away from the coachee." One of the negative effects of the exam-oriented approach is that students become passive in learning attitude and reliant on teachers to offer specific advice to finish the task, i.e. to quickly graduate with a recognized academic qualification. This, in the long term, hinders the development of critical thinking and genuine interest in the management subjects studied on the students' part. Subsequently, when these students join companies in Hong Kong, formation of learning culture in organizations, which is conducive to effective coaching, is hindered.

Whether a specific e-coaching service provider is able to win in the marketplace (e.g. create competitive advantage) depends on the relative effectiveness of its e-

coaching approaches as compared with that of its competitors. More specifically, it depends on how it responds to the prevailing environmental forces to create the required critical success factors (CSF) for e-coaching implementation with joint-effort from its corporate clients. At the same time, a coaching service provider needs to identify and possess the CSF of its own business of e-coaching (Stone, 2006). Specifically, it needs to build up capability to manage the e-operation to support e-coaching service?

3. Critical success factors and realization of business value of e-coaching in Hong Kong

The overall trend of e-coaching adoption is clear based on the rich picture review. From the e-coachers' (e.g. external e-coaching consultants or internal coaches) perspective, there must be some favourable conditions in place, in the form of critical success factors, before they are able to deliver effective e-coaching. These factors have been identified in the literature. For example, Corporate coaching partners (http://www.corporatecoachingpartners.com/) have noted in its website the following critical success factors (CSF) for e-coaching:
- commitment of both coachees and sponsors to the coaching process
- clear contracting with the sponsor over required deliverables
- ability to coach the whole person
- ability to act with high integrity and respect for confidentiality to the needs of the coachees.

These CSF's are related to the coaching process, which have also been discussed in the coaching literature. For instance, Longenecker and Neubert (2005) have identified 10 key practices that enable effective managerial coaching. The following are some of the practices noted:
1. effective managerial coaches will clarify the results/ performance outcomes that are truly needed or desired from junior managers
2. effective managerial coaches understand the junior manager's strengths and weaknesses
3. effective managerial coaches provide expert advice on how to improve performance
4. effective coaches develop a working relationship based on mutual benefit and trust
5. effective managerial coaches understand the context, pressures, and demands of the junior manager's job
6. effective managerial coaches support problem solving

These CSFs on coaching practices are quite compatible with soft systems thinking and the required condition of communicative competence (Jackson, 2000) to some extent. These CSFs are demanding requirements on the coaches and their client companies alike; if they can be achieved, the business value of e-coaching to the company concerned and the coachees can be realized.

In Asia, including Hong Kong, Lang (2007b) has identified four additional factors to consider when running coaching service:
1. *age of the coach*: older coaches are more experienced, thus better

2. *gender of the coach*: senior Asian managers tend to prefer a male coach rather than a female coach
3. *specific background and experience of the coach*: e.g. bankers requested a coach with a banking background.
4. *race of the coach*: e.g. expatriates often think that an Asian coach is unable to adequately relate to their cultural background.

Thus, ability to address these cultural factors in Hong Kong makes up another CSF for coaching practice in Hong Kong.

E-technology, especially in the form of collaborative systems, acts as enabling technologies to re-engineer the coaching process, thus further boosting e-coaching effectiveness. It is intended to help coaching consultants to better achieve the coaching CSFs and increase business value of e-coaching.

4. Assessing e-coaching from knowledge management perspective

The business value of e-coaching and the e-coaching process can be further reviewed from knowledge management perspective. Such a review refines the ideas from the current literature on e-coaching as well as provides more specific guidelines on how to improve e-coaching from a managerial and strategic perspective.

From the writings of Longenecker and Neubert (2005), one can notice that coaching practice is knowledge-intensive; furthermore, the tailor-made and highly interactive nature of coaching suggests a personalized knowledge management (KM) strategy that needs to be adopted by the coaches or the coaching consultants. Such a strategy relies on the development of person-to-person network so that tacit knowledge can be shared (Hansen, Nohria and Tierney, 1999). The goal of IT, in this case, is to facilitate conversations and exchange of tacit knowledge. The business model for the e-coaching provider, based on this approach, is to "charge high fees for highly customized solutions to unique problems" and "focus on maintaining high profit margins" (Hansen, Nohria and Tierney, 1999). Thus, management education centres need to develop an appropriate Information Technology strategy based on these KM notions.

For management educators who start to practise e-coaching as a diversification strategy, they have to learn taking up multiple teaching styles, namely, as a sculptor and a coach (Ljoså, 1998); they also need to master the skill to deliver both mass service (for teaching) and professional service (for e-coaching).

For client companies that practise coaching, e-coaching can be considered as a short-term means to promote organization development (OD), which aims at long-term development of individuals, groups and the organization as a total system, so as to improve overall effectiveness of an organization (Mullins, 2007). The pursuit of development, as what OD strives for at the individual and the organizational levels simultaneously, is a multi-purpose endeavor, encompassing truth, plenty, good, and beauty (Ackoff, 1981). OD, in this case, creates a favourable climate for companies to practise e-coaching within an increasingly e-environment (with substantial corporate knowledge management and collaboration activities) (Tassabehji, Wallace and Cornelius, 2007).

At the organizational level, e-coaching promotes OD and effective knowledge management. It can also be said that e-coaching, to be effective, should be OD-driven. Consequently, e-coaching is able to boost organizational absorptive capacity, i.e., ability to recognize the value, external information, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and promote organizational learning.

For e-coaching infrastructure providers, IT facilities that support knowledge brokerage (Davenport and Prusak, 1998), i.e. the process of making connections between knowledge buyers and sellers, can improve e-coaching services. After all, no one can be an expert in everything. On the other hand, as Davenport and Prusak (1998) noted, "don't expect software to solve your knowledge problem..": e-coaching is a human activity system with soft complexity. They need to be aware of this aspect of soft complexity when selling and implementing their Internet-based software solutions to their clients.

The following table, Table 1, summarizes the main ideas developed in this paper so far with the writer's own assessment. The rating scores in the table should be treated as propositions.

Table 1. Main players in e-coaching and their respective concerns

Key players	Need to promote wider understanding of the nature of e-coaching	Create favourable organizational climate and culture for e-coaching	Make use of e-technology to enhance coaching service delivery	Build up distinctive competence in e-coaching service operation
Client corporations	**	**	**	**
Individuals	*	*	**	
Qualification awarding organizations	***	**	**	**
Coaching consultants	***	**	**	***
IT solutions providers	**		**	*
Management education centres interested in offering e-coaching	***	**	**	**

Keys: *** (vital concern); ** (main concern); * (mild concern)

In this section, the concerns as identified in Table 1 are briefly examined and addressed with specific knowledge management approaches as recommendations. The setting is confined to Hong Kong. The overall status as depicted in Table 1 is that all

the major players largely share similar concerns in e-coaching practice but the intensities of the specific concerns of various players do differ. This partly accounts for the nature of soft complexity of the situation.

5. Concluding remarks

While the meaning and nature of coaching remains confusing for many people (Hawkins and Smith, 2006, p. 23), the proposition that e-coaching has business value can be quite agreed on by all major stakeholders involved. Although the process of coaching and the critical success factors of the coaching process (including e-coaching) have been examined in the current coaching literature, specific guidelines on how to create the favourable conditions for these CSF to be achieved are still not sufficiently clear. The business value of e-coaching and market potential of e-coaching can be roughly gauged based on literature review on this subject domain, knowledge management and Internet research.

By relating the notions from knowledge management to the discussion here, this paper also points to ways to import insights from knowledge management to enhance e-coaching practices from a managerial and strategic perspective. This further sheds light on how to effectively employ e-coaching and realize business value of e-coaching in the contemporary knowledge era and increasingly e-environment - an era with its own macro-environmental forces.

Finally, this paper made an attempt to review and refined the notions as related to e-coaching; it can only be considered as a preliminary review based on limited literature review and personal observation of the writer as a management trainer in Hong Kong. A more critical evaluation of e-coaching as a management technology can be carried out from a multi-perspective systems-based view (Ho, 1995). More empirical investigations need to be conducted to validate the ideas proposed here. These endeavors appear worthwhile.

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