

A unique relationship:

what role for AI in coaching?

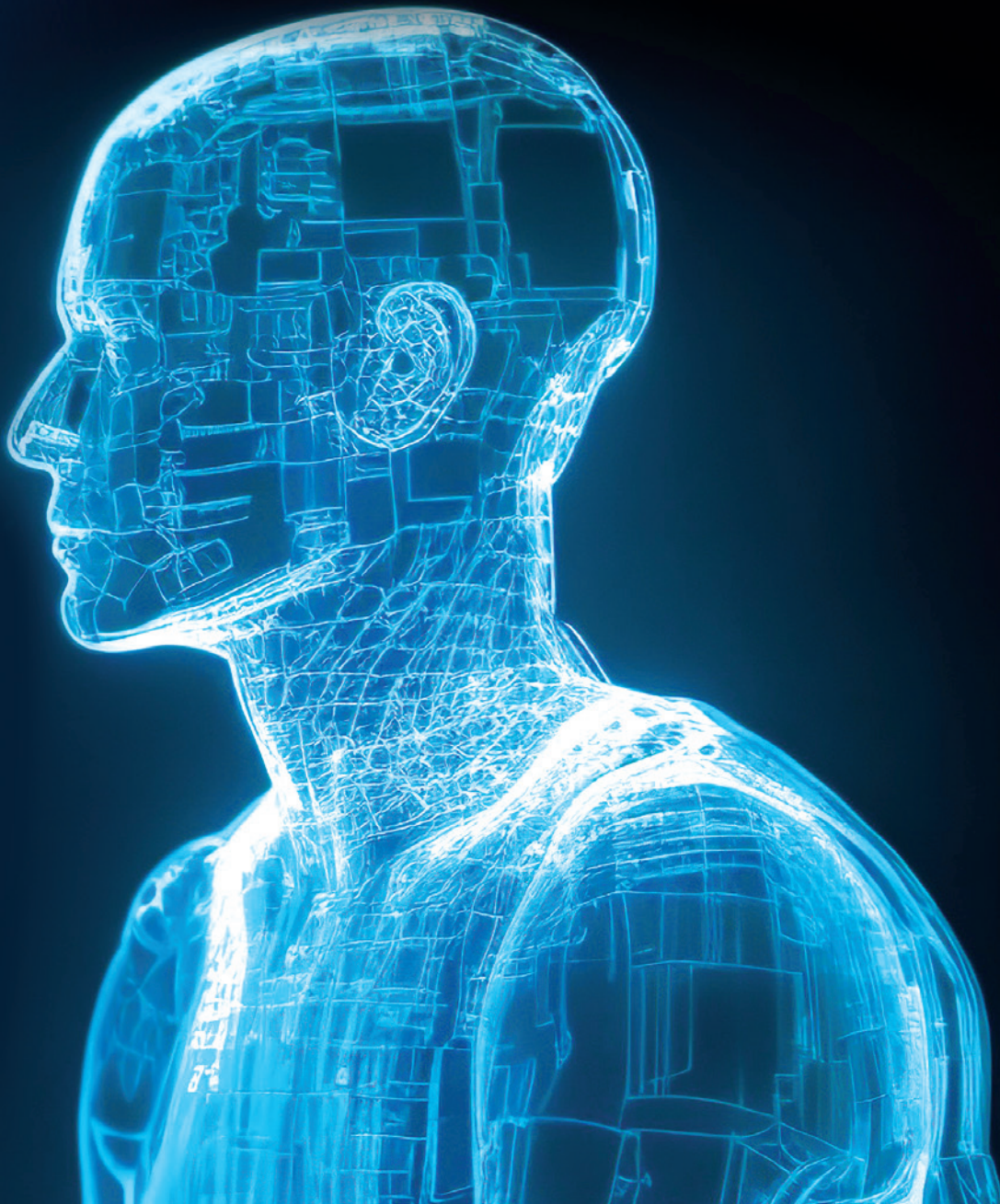


Erik de Haan asks: what can artificial intelligence offer the profoundly human practice of coaching?

Chemistry and human connection are at the heart of coaching, but that doesn't completely exclude artificial intelligence (AI) from the conversation.

I believe that humans will continue to be irreplaceable in executive coaching, a transformative approach to work-related learning through one-to-one conversations. Relational coaching in particular emphasises the quality and depth of the emotional connection between coach and coachee, and is therefore even harder to emulate.¹

I can see an expanding role for AI in coaching practice; however, mostly with respect to our understanding of the technologies, their capabilities and how these might be applied effectively, as well as their limitations.



Artificial intelligence in the workplace

AI has achieved plenty of publicity in the past year, principally from the rollout of ChatGPT and its ever-expanding list of workplace capabilities; from drafting cover letters to providing feedback on reports and proposals. Most of all, AI offers an opportunity to improve the quality of business decisions by drawing on a bigger, broader dataset than is possible for the human leader. This can also help to ensure that personal preferences (that may be biased or even discriminatory) do not impact decisions. Considering people's unconscious bias, decision making can be vastly improved if we allow AI to carry out the initial analysis of all the relevant data sources.

Business leadership is one thing. Coaching seems to offer a greater challenge to AI. An experienced human coach has the knowledge and empathy to explore emotions, make associations, and use intuition and imagination to help their client progress – all deeply human qualities. Given that these qualities are difficult and currently impossible to replicate, where does AI's potential in coaching lie?

To date, AI has worked best when tackling complex but well-defined problems, like diagnosing rare sarcomas or identifying fraudulent financial transactions. AI is most efficient when starting with a 'clean' dataset, where, for example, all facts are guaranteed to be about the same individual or all statements are evidence-based. Therefore, AI can add immense value in an ecosystem of truth (such as in medicine or accountancy) where data are factually correct and reliable. This is a risk for AI applications on the internet and inside organisations, where there is a lot of opinion and falsehood that AI may well base unhelpful conclusions on. Developers and users of AI have therefore focused on models and functions that work with data from a single client, and where data can translate effectively into a digital format, such as in facial recognition, e-commerce, navigation and healthcare.

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AI can assess, but chemistry can't be automated

There's potentially a role for AI at the outset of a coaching assignment, during the initial scoping exercise. AI can ask questions of each prospective coachee and reach conclusions about best next steps.

While AI can effortlessly organise coachee data, selecting the right human coach is a matter of psychology, not data. While AI can assess an individual's coaching needs, personal chemistry can't be automated. Global Head of Coaching at Hult EF Corporate Education, Naysan Firoozmand, emphasises the importance of the human touch: 'At Hult EF, selecting a human coach is done by the coachee. An experienced specialist provides a shortlist of potential coaches, but the coach is selected by the coachee based on personal chemistry. Chemistry is one of those things that you can't easily quantify; it can't be diagnosed through an assessment or a survey questionnaire or AI.'

Chemistry needs to be a meeting of equals and a process; a search for understanding of what is needed here and now; and what the potential outcomes and risks may be. We don't need an answer with lightning speed; rather, we need a tentative question and a slow and careful appreciation of the question from various angles. Successful chemistry looks and feels very much like the subsequential sessions, so this meeting of equals in a slow, reflective process will continue. The faster AI becomes, the further away it will stand from actual coaching.

Once the human connection has been established, it cannot be substituted. At the heart of coaching is that unique relationship between coach and coachee. Once it's been formed, it cannot be replaced by another human or by technology. That would create what we would call a rupture, a break which unnecessarily damages or even wipes out the carefully established connection.

Content and relationship

In order to think about how AI might help, it is important to understand first what coaching does and what it achieves. During every coaching conversation, I tend to focus on the *content journey* and the *relational journey*. The former is the step-by-step process to provide answers to challenges, to get closer to stated goals, and even to move from a degree of anxiety to more confidence and determination, with regard to an issue or problem. The latter, the relational journey, is all about how content is mirrored in the relationship in the room, how partners get on and how they mutually co-regulate. If this second journey is successful, we tend to see more agreement and more affinity in the room, as well as expressions of gratitude, confidence and determination. Coach and coachee can learn from both journeys, and usually one does not move independently of the other. Therefore, an explicit assessment of the relational 'mood' in the room can help in evaluating the achievement of goals. This is called *relational coaching* and requires an ability to understand both content and relationship, and a degree of courage to speak honestly to both.¹

This unique relationship in the room is the central part of relational coaching, which, as I've previously described, has an emotional and psychological focus.¹ However, I can see a role for AI on the content journey, in what we sometimes call 'goal-directed coaching', because this is more of a linear process and can be more easily put into facts and words. The individual sets a goal, develops a plan, takes action, monitors and evaluates their performance, before adapting their actions to improve performance and attain that goal. 'In this domain, an AI coachbot could coach as well as any basic human coach,' says Firoozmand. 'It's able to pick up on a much broader spectrum of potential questions and solutions associated with addressing a goal.'

An AI coach can ask questions about what needs to happen next, monitor progress, and respond to any input at any time. In this way, it could help members of staff who need a sounding-board – by conducting a dialogue to help them think through a business problem, such as setting up a new project. 'There is hope that AI can complement the human coach in advancing the further democratisation of coaching – reaching as many individuals as possible, which is one of our key commitments, because we believe that coaching can be so positive for so many people,' says Firoozmand.

But coaching is not all about reaching measurable goals. Together with Nicky Terblanche from Stellenbosch University, I was involved in a randomised controlled trial of AI in coaching.² This longitudinal study tested the efficacy of a chatbot AI coach called Vici. An experimental group (n=75) used Vici for six months. Eight measurements on goal attainment, resilience, psychological wellbeing and perceived stress were collected from the experimental and control group (n=94). Data were collected at baseline, after each of the six chatbot usage months, and again three months later. We found that the experimental group showed a statistically significant increase in goal attainment, while all other more psychological measures yielded non-significant results, i.e., the chatbot was no better than no coaching at all in the second, relational journey. In other words, in moving clients toward their goals, the AI application was as effective as a human coach. But when it comes to establishing empathy or promoting wellbeing, on the psychological measures, the AI didn't move the dial. This provides some indirect support for the idea that human coaches are aware of the importance of maintaining a strong coach-coachee relationship, and that they do more than simply facilitate a content journey. Their generally supportive and illuminating relational dimension could positively influence aspects of coaching outcomes, such as improved client wellbeing.

AI might work well with clearly defined goals, but this can also come at a price. In order for AI applications such as Vici to help, certain key assumptions need to be fulfilled which are not always true: in order for AI to contribute, coaching goals need to be stable and represented well by simple, factual words and discrete steps. However, complex goals often vary from session to session (and even from moment to moment!) and cannot necessarily be broken down into subgoals and/or simpler steps. Moreover, there may be an important 'analogue' or 'somatic' understanding in the room, where goals are not just communicated by words but also by the body and by gestures, such as responding to one's gaze and barely visible nods or shrugs.

Another more human attribute might be the coach's ability to respond to the unexpected. What if the goal the client wants to achieve is not formulated? The AI coach can help with a clearly articulated goal, but cannot deal with the unexpected. In such cases, the coaching may not be about doing something differently; it may be about deciding on a new approach, having a different mindset or a fresh attitude, which happen in the here and now of the coaching conversation and are not goal-oriented.

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Another ear in the room?

I can think of a few more extreme, potentially useful applications of AI in the coaching room, which, however, could also have more serious ethical ramifications.

I have long thought that the moment-by-moment 'material' in a coaching conversation is a worthy and promising area of study.³ In the study of this material, AI could also make powerful contributions, although it would mean letting AI into the 'sacred', confidential space of coaching conversations. Although my colleague, Naysan Firoozmand, does not see AI taking over from the human coach just yet, he can envisage an AI application supporting the coach and coachee by listening in on coaching sessions and logging the common themes that emerge: 'It's like a third-party ear in the room, unbiasedly capturing the nuances or trends that are happening in the dialogue, so you start to tap into things you might not have considered or might have dismissed as noise.' (See Bridgeman & Giraldez-Hayes for an early application of this idea.⁴)

By analysing these trends, the 'AI listener' could also help to train new coaches, enabling them to improve their coaching style. 'If you spoke for, say, 60% of the time, consider speaking less,' says Firoozmand, 'so that provides a narrative for future conversations.' But any such assistance should be used safely and transparently. Confidentiality is vital and anything that undermines the exclusivity of the relationship is problematic.

This brings us to the ethical issues around the use of AI.

Bringing AI into the coaching room may seem to be akin to bringing in a simple recording device (such as a notebook) that can produce a permanent 'audit trail' of sessional themes outside of the coaching room. However, the risk of feeding into a huge database that can have unethical uses (eg, through hacking), or of linking personal data to the recording, is much greater here, precisely because of AI's ability to handle vast amounts of data at lightning speed. In the current trend towards opening up information for all sorts of bots and for AI to use freely, it is difficult to see how AI can ever earn a place inside a confidential coaching room.

Another ethical consideration comes from the popular idea of 'democratisation' of coaching, especially in Silicon Valley. If we are not careful, this may really mean that software engineering companies support the building of platforms aiming to take massive market share, while underpaying professional coaches and offering cookie-cutter (simple stable-goals-based, like LivePerson, Vici, Coach M, Evoach, etc.) coaching with the sole aim of getting warm and fuzzy 'likes' on social media. By contrast, independent human coaches can democratise coaching right now by partnering with third-sector organisations, for example, by reducing fees for underserved groups or by offering a fixed percentage of pro bono coaching as part of an institutional commercial offer.

This leads me to conclude that there is still a long way to go for AI, and enough grounds for us in the coaching profession to follow developments with a healthy dose of suspicion. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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