

Been around the block: Is the prior experience of coaches in the workplace helpful?

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Been around the block: Is the prior experience of coaches in the workplace helpful?

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ABSTRACT

While most business coaches have prior experience of a workplace, there is debate as to how this should, or does, contribute to their coaching. It is often considered that coaches should be an expert in the process of coaching, and not their client's business. This study utilised an inductive design to explore the perception of the contribution of prior work experience through semi-structured interviews with 11 clients and 13 experienced coaches. The interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The data showed that both clients and coaches valued the coach having experience of working at a similar level. This helped establish credentials at the point of hiring, as well as providing authority and confidence during the coaching relationship. Such experience was also seen to give reference points and wisdom. However, while some participants saw advantages in the coach having a similar work background to the client (providing a common language and shared experiences), others considered that, while it was important that the coach had 'been around the block', this could be in a different work domain to the client. Clients also valued the wider experiences of a coach (such as artistic or socio-political) that brought creative insights and wider experiences.

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Coach experience; coach background; executive and workplace coaching; client preference; credentials

Implications for practitioners

The prior work experience of coaches can be helpful in their coaching practice in establishing credentials, facilitating understanding and providing confidence. It can also provide resources for the coach to draw on. More work needs to be done *via* coach education and training to help coaches to consider:

- How to skilfully bring their prior work experience into the coaching relationship for the benefit of their client.
- How their wider (non-work) experiences can be used to enrich the coaching interaction.

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- Consider the benefits and risks of sharing experience of the same work domain as their client.

Introduction

In business coaching, the role of the coach is often considered to be as an expert in the coaching process and not as an expert in the work domain of their clients (Cox et al., 2018; Passmore & Sinclair, 2020). By work domain we mean the area of work such as law, healthcare, manufacturing etc, and refer to work experience as more general experience in the workplace, possibly at a similar level but not necessarily in the domain of the client. As stated by Stokes et al. (2021, p. 2) coaching has been ‘associated with a shorter-term performance focus with the coach portrayed as a process rather than content knowledge-based expert’. A strong distinction is often drawn between mentoring (which will normally require domain expertise) and coaching (Stokes et al., 2021). Mentoring is viewed as less formal, longer-term and focused on career or job-specific learning and development. A mentor may be available to a mentee for a considerable period of time and will be selected for their industry sector and/or technical knowledge. No training or qualifications to conduct mentoring are required (Passmore, 2021).

In contrast, definitions of coaching focus less on the knowledge and experience that the coach brings to the relationship and more on the process by which performance is improved. Definitions such as that by (Cox et al., 2018, pg xxix) exemplify this: ‘a human development process that involves structured, focused interaction and the use of appropriate strategies, tools and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the coachee and potentially for other stakeholders’. Such definitions of coaching result in a focus on the skills and techniques that the coach brings to the coaching encounter rather than their own prior work-related experiences. For this reason, coaches are encouraged to follow continuous professional development and upgrading of skills and techniques. Yet it can be assumed that many professional coaches will have had previous careers that give them prior experience in a work domain. Some coaches will also have concurrent roles and jobs that provide work-related experience, as well as experience from activities that fall outside of the formal workplace.

An argument can be made that, whilst there is no need for prior work domain experience in order to become proficient at the process of coaching, such experience may improve the quality of the coaching. As little exploration has been given to this argument and the advantages that prior work experience brings to coaching practice and the coachee experience, the intended contribution of this research therefore is to explore the role that prior work experience plays in the practice of coaching, drawing on the perception and understanding of coaches and their clients (noting that perception of effectiveness does not necessarily translate into good outcomes of the coaching).

Perspectives on work experience in coaching

There has been considerable debate as to whether work domain experience of coaches is an important factor in their ability to coach. As has been pointed out (Fisher et al., 2023),

the origins of coaching were based on managers using approaches to help their staff improve their effectiveness. Therefore, *de facto*, the experience and domain knowledge of the coach/manager were originally an essential component of the coaching process. This is of course similar to the role of the sports coach, which normally requires expertise in the relevant sports domain to be effective (Sirojev, 2023).

However, in the 1980s coaching evolved to emphasise the primacy of facilitation over giving directional advice. Whitmore, a key individual in the development of coaching as a discipline, did not consider expertise important for good coaching, and indeed thought it might hinder it because it can be difficult for the coach to withhold their expertise and not provide a technical solution. He stated that 'it is hard, but by no means impossible, for an expert to be a good coach' (Whitmore, 2009, pg 43). In contrast, others have argued that executive coaches need to be 'business savvy' and understand the 'language, history, and current conditions of the executive's industry and business environment' (Stern, 2004, pg 156).

There is evidence that the prior work experience of coaches can bring some important benefits to a coaching relationship. First, it can enhance credibility which is understood to be a key component of successful coaching (Sue-Chan & Latham, 2004). Fisher et al. (2023) interviewed four experienced coaches, who had held senior roles in commercial organisations, and their clients. They found that both the coaches and clients considered the prior experience to be important in establishing credibility and confidence. Coaches also thought that their prior experience of the mistakes that they had made was an important contribution to their effectiveness as coaches. However, the coaches all recognised that their prior experience also posed a risk that they might too readily provide answers or jump to conclusions. While the literature is divided as to whether prior work domain experience is of benefit in establishing credibility, a systematic review found the preponderance of evidence does link credibility to a coach's prior experience (Blackman et al., 2016). The role of prior experience in establishing confidence, trust, credibility and rapport has also been highlighted (Bush, 2004). It has also been noted that the character of a coach (as expressed through their virtues) can be important in the coaching process; these virtues are developed through the coaching experience and are dependent on context (George & Rose, 2024b).

Second, knowledge of the work domain may also be important in helping the coach provide deep and meaningful challenges to their clients (Cox, 2003). It can help them have empathy for their client's situation and facilitates discussion (Augustijnen et al., 2011). It has also been suggested that coaches need to understand the work domain to inform and frame their questions, and that clients do not want to have to explain things to their coaches (Passmore, 2009, 2010). Expert knowledge also helps the development of management skills, including the ability to navigate the politics of the organisation (Gray et al., 2011).

Finally, clients may well see prior domain-relevant experience as important when hiring a coach (or during chemistry sessions) as they may think that the coach is better suited to help them with their issues (Gray et al., 2011). One quantitative study using conjoint analysis indicated that similarity in background between a potential coach and their client was a positive factor in coach selection by clients. It was less important than personal recommendation, client feedback and coach training, but more influential than gender or their experience as a coach (Rojon et al., 2020).

Recent studies have explored the importance of the background of the coach, including the role of the coach's domain experience in relation to selection as well as the effectiveness of the coaching. In a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of executive coaching, De Meuse et al. (2009, pg 130) propose that much of the validity of coaching may rest with the coach as much as the coaching process itself and that 'the reputations and references of experienced coaches carry the greatest weight when it comes to decisions about whom to hire'. Prior experience in the workplace *via* occupational practice of knowledge and skills has been found to enhance performance (Dokko et al., 2009) and so similarly it is proposed that the prior working experience of a coach may be influential in terms of performance. The prior experience of the coach has been linked to increased credibility of the coach by the client as well as enhancing perceptions of self-confidence by the coach (Fisher et al., 2023). Specifically, Augustijnen et al. (2011, pg 159) suggest that prior business experience enables the coach 'to put themselves in the coachees' shoes and facilitates dialogue'. The importance of building a coaching relationship built on connection and trust is well established (Sills, 2021) and Mosteo et al. (2021) identify the importance of the coach's behaviours and attributes in building this during the coaching process.

We propose that these existing findings suggest that the background of the coach is an important aspect that is deserving of more study. Our research has therefore addressed the question: *what do experienced coaches, and coaching clients, understand the contribution of a coach's prior working experience to be?* The research outcomes will help in understanding how coaches are selected as well as inform their training and development.

Research methodology

The research was inductive and exploratory in nature, and designed to gain insights into the understanding of experienced coaches, and clients, as to the importance of prior work-related experience in coaching. This research assumed that there are 'real' mechanisms that operate in a social context, but that these may be unobservable. It is therefore necessary to use a subjective epistemology to develop descriptions of this reality. We have therefore adopted a critical realist approach (Archer et al., 2016; Bhaskar, 2007; Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). A qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews, was used to elicit the perspectives of coaches and clients.

The sample

Thirteen experienced coaches (with 5 years or more of coaching experience and accredited by a coaching body) and 11 clients who had experience of being coached were interviewed for this study (Tables 1 and 2). In this paper, client is synonymous with 'coachee', who may not be the person commissioning the service. Details of the interviewees have been published elsewhere as they formed part of studies that address different research questions (George & Rose, 2024a, 2024b). The interviewees were obtained by convenience sampling. Coaches and clients were initially approached through personal contacts and recruitment proceeded *via* snowballing. All clients had been coached within the last three months in the context of their work or occupation, and had been coached for a variable time of between 4 months and 10 years. The analysis of interviews was done independently of any relationship with other participants (such as coach-client).

Table 1. Summary of experienced coaches interviewed.

Pseudonym	Gender	Years since qualification	Accreditation
Julie	Female	18	AC
Nancy	Female	16	AC, EMCC, ICF
Edith	Female	20	AC
Alice	Female	18	ICF
Mary	Female	10	AoEC
Peter	Male	15	EMCC
Sally	Female	10	APECS
Brian	Male	16	AC
Aoife	Female	9	AC
Nick	Male	5	AC
Steve	Male	16	EMCC
Emma	Female	20	EMCC
Penny	Female	14	ICF

Abbreviations: AC: Association for Coaching; AoEC: Academy of Executive Coaching; APECS: Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision; EMCC: European Mentoring and Coaching Council; ICF: International Coaching Federation.

Table 2. Summary of clients interviewed.

Pseudonym	Gender	Business	Position
John	Male	Healthcare	Medical Leadership
Muna	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Rebecca	Female	Hospitality	Career transition
Keith	Male	Higher Education	Dean
Charlotte	Female	Healthcare	HR Director
Hamad	Male	Healthcare	Doctor
Christian	Male	Advertising	Creative Director
Claudia	Female	Pharmaceutical	Scientist
Megan	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Clare	Female	Charity	Chief Executive
Leanne	Female	Higher Education	Chief People Officer

The interviewees were asked for their preferred gender (we chose gender rather than sex because we assumed that behavioural, cultural or psychological traits of the participants was more likely to be important than their biological traits).

Data collection

The interviews were conducted virtually and recorded using Zoom. They were scheduled for 60 min. Interview guides were prepared. These included open questions around the importance of work domain experience in coaching, and the respondents' perspectives on this matter. These questions could include 'Are there things you think that a coach should have?', 'Would you imagine being coached by someone with no experience, say fresh out of school could be effective? (and why?)'. If the coach or client also talked about relevant work domain experience, they were asked how that benefited or hindered the coaching.

The series of interviews were stopped once the interviewers considered that there was enough data (using the concept of 'information power' rather than saturation, in which the researchers assessed from looking at the interview notes whether there was enough information present in the transcripts to answer the question) (Malterud et al., 2016).

The recordings were transcribed using Otter software, followed by manual checking. At this point in time the data was given pseudonyms. Any quotations are reported giving the

pseudonym and the suffix Co (for coach) or Cl (for client). The data was analysed using NVivo software. The analysis was based on the six steps of reflexive thematic analysis (familiarisation with data, coding, generating initial themes, developing the themes, reviewing the themes and writing up) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The process of familiarisation included listening during the interview and manual checking of transcription and repeated reading of the transcripts. Reflective notes were kept during the interviews and analysis. In the initial analysis, 1597 segments of text were coded across the entire interviews, then reviewed and patterns or themes developed based on the data and the research questions. During this process 6 themes were developed that addressed the research question, containing 65 segments of text. These were identified, named and refined by discussion between the researchers. Research quality was assured using the trustworthiness criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The researchers considered the confidentiality, privacy, safety and the risk of distress during the study (Rose et al., 2024). Ethical approval was given in advance of data collection by the University of Reading ethics committee (SREC-HBS-20211004-ANGE2465 6/10/21). Participants were given verbal and written information about the study, had the opportunity to ask questions, and indicated their consent by signing a form. All participants received a summary of the research findings once the study was completed.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews resulted in the development of six themes (Figure 1) around the importance of the coach's prior working experience. Five of these related to the value that the prior working experiences of the coach bring to coaching. The sixth theme refers to a discomfort that many coaches feel about the concept of work experience, while recognising the advantages that it might bring. Three of the themes relate to what experience might be adding to the coaching interaction (establishing credentials, common language and resource for coach) while two related to types of experience that clients and coaches valued.

Establishing credentials

When clients first seek a coach, they need a basis to make an assessment of the coach's potential fit to them and their situation. One way of doing this is to review the background

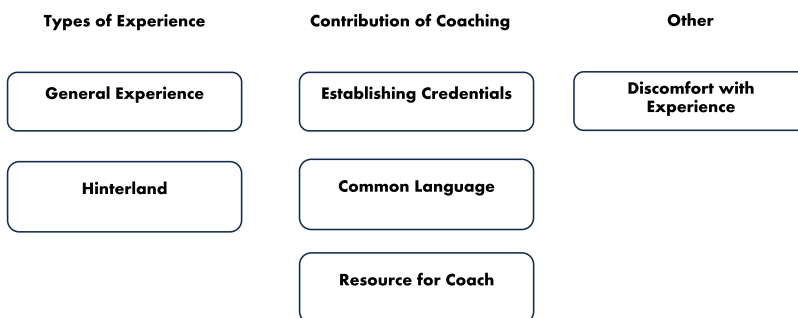


Figure 1. Themes identified in this study.

and credentials of the coach. Both coaches and clients recognised that prior experience could be useful for establishing credentials, and that people may seek coaches with experience at a similar or higher level in an organisation to themselves. In some cases, this would be in the same domain to the client, but that was not necessary in all cases.

... you're establishing your credentials, ... you're giving that person confidence that you are the right person that they should be speaking to or starting these conversations with. [Aoife Co]

If they think that you've been a coach for your life, and you don't know what it's like working in [major consultancy company], under the pressures that I'm working on, then they won't even entertain that you can help them. You know, coaching skill is sort of an afterthought to them, they want to make sure that you can converse on the same level. [Mary Co]

Another aspect of workplace experience is in the differences experienced by people in terms of their characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability. There was a sense of identification of common experience, with clients selecting, or considering, coaches based on these shared characteristics, indicating that they can prefer to relate to shared experiences with their coach.

One important aspect of establishing credentials is the authority of the coach. Clients valued the coach having authority, by this they did not mean that the coach had authority over them as used in the sense of power, but were described as having the characteristic of authority; engendering respect and confidence. This authority was seen as coming from the significant prior work experience of the coach. This authority of the coach is also important in the ongoing coaching interactions, as discussed below.

And so ... having a business background really helps. I do a lot of work with [leading consulting company]. And ... if you're coaching a partner they want to know that you've been there, done it and you can speak from a position of knowledge and authority ... at that level. So, I think you do need to have a business background, if you're going to work in business. [Mary Co]

But you do want them to have authority ... , not over you. But you want them to have authority in this situation, that authority is based on their ability to draw on references and experiences and wisdom. [Keith CI]

Common language and understanding

Once coaching had started, previous experience was seen as an advantage for several reasons. Domain specific experience (for example within the healthcare sector) was seen to be important because it provides a common language and understanding of the issues faced by the client. The client could speak in shorthand, using acronyms, without the need to explain the situation. On the other hand, some of the sample who did not have work domain specific experience did regularly coach NHS staff, indicating that this experience is either not essential or can be acquired through repeated coaching of clients from that domain;

And at times, it gives us a common language, although I very rarely talk about any kind of clinical practice with him. ... I felt from the outset it allowed him to understand a little bit more about me, my way of thinking, my way of working and stuff. [John CI]

Because I currently coach 95% in the NHS I think it's quite valuable. That's because I coach clinicians and managers as well, and ... it's important to me that, that they have an understanding that I ... understand their situation. [Aoife Co]

General experience

An alternative view stressed that domain specific experience was not important, and indeed could be a hinderance because it can reduce objectivity. However, they did indicate that some general experience would be relevant.

... a law firm ... or a consultancy firm, say. 'Have you dealt with ... partners? Have you dealt with legal professionals? Or ... what do you know about the pharmaceutical industry?' And I'm getting quite brazen in .. response to that, and ... saying, ... 'I think the last person that you need as a coach is someone who is coming into your workplace and professing to know all about it, and has years of experience in it.' Because a coach should be playing a role of being very much out of that system and ... helping the people to look at it objectively. [Brian Co]

... my very first coachee, who wanted to be a football coach for [Premier team]. I don't even like football. Never mind not knowing about it. But I could coach him ... I had to have the confidence of having some experience in the workplace, whatever that workplace is. [Emma Co]

General experience could give a coach various attributes that might help the client. These include a degree of authority, respect and gravitas, and clients noted that these gave them respect for the coach ('you feel like she knows what she's talking about' [Rebecca Cl]) and confidence in the outcome. Some clients took reassurance from the coach's experience that things could get better.

Resource for the coach

Past experience can provide the coach with resources that they can draw on during a coaching session, as well as reference points and a form of wisdom that comes from making meaning out of their past. Experience in other roles means that a coach will have had more time and opportunity to develop the perspective to put things in context, and may have developed more social and emotional intelligence, 'the wise person is normally someone who has worked through that and ... said, I'm comfortable with either of those things, So that's the psychological development' [Brian Co].

Hinterland

Several clients emphasised that an important component of the success of coaching was for the coach to have a 'hinterland', that is experience of things wider than that gained through work such as art, poetry or deep engagement with socio-political issues, which they could bring to enrich their understanding of work. For many this wider experience of the coach was part of their professional identity. This hinterland was described as giving the coach perspective, wisdom and the ability to bring new and creative insights to the issue, as well as a wide range of references into the conversation.

I am always struck by quite how well informed, well read and diverse his kind of reflections are. So I always think, wow, ... he'll be able to bring in a range of different experiences. So it gives me the sense ... of someone who has engaged with a breadth of experience that can be drawn into the conversation with a degree of agility and flexibility about them, being able to ... pull on aspects of that experience that help to explain or clarify. [John Cl]

Discomfort with experience

Both the coaches and clients who were interviewed were asked whether coaching would be effective if the coach was straight out of school or university (with the implication that they would have less workplace experience). In general most of the interviewees considered that; 'there's no reason why [such a person] can't learn the same skills of ... listening, rapport, questions, blah, blah, blah. But whether that gives sufficient confidence to the other person?' Emma [Co]. In general, clients were comfortable in stating that they would not want their coach to lack experience;

I think they could have asked me all sorts of interesting questions, innocent questions, that might have been very helpful. But would it leave me with the same sense of confidence and reassurance? Probably not. [Leanne Cl]

Many of the coaches when answering this question appeared to feel discomfort in saying that they could not be coached by someone with less experience (and probably younger) than them. In part this may be because coaches are very aware of the boundary between coaching and mentoring. However, some coaches would acknowledge that they would sometimes do some mentoring alongside their coaching, for which experience is of course essential; 'There are times when I need a bit of mentoring as well ... , that needs a lot of experience, business experience as well as coaching experience.' [Peter Co]. One client said that neither age nor experience was important, but that coach and client are at a 'similar stage in [their] journey of life' [Christian Cl] is important.

While for most of the interviews age was seen as a positive, reflecting general experience, there were situations when matching relevant specific experiences to provide both connection and credentials would be more important. This was highlighted by one client when describing a coaching session in her charity.

I've been running a young people's charity, ... young people coaching younger people just a little bit younger than them that can be really ... powerful ... I think it's about having stuff that ... that you can use, that can almost be brought to your aid when you need it. [Megan Cl]

Comparison of coaches and clients

In general the coaches and clients interviewed were in agreement as to what workplace experience contributed to coaching. The clients were more willing in general to say that it was important or even necessary. Some coaches may have been restrained by their coach training that emphasises, as discussed above, that coaching does not require expert knowledge. In addition, while clients valued wider experience (the hinterland), this was not mentioned by coaches.

Discussion

This study has addressed whether work experience is important in a coaching relationship. The interviews highlighted several areas where experience had an impact; in establishing the credentials, in enabling a common language and understanding of the work domain, in providing general experience and understanding of situations (not specific for the work domain), of providing resources for the coach to draw on and in giving the coach a 'hinterland' that gives them perspective, wisdom and creative insights.

The experience of a coach is important in various stages of the coaching process. There is evidence in the literature that clients (or their HR departments) often have a preference for hiring coaches who have work domain specific experience (Rojon et al., 2020; Wycherley & Cox, 2008). This might be manifest in the selection of potential coaches by an organisation, or during a chemistry meeting. In such cases this preference for coaches with experience may be motivated by the issues discussed by the interviewees in this paper. However, it may also reflect a wish for the coach to be able to provide mentoring as well as (or possibly instead of) coaching. While some coaches have sought to provide clear distinction between coaching and mentoring, others have argued that it is not possible to neatly separate these two activities and that practitioners of both coaching and mentoring will use insights and approaches from both disciplines to bring benefit to their work (Stokes et al., 2021). Researchers involved in the development of leaders in specific work domains have argued that both mentorship and coaching is needed (Roberts & Gonzalez, 2023). This need to be able to mentor alongside coaching was reported in several of the interviews, and the need was recognised for relevant work experience when mentoring. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that expertise can be important in the selection of coaches by an organisation or individual. However, it could be argued that having a single coach/mentor in one person may detract from the benefits of each of the two interventions of coaching and mentoring.

It is recognised that the working alliance between a coach and their client is a key factor for the success of coaching (Graßmann et al., 2020). Several factors contribute to the working alliance, including credibility, confidence, trust and rapport. Prior experience is important in establishing credibility (Blackman et al., 2016). It can also help establish trust and rapport (Bush, 2004). The coaches and clients interviewed as part of this study supported these findings, indicating that experience brought the coaches a degree of respect and confidence in them. In addition, both coaches and clients indicated that the coaches' previous experience of 'tough times', and their ability to come through these, gave their clients confidence in the future. The knowledge of shared experiences, including those of gender, ethnicity and disability which raise important issues in the workplace coaching (Wilkinson & Rose, 2022), could also help build the relationship between coach and client.

Experience has been viewed as giving coaches resources, for example by making them aware of past mistakes (Fisher et al., 2023). One theme that developed in this study was the 'wider' experience of coaches, described by one client as their coach's hinterland. This includes factors such as their knowledge of art, literature and socio-political issues. It was recognised by clients that this gave them the ability to draw on these experiences for the benefit of the client. While this is distinct from workplace experience, it was seen to contribute to coaching in the workplace. This finding aligns with previous work that has highlighted how life experiences, such as divorce, illness, bereavement and traumatic events can provide insight into other people and help develop empathy and compassion (Campone & Awal, 2012). However, there has been less work on the benefit such wider experiences can bring to coaching.

One of the findings of this study is that clients did value the previous experience of their coaches. However, they often did not care where that experience was obtained – experience in either the wider workplace or from outside work was helpful. As one interviewee described, it was important to have 'been around the block', but it was not always

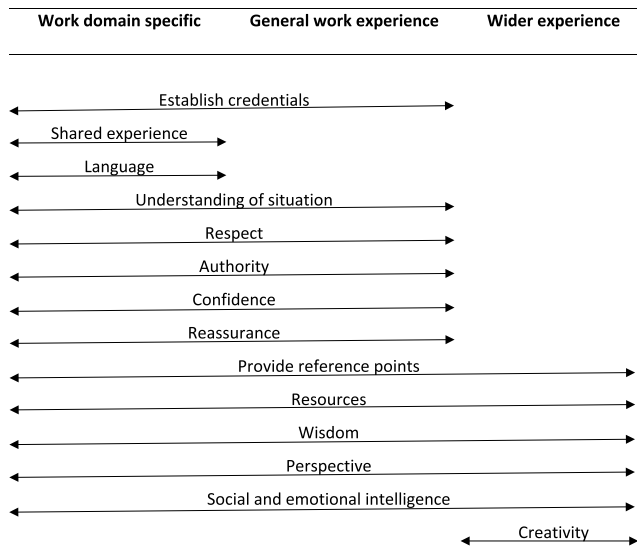


Figure 2. A mapping of how experiences in a specific work domain, in work in general and wider experience impact on coaching.

necessary to have experienced the same work domain as the client (though some coaches indicated that this could also be beneficial).

The importance of these three types of experience (from the work domain, general work experience and wider life experience) to the impact on coaching is shown in [Figure 2](#). Whilst these three areas are helpful categorisations, they should not be too rigidly applied as the boundaries between them are not well defined (e.g., much wider experience may derive from the work setting). It is also possible that experience can impact in unexpected ways that are not captured by a simplistic categorisation. However, this mapping gives a useful starting point for considering the differing contributions of experience to coaching.

This study looks at what coaches and clients understand, or perceive, to be important for coaching. It does not address whether the factors shown in [Figure 2](#) actually improve the coaching outcomes. A meta-analysis of the factors that impact on the effectiveness of coaching in the workplace highlighted seven important areas; self-efficacy, coaching motivation, goal orientation, trust, interpersonal attraction, feedback intervention and supervisory support (Bozer & Jones, 2018). The experience of coaches will influence a number of these areas.

Implications and recommendations

This study contributes to the literature addressing the importance of prior work experience for coaches. It supports research in the literature that shows that the experience of coaches is important in establishing credentials and building the working alliance between coach and client. Work experience also provides a language and understanding of the workplace, and provides resources that that the coach can draw on to support and challenge the client.

In this study we started by looking at the importance of work-based experience. What emerged with both clients and coaches is that the experience the coach has ('been around the block') is important. This experience comes from three sources; either a similar work domain to that of the client, or general work experience or through wider experience (the hinterland).

These findings have implications for several stakeholders in coaching. Clients and those responsible for hiring coaches need to consider the impact of prior experience on the coaching outcome. What emerges from this study is that while work domain specific experience can contribute to a common language and to an understanding, more general workplace experience (as well as wider experience outside the workplace) contributes to many areas of the coaching relationship (Figure 2). When hiring coaches, it is important to think what experience the coach brings to the situation, and whether that is in the same work domain as the client (or indeed comes from outside the workplace).

The findings also suggest that coaches need to reflect on their own experience and think about how to bring it into the coaching relationship. As discussed above, there is a tension between coaching and mentoring, prior workplace experience can encourage the coach to 'give advice'. However, clients clearly value the experience of their coach, and so coaches need to consider how to bring their experience into coaching. They can do this by considering what their experience offers to their clients. They need to do this in the service of their clients. There are clearly risks in this; for example, while clients can find it helpful for their clients to be seen to be authoritative, they should not have any actual authority over their clients. There is a fine balance to be maintained.

The findings are also important to training and development of coaches. It suggests that training should seek to incorporate and integrate the previous workplace experience of coaches, encouraging reflection on how to do this in a skilful and practical manner.

Limitations and future work

There are limitations to this study, in large part because the sample of both coaches and clients was limited in diversity; the clients were relatively senior in their workplace and the coaches all worked as business coaches in the UK. Further research could investigate prior experience using a larger and more diverse sample in terms of industry sector, age and culture or geographic location. A quantitative survey might also give information about whether there were differences across work domains (healthcare, public sector, private sector etc.).

In addition, this study looked at the perception (and so preference) of individuals. Preference does not necessarily equate to effectiveness, and a quantitative study could test the relationship between the impact of prior experience on coaching outcomes.

It would also be helpful to understand more precisely how coaches use their previous work experience in coaching, as this would help develop better approaches to the training and development of coaches. An ethnographic study of workplace coaching could be an approach to this.

Conclusion

Many coaches have experience of the workplace prior to becoming coaches. This experience is perceived by coaches and clients to contribute to the coaching relationship. The

experience may be in the same work domain as the client, which brings an understanding of the workplace and a common language. However, general experience at an equivalent level was also seen to contribute; the coach had to have 'been around the block'. This was seen to bring respect, authority and confidence to the engagement. It would also provide the coach with resources, such as understanding and perspective, that could be useful. Clients also valued experience outside the workplace that would bring an extra dimension to coaching.

Authorship contribution statement

This study was conceived by AJTG. SR and AJTG co-designed and planned the research. Interviews were carried out by AJTG. Data analysis was carried out by AJTG and SR. Both authors contributed to writing the manuscript. Both authors have approved the final draft.

Data access statement

Given the snowballing recruitment strategy, and the details covered in the interview, publication of the transcripts of the interviews would breach confidentiality. Participants were therefore not asked to give consent for sharing the transcripts. The data will therefore, unfortunately, not be accessible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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