

Career Coaching

Alison Carter
Wendy Hirsh

A case study in evaluating impact

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Introduction

As the volume of workplace coaching has increased, so too has the research literature on coaching outcomes for both individuals and employing organisations, and how to measure these.

However, much of this evidence relates to leadership coaching, coaching for job performance and, to some extent, coaching to improve wellbeing at work. Much less has been done to help employers articulate the value of career coaching in their workplaces or to establish robust measures of its success. Yet effective evaluation of career coaching is crucial when introducing such interventions or refining existing ones.

In this paper we explore the evaluation of employer-sponsored career coaching through the lens of one career coaching programme as a case study to shed light on some questions relevant to employers:

- What might be the short-term and longer-term effects of an employer-sponsored career coaching programme?
- How can the results be evidenced?
- What can we share about evaluating career coaching that may be helpful to other employers and career coaching providers?

What do we mean by 'career coaching'?

When individuals are thinking about their career, they may be considering what they want from their current role, exploring new opportunities, seeking progression or further training inside or outside their organisation, or making other changes in their working lives or their worklife balance. In such situations, investing some time with a skilled and experienced coach might seem to be a helpful thing to do.

The content of career coaching sponsored by employers can vary but is typically designed to support an individual staff member to take more control over their own career, to clarify their career goals and to take practical steps to achieve them. Discussions are usually not limited to, but might include, career interests and aspirations, values, options and choices,



shaping a career plan, finding opportunities, applying for jobs and preparing for interviews. An individual may wish to make changes within their current work role and/or to be looking for another job in the same field or a bigger change in career focus.

Why is evidencing the results of workplace career coaching difficult?

- The objectives for career coaching may not be clear at the start, but need to be identified before appropriate evaluation can be designed. Evaluation often starts too late, missing out the chance to establish baseline measures.
- Evaluating *impact* is much more difficult than asking individuals about what changes in the career coaching *process* would make the experience more engaging.
- The impacts of career interventions tend to be complex, varied and personal. Significant career development action can take a long time and steps along the way can be difficult to observe or even for individuals to articulate.
- The desire for privacy and anonymity can be in tension with tracking individuals and accessing factual data, raising issues of transparency and consent.
- Models of impact based on theory and with appropriate metrics are lacking. Evaluation methods used for other types of coaching do not cover career outcomes. The career development field lacks widely accepted evaluation models and metrics appropriate for adults in employment.
- Employers sponsoring career coaching are likely to be interested in organisational as well as individual impact, for example, staff retention. This makes evaluation more complex.
- Career issues are often context-specific, depending on the type of workforce, the work they do and their work settings.

The case study context



This case study examines sector-funded career coaching in England in a range of healthcare settings with many employers and covering many occupations. From October 2021 – March 2024, 2,002 primary care workers received career coaching support. Most of these individuals worked in general practice, including GPs, nurses, other professionals, practice managers and receptionists. Individuals from other primary care settings included workers at all levels in pharmacy, dentistry and optometry settings. Following the intense working pressures during the lockdowns in England of 2020 and 2021 and vaccine delivery programmes, there was a desire to help the primary care workforce feel valued, fulfilled and in control of their careers. There was national concern about losing highly qualified staff from the sector.

The aim of the intervention was to provide easy to access, individually tailored coaching to support primary care workers with their career development. Staff could self-nominate, and up to four sessions were delivered via a video platform or telephone. The coach might signpost an individual to further support if appropriate. Follow-up emails, keeping coachees in touch with further information and resources, continued after the coaching sessions had finished.

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) conducted evaluation research to identify the impact of this coaching for individual staff (coachees) and organisational outcomes for the primary care sector. An extended research period allowed the capture of longer-term effects as well as short-term ones.

Articulating expected impacts and outcomes



A logic model was developed to identify and articulate the purpose of the coaching and expected possible individual impacts and organisational outcomes to be measured in the evaluation. It was developed through examination of the career development literature and dialogue with evaluation team, sector leaders, coaches who delivered the pilot and national career development experts. The model shows both the impacts one might expect for individuals and the hoped-for outcomes of value for the employer/sector (see Figure 1).

It was expected that individuals might benefit from impacts around:

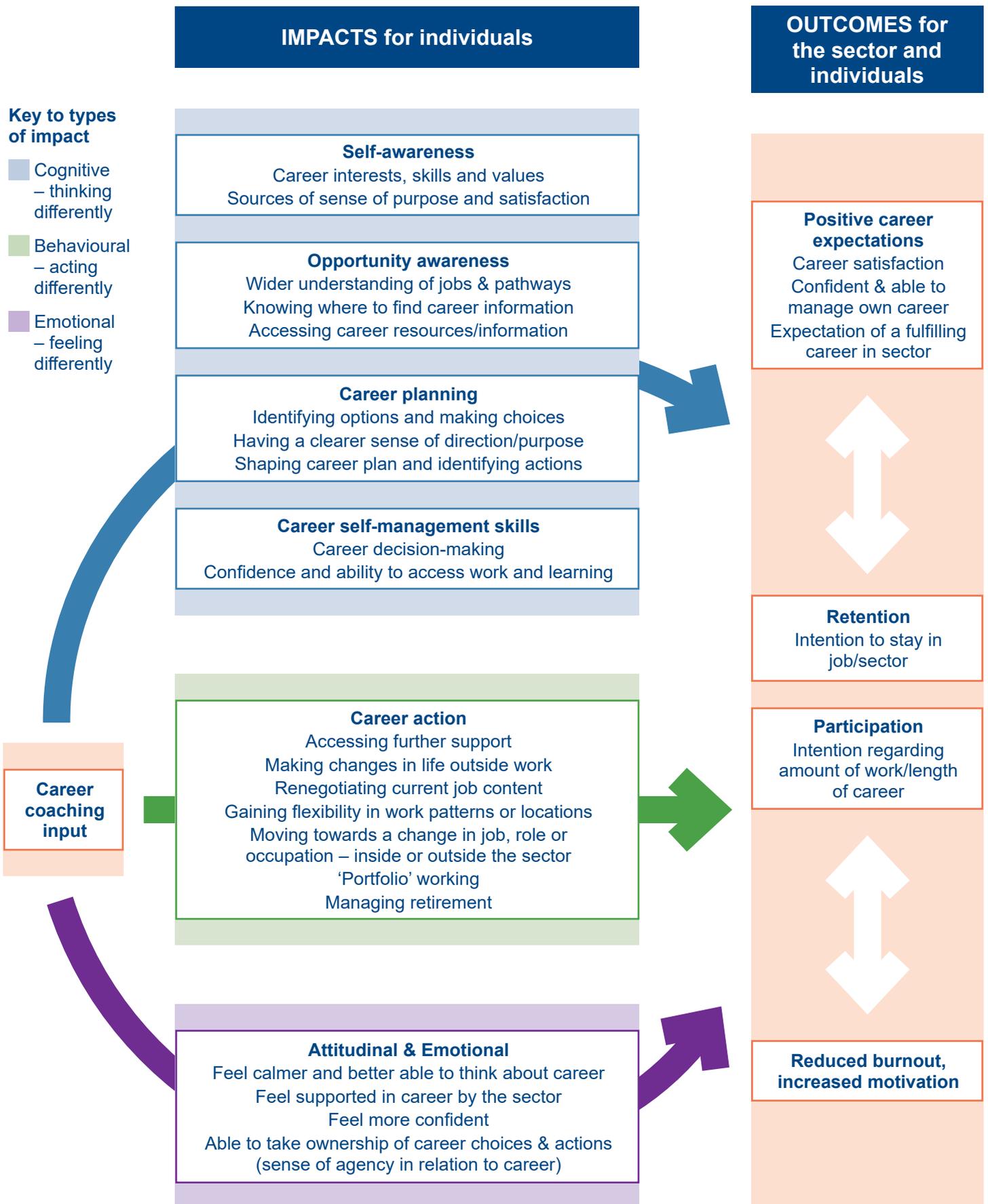
- Changes in their thinking – self-awareness, opportunity awareness, career planning and career management skills.
- Changes in their attitudes and feelings – feeling calmer, feeling supported in their career, feeling more confident, feeling able to take ownership of their career.
- Taking career action – including accessing information and support, renegotiating changes to their current job or pattern of work, moving towards a different job.

More positive career expectations may result from these direct impacts and benefit both employees and their employers. The model included these as increased career satisfaction, confidence in managing own career and expectations of a fulfilling career in the sector.

Further organisational outcomes hoped for included:

- Improved staff retention – reduced intention to quit.
- Improved participation – amount of work and/or length of career.
- Reduced burnout.

Figure 1: Evaluation logic model: Impacts and Outcomes



Source: IES, 2021

Evaluation methods and samples



In this evaluation it was decided to collect data relevant to both expected individual impacts and hoped-for business outcomes. A multi-method research approach was designed to collect both quantitative (perceptual) data and qualitative (open-ended) data throughout the period January 2022 – January 2024.

Self-reported impact surveys were designed to be deployed with all coachees on four occasions: pre-coaching (called T1), post-coaching (called T2), follow up three to six months after finishing coaching (called T3) and longitudinal follow up one to two years after finishing coaching (called T4). Surveys at all these time points repeated the same items and measures corresponding to the impacts and outcomes identified in the logic model. Well-validated scales were used where they existed (eg for meaning at work and burnout). Respondents were also asked for demographic data (gender, age, ethnicity) and information about their job role.

Table 1: Total numbers completing the survey across two waves of analysis

Before Coaching (T1)	Matched before & immediately after coaching (T1 and T2)	Matched before coaching & follow up (T1 and T3)	Matched (T1, T2 & T3)	Matched before coaching & longitudinal follow up (T1 and T4)	Matched (T1, T2, T3 & T4)
1,248	124*	54	27	51	10

Notes: Shaded columns only were used for analysis of results presented in this summary.

*Of the 124 matched on T1 and T2, 62 were in the first wave of analysis and 62 in the second wave. Only those in the second wave are shown in the results presented here.

Source: IES, 2024

Interviews were also conducted in the first wave of research, but it was found that busy primary care workers could not easily schedule interviews into their working time. The sample of interviews, although very interesting, was too small to draw general conclusions.

A prompted journalling exercise turned out to be a more effective open-ended method in this context. It asked three questions at different time points: pre-coaching, up to three times mid-coaching (during their coaching engagement period), and once or twice post-coaching. The exact phrasing of the questions altered slightly for each time point to reflect that stage of the coaching journey. At all stages, the questions asked coachees to reflect on their current feelings towards their roles, thoughts about their future careers, and what they hoped to achieve or had already achieved through accessing the coaching.

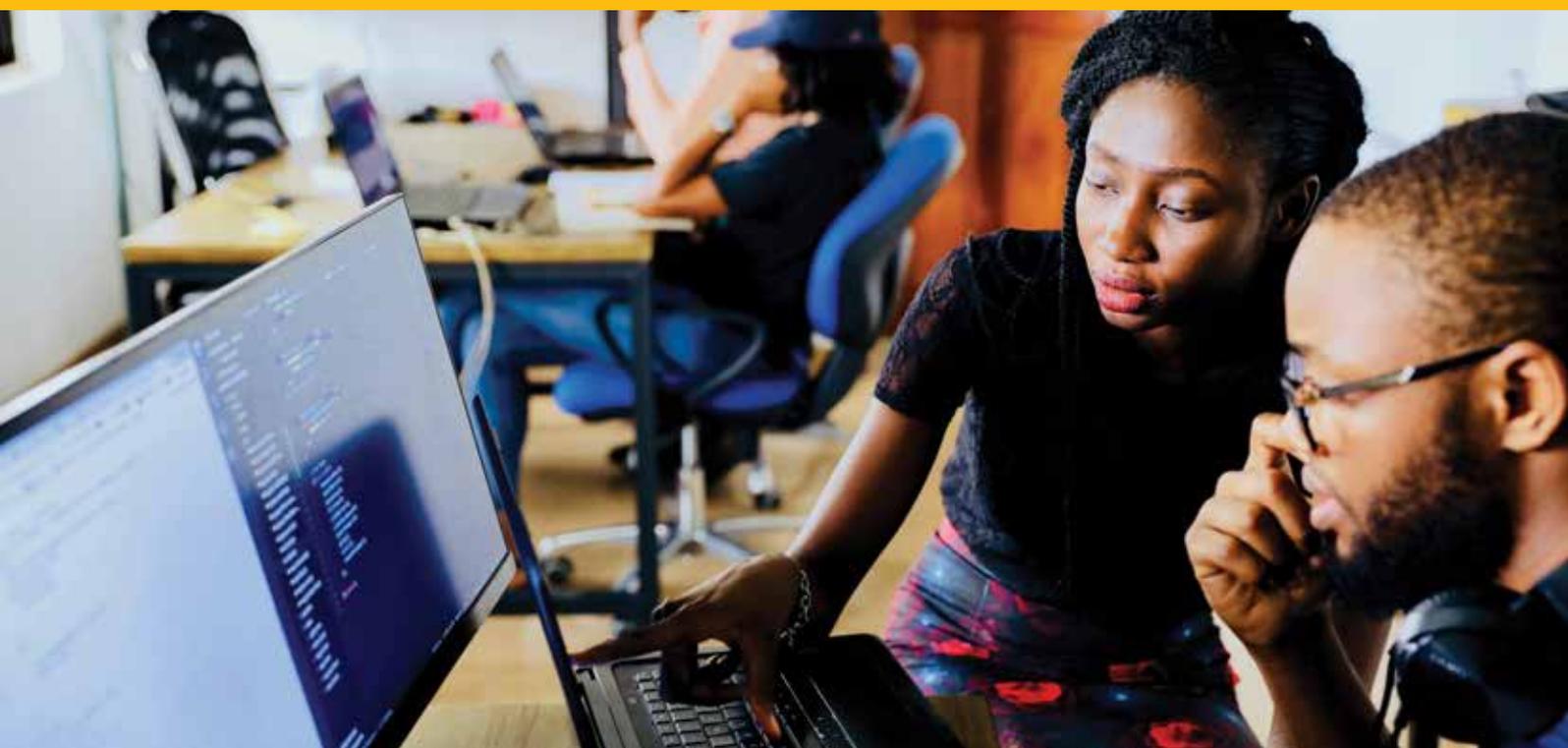
Table 2: Distribution of journalling data, by journal entry timing

Journal entry	N (%)
Pre-coaching	130 (42%)
Mid-coaching	114 (36%)
Post-coaching	68 (22%)
Total:	312 (100%)

Source: IES, 2024

Researchers requiring a full set of questions asked are invited to contact the authors for an accompanying technical pdf.

Data analysis



Detailed analysis of all data collected to date was undertaken in two waves timed to align with the business planning cycle of the organisation. Positive interim results in the first wave of evaluation enabled decision-makers to continue investing in the career coaching. These interim results also identified some improvements that could be made to the programme.

Specifically of relevance to this paper, are the summary level results on the short-term and long-term effects of this employer-sponsored career coaching programme. For this we draw on a matched sample approach identifying individuals whose results could be compared at different time points. This is different from simply taking aggregate analysis at two time points that may not be of the same individuals. The data used here covers:

- The 62 coachees who completed the first survey (before their coaching – T1) and the second survey (immediately after coaching – T2) during the second wave of analysis, to highlight the short-term effects of the career coaching.
- All 51 coachees who completed the first survey (before their coaching – T1) and the fourth survey (T4 – longitudinal follow-up, up to 12 to 22 months after coaching) to identify the longer-term effects.

The analysis used repeated-measures comparisons of mean scores to explore where changes in responses were significantly different.

The journal entries were analysed for any changes in the cognition (thinking differently), behaviours (acting differently) and emotions (feeling differently) elements. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted in two waves as for the survey. The main themes were similar across the two waves of evaluation and were presented alongside quotes from the journals. Where coachees provided several journal entries over time, this enabled narrative case study vignettes to be produced. These shone a light on how different the context was for each person and how personalised their coaching experience had been. Together, these example vignettes provided an illustration of a range of impacts and outcomes including improved confidence and resilience, more clearly defined career plans, short- and long-term retention, and renegotiation of job content.

Summary of Findings

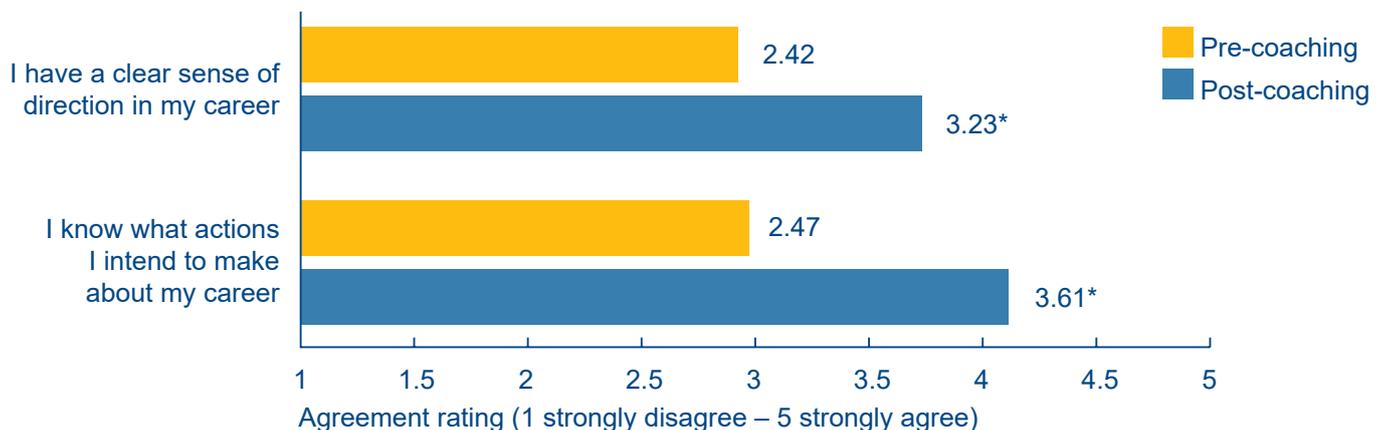


Cognitive impacts were achieved quickly and sustained

Overall, the cognitive outcomes for participants in the survey and journaling data were similar. Significant improvements were recorded in career thinking immediately after coaching, with improvements still observed three to six months later. Short-term improvements were particularly marked around career planning and career self-management skills. In the longitudinal survey sample, after a longer time, coachees recorded feeling clearer about the work activities they found interesting and enjoyable, felt better at articulating their skills and strengths, were more likely to know how to access support from others and had improved their sense of career direction.

As an example of presenting a short-term effect, see Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Average agreement with Cognitive Career Planning statements



Note: *denotes statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between pre- and post-coaching surveys

Source: IES, 2024

The journalling findings provided similar insights. Coachees detailed how coaching had allowed them to create action plans, increased future development and job opportunity awareness, and provided information around applying to new roles. Additionally, participants reported greater clarity about their careers as they gained a deeper understanding of barriers and how to overcome them, the values they wanted to follow, opportunity awareness and progression pathways. Later journalling data highlighted that participants had an increased awareness of the availability and demand for other roles.

Behavioural impacts were achieved quickly and sustained

Career actions (ie changes in career behaviour) were identified immediately after, and three to six months after, coaching, including actions to maintain a healthy work-life balance, making changes outside work and researching additional career information. Behavioural outcomes for the journalling and surveys again shared similarities, with actions detailed including making changes outside work, moving towards a job change and renegotiation of current job content.

The longitudinal survey found that participants preserved a better **work-life balance** and had engaged in a range of career actions including conversations with someone they knew well, widening their networks, and making changes outside work. This is backed up by the later journal entries which showed actions including renegotiating job content, and preparing for or making job moves. The later journalling data also showed coachees starting to access development and training to progress their careers.

Emotional impacts included increased confidence, but feeling in control

of career took longer

The emotional impacts in the logic model span both changes that might occur quite quickly, such as feeling calmer or more confident, and those likely to take much longer, such as feeling stronger career ownership.

There was no significant change in survey results immediately after coaching in the coachees' sense of control over career choice, although some evidence was found of improvement in feelings of being supported by the sector. However, the journal entries commonly described improvements in **confidence and resilience**. Coachees described how increased confidence had helped them enjoy work more. Examples included a respondent recently returning from maternity leave and others moving into roles with additional responsibilities.

The longer-term improvements in emotional impact from the longitudinal survey sample were less statistically significant than in other areas, with moderate improvement in participants' perceptions of **control over career choices** and smaller positive changes in feelings that the sector was supportive in developing careers. Later journal entries documented coachees feeling more **positive and confident** in various ways depending on their situation.

A selection of quotations taken from journal entries

'Gained in confidence to discuss employment options with Managers re promotion. Following being offered another role elsewhere was asked to stay as [my] work ethic was valued.'

'I'm feeling more in control of myself and my career decisions ahead. I'm enjoying my work more than I was some months ago.'

'I am trying to enrich the job where I am and trying to help find a work/life balance for myself and look to do this with colleagues also... I am looking forward to what the next 10-15 years brings until I retire.'

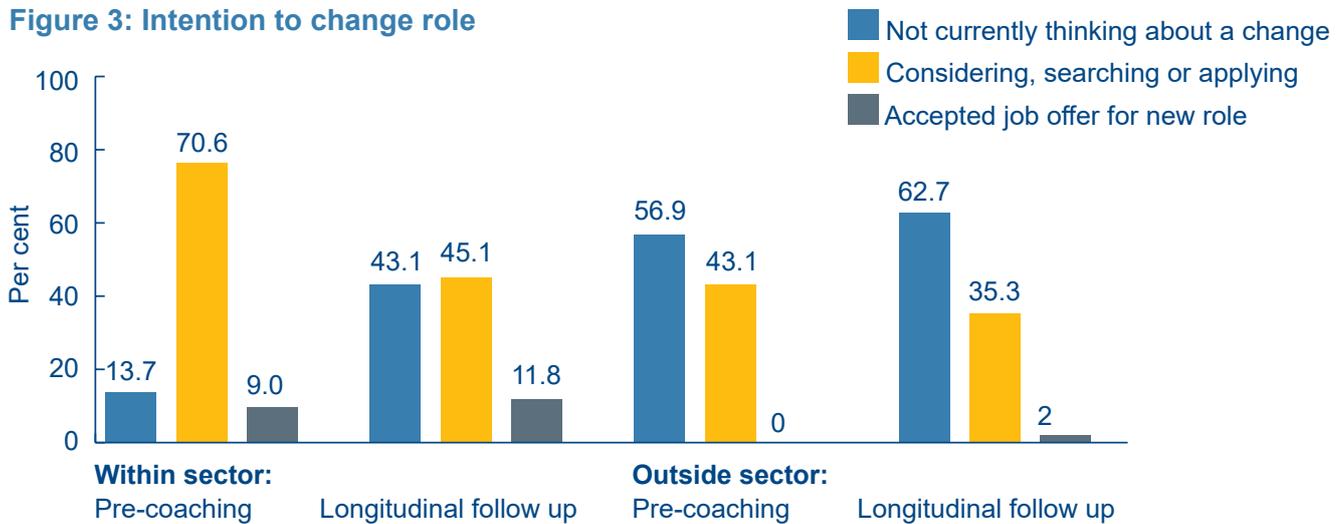
'I feel more positive and resilient and as if I have a clearer line of sight as to what to do next.'

'Looking at what I enjoy in my role I realise I do want to be here but am open if opportunities do arise... Overall, I feel I have moved from a point of dissatisfaction back to satisfaction, and even flow'

A key outcome was staff less likely to be considering a role change

Turning now to the organisational outcomes, a key outcome for the primary care system was an indication of **short- and long-term employee retention**. In the short term, three to six months after coaching, there was a small reduction in the proportion of coachees planning to change roles within and outside the sector. However, this change was more evident in the longer-term (longitudinal) survey data with staff being less likely to be considering a change of role either within or outside the sector (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Intention to change role



Source: IES, 2024

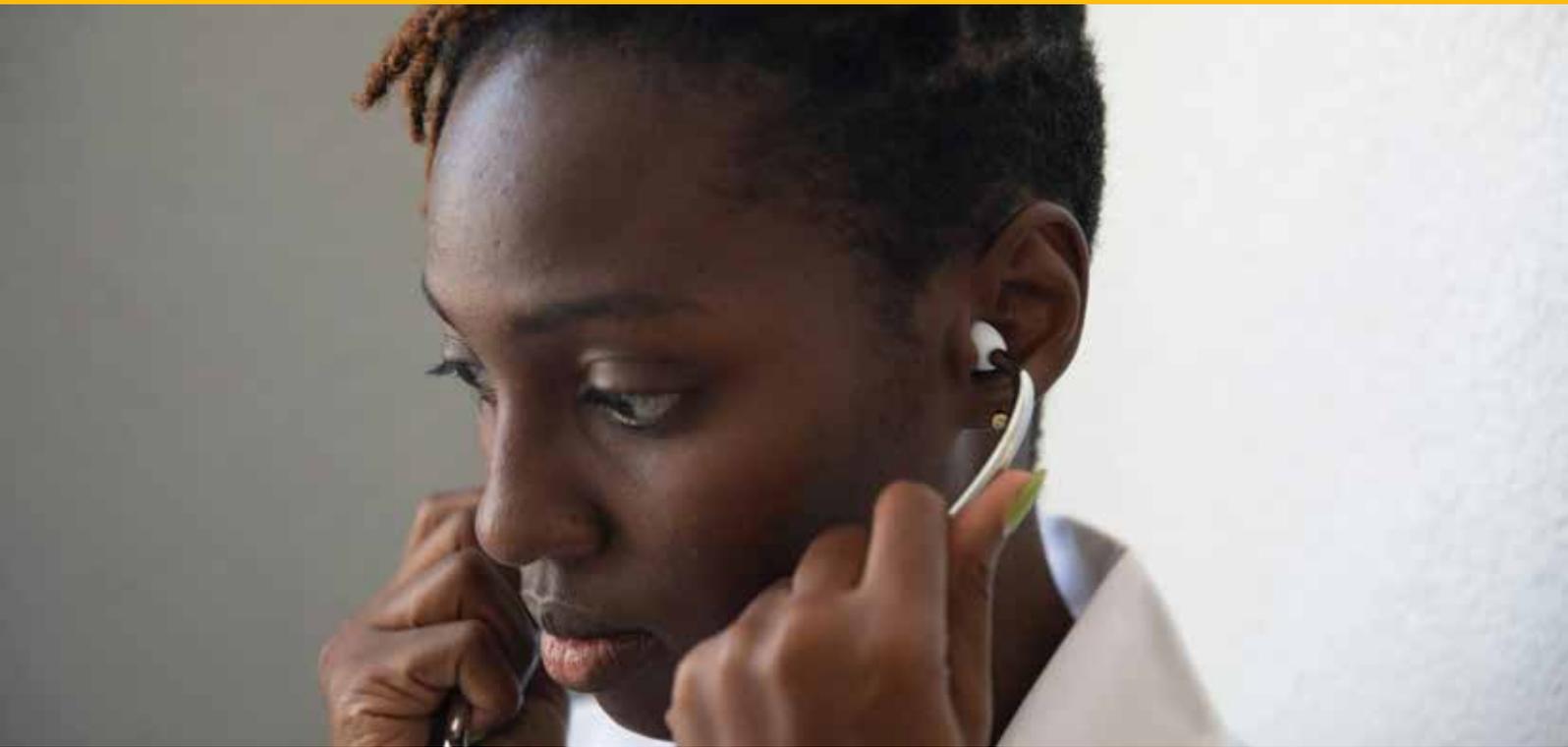
It seems likely that improved retention within the sector may be being achieved at the expense of reduced participation in terms of working hours. Some survey and journal respondents immediately after coaching reported already having renegotiated their job content. Later journal entries show that staff had, or were intending to, reduce their overall number of hours or sessions working within the primary care sector.

Career satisfaction, burnout, work being meaningful and career expectation outcomes were evident one to two years following coaching

As expected, several of the outcomes in the logic model take much longer to show themselves.

A year after coaching, career satisfaction had risen, particularly in relation to satisfaction around career achievements and progress towards goals. Burnout levels were significantly lower at that time despite changes not being seen immediately after coaching. Survey respondents were also more likely to report their work being meaningful in the longitudinal follow-up than immediately after coaching. Again, these patterns were supported by journal entries, with coachees documenting an enhanced appreciation of the variety of work in their roles, together with increased confidence in their role, resilience in the face of challenges, and an enhanced sense of clarity about their career aspirations.

What can we learn from the case study...



...about the effects of a workplace career coaching programme?

The case study provides a rare example of an employer-sponsored career coaching intervention that has been evaluated from its beginning to its end. The intervention was large enough and the evaluation was for long enough to be able to show significant impacts for individuals and outcomes for their employers. So, whilst not generalisable to all workplace career coaching programmes, the case study does add to the evidence base on potential outcomes of employer-sponsored career coaching. Cognitive impacts (changes in career thinking) and behavioural impacts (taking career action) can be achieved quickly and be sustained. Feelings of confidence can be improved, but the impact on feelings of career agency and employer support seems to take longer. Contrary to perceived wisdom, staff can be less likely to be considering a role change after coaching. Improvements in career satisfaction, burnout, work being meaningful and positive career expectations can be evident one to two years following coaching.

...about evidencing results through evaluation?

Not all career coaching programmes are aimed at the same perceived issues and so they will not be judged in the same way. Some of the questions used in this case about career impacts and outcomes may be useful elsewhere but some may need adjustment. Developing a logic model was extremely helpful in:

- Getting a clearer articulation of what the sector/employers hoped to get out of investing in career coaching.
- Providing a process for using early feedback from those involved in commissioning the programme and delivering its pilot phase.
- Using cognitive, emotional and behavioural clusters to organise items measuring individual impacts. This seemed both memorable and useful.

- Collecting impact data relevant to the organisation provided evidence to write successful business cases for continued investment.

Some **practical challenges were overcome** by the procedures used in the evaluation:

- Coachees' participation in surveys and journalling were improved by getting coaches' active support and keeping them informed about the evaluation.
- Privacy and anonymity can be in tension with tracking individuals, so being transparent and seeking consent before the coaching began was helpful.
- The research team learned that response rates were improved when each request for input from coachees was sent in a separate email with a separate link to the questions. Sending multiple requests in one message risked only the first link being clicked.
- Interviews proved too time consuming in this setting. By contrast, journalling was a surprise success in both willingness to submit entries and the depth of insights obtained even from quite brief responses. Journalling can show how individuals are starting to think and feel differently before they can be seen acting differently.
- A good individual story, such as the vignettes created from successive journal entries from one individual can be a very powerful way of showing the impact of career coaching.
- Periodic analysis of evaluation data provided quick stock-takes of improvements needed without having to wait for the end of a long evaluation period.
- Continuing the evaluation for much longer than the quick 'before and after' approach gives an opportunity to show deeper impacts and organisational outcomes.

However, **some challenges remained**:

- The lack of widely accepted metrics or instruments for career interventions with employed adults meant that developing the survey instrument was quite difficult. In retrospect some other items might have been useful, for example a simple question about job satisfaction. Importing validated scales from other fields (eg meaning at work and burnout) was methodologically desirable but the number of questions in such inventories can push out other relevant questions.
- Although this evaluation did start in the early days of this intervention, it was not designed at the same time as the programme was conceived which would have been preferable.
- Other things going on in the organisation can always affect how employees are experiencing their work and their career opportunities in positive or negative ways. In the absence of a control group, some of the improvements seen in the longer-term data may have been influenced by other factors.

Overall this case study should help other employers and coaches feel that the evaluation of workplace career coaching is both possible and worth doing. The positive findings should also encourage employers to invest in a sustained way in supporting the career development of their employees. Many feel this is worthwhile, but few have attempted to evidence this.

Related IES publications

Carter A (2024). Looking into the future of workplace coaching, Video recording of presentation to a Circle of Peers event, organised by Cullen Scholefield <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/video-looking-future-workplace-coaching>

Carter A (2006). Practical Methods for Evaluating Coaching, IES Research Report 430 <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/practical-methods-evaluating-coaching>

Edwards M, Carter A (2024). Outcomes from employer-sponsored career development. Review of the literature, IES Paper 164 <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/outcomes-employer-sponsored-career-development>

Hirsh W (2021). Career development in organisations to navigate changes in work and skills, IES Perspectives on HR 2021, IES Paper 147 <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/career-development-organisations-navigate-changes-work-and-skills>

Hirsh W (2018). 'Effective performance, development and career conversations at work', IES Perspectives on HR 2018, Institute for Employment Studies <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/effective-performance-development-and-career-conversations-work>

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For further information

To discuss the issues and challenges raised in this paper, please contact Dr Alison Carter, IES lead on leadership, change and coaching. alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk

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