



# Impact of coaching on employee well-being, engagement and job satisfaction

## Research Summary

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### Summary of Findings

The research is an exploratory study into whether employees receiving coaching at work experience any impact on their perceptions of well-being, job satisfaction and engagement at work. The study is unique in its focus on coaching primarily delivered by internal volunteer coaches to a range of managers and non-managers. Previous studies into well-being have tended to focus on top leaders coached by external coaches.

Employees were targeted who had been involved in various coaching programmes designed to improve performance or support change (not programmes deliberately designed to improve well-being).

We followed 100 coachees from eight employers for a year. We asked them to complete three surveys: before coaching started, after six months and again after 12 months.

This paper summarises the results from an analysis of the coachee self-report survey responses.

## What research needed to be done?

In recent years we have seen a welcome increase in scholarly papers in journals about coaching at work, all adding to the evidence about positive benefits and improvements in individual effectiveness from coaching. Even so, much of the academic research has a narrow focus on the coaching of leaders by external professional coaches and/or conducted within just one company. Leaders usually have more autonomy over their work routines compared to other occupational groups, so it cannot be assumed that coaching outcomes will be the same for those not in leadership positions. Good quality research on a range of relevant outcomes for employers (eg employee well-being, engagement and job satisfaction) has been relatively sparse.

Back in 2009, IES Research network member organisations told us that coaching programmes in work settings are more diverse than just leaders and are highly contextualised: they are just as likely to be targeted at professional non-managerial employees. According to the CIPD in 2011, much of the growth in coaching in organisations has also been resourced by line managers or internal coaches who have undertaken some extensive coaching training. Typically internal coaches give a few hours every week to coaching employees from other parts of the company.

This study aims to address these gaps in the literature and explore whether employees (managers and non-managers) on an internal coaching programme experience any impact on their psychological well-being, and whether this impact is sustained over time.

## How was the research conducted?

The research adopted an exploratory, longitudinal, quantitative approach. Initially we cast the net widely: employers and coaching providers who were setting up formal coaching programmes were invited to participate. Eventually we mainly selected coachees from eight public sector organisations and asked them to complete three on-line surveys. Responses were tracked using ID codes.

We embedded valid and reliable scales within each survey: the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) measures positive aspects of mental health; the IES Employee Engagement Scale measures a person's level of engagement with their organisation; and the Workplace Well Index which is associated with a person's satisfaction with their job.

We received 100 responses to the pre-coaching questionnaire, 34 responses to the post-coaching questionnaire sent after six months and 27 responses to the final questionnaire sent after a further six to nine months. The drop-out rate between the first and second surveys may be, in part, due to timing. Public sector organisations (and especially those in local government) at the time of our study in 2010/2011 were facing major budget reductions and accompanying redundancy schemes.

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## What did the research find out?

1. There were statistically significant rises in employee perceptions of their well-being at work and in general in the short term, but no evidence that these rises in well-being were sustained.
2. The coaching increased overall well-being scores by improving coachees' ability to feel relaxed, to feel useful and to think clearly.
3. At work, the coaching also helped coachees to improve their ability to deal with problems well, cope with the unexpected and to feel closer to other people.
4. There was a small rise in overall perceptions of employee engagement as a result of being coached but these were not statistically significant.
5. Coachees who felt that the coaching helped them to become more aware of their own motivations reported lower engagement scores than those who did not feel it had helped them in this aspect.

## Impact on employee well-being

The impact of employee ill-health on employers is pronounced and expensive. The Health & Safety Executive in 2011 reported that common mental health problems (stress, anxiety and depression) are a leading cause of self-reported sick days. There are consequences for employers who promote well-being in terms of reduced costs of employee absence. Therefore understanding the relationship between health and work has been a priority in other IES research. The impact of work on psychological health is not a passive process: individuals can shape their own well-being. Our Research Network companies were interested to understand if coaching may be one means through which employees can equip themselves to do so.

Before coaching overall average general (non-work) well-being score is higher than the well-being at work scores. Both results are similar to those of the general population, so our sample of employees was not unusual.

We found evidence of statistically significant increases in perceptions of well-being among employees soon after a period of coaching. This is line with some international study findings of managers being coached by external professional coaches. This was despite the fact that the coaching in our study was focussed on the attainment of a range of organisational goals rather than improvements in well-being per se.

Overall there is emerging evidence from the literature that coaching can be effective as a positive individual change methodology. However, how coaching improves well-being is less clearly understood.

Respondents were asked how their method of working and their feelings towards work had been impacted upon by the coaching sessions. In the main, respondents felt that coaching had impacted positively on both the way in which they worked and their feelings towards work.

Coaching outcomes associated with higher general well-being:

- Made me feel better equipped to handle whatever comes my way.
- Made me more aware that if I'm in trouble then I can usually think of a solution.
- Made me more aware that I could solve difficult problems if I tried hard enough.

This suggests that the initial enthusiasm that coachees have about the coaching programme and the benefits it brings their well-being may wane over time. This may be due to the fact that they forget the coaching they received and the positive outcomes this has had for them in terms of their well-being, or their work situation does not change, and so they do not reflect back on the coaching as positively as they did when they had just received it. External factors such as budgetary pressures may also have an individual impact.

## Impact on employee engagement

Although a debate continues in the literature about on a definition of employee engagement, the concept has gained considerable traction among employers.

Before their coaching this sample of 100 coachees are relatively average on the engagement scale. Engagement scores at six months in were only positively associated with the coaching outcome 'made me better at handling unforeseen situations' and negatively associated with the outcome 'made me more aware of my motivations.'

Few of the coaching outcomes appeared to be associated with higher engagement scores after six months. Indeed, one element of the coaching 'made me more aware of my motivations' was negatively associated with engagement; those who felt that the coaching helped them to become more aware of their own motivations reported lower engagement scores than those who felt the coaching had not helped them to achieve the same. This may mean that those respondents who feel that they now understand their own motivations better may then question their organisation more or feel less engaged with it as they realise that they cannot accomplish what they want at their current organisation and so disengage with it. This seems particularly harsh on the organisation that has invested in the coaching programme. Our study was exploratory: further research is required to establish whether this phenomenon holds true for larger number of respondents.

## Impact on job satisfaction

Before coaching the coaching clients, on the whole, were fairly satisfied with their jobs. Six months later, after coaching, some of the outcomes described in the survey were in the main associated with items in the job satisfaction scale.

Coaching outcomes associated with higher job satisfaction:

- Helped develop new work skills.
- Helped me deal efficiently with unexpected events.

## Are changes sustained over time?

Due to the limited sample size in the study and the high drop-out rate between the start of coaching and the six month survey, coupled with the fact that the majority of respondents by final survey had changed their job since undertaking the coaching, meant that little analysis could be undertaken to produce conclusive results on whether any changes had been sustained over-time following the coaching programme.

One small indicative piece of analysis looked to compare coachee's perceived impact of the coaching at six and 12 months on the four scales. The limited results highlighted that coachees were significantly more positive towards the impact of coaching on their work well-being and their general well-being at six months than they were at 12 months. There was no change in their perceived impact of the coaching on job satisfaction or engagement over the two time periods.

This would suggest that during the initial six months of the coaching, coachees perceive it to have impacted positively on their work well-being and their general well-being. This could be because it is a new experience for them and this enthusiasm gives them a more positive mind-set which, in turn, makes them feel more positive about themselves and their workplace role. Therefore this has an impact on their well-being both at work and in general. However, over time, it is possible that positivity within the workplace wanes due to various reasons such as a lack of support in the organisation or work practices reverting back to the norm. In turn these make coachees less inclined to feel that coaching has had a positive and sustained effect on well-being.

It would be useful for future studies to explore this aspect in more detail. Does the positive attitude towards coaching at the beginning necessarily translate into better work outputs or does it just alter coachees' mind-sets to ones which are more positive about work and life in general? Are further development opportunities or more support required in order to sustain any benefits that might be experienced through coaching?

## About IES and the research team

IES is an independent, apolitical, international, not-for-profit centre of research and consultancy in human resource and development issues. It works closely with employers in all sectors, government departments and professional bodies. IES is a focus of knowledge and practical experience in employment and training policy, the operation of labour markets, workforce planning and development.

Ben Hicks is a former IES researcher. He is currently a researcher at the Bournemouth University Dementia Institute and a Doctoral Student. His PhD research explores the use of computer game technology to improve the well-being of older men with dementia.

Dr Alison Carter is an IES Principal Associate specialising in HR, Leadership and Coaching. She is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD, has an MBA from Henley Management College and a professional doctorate. Alison was a Director of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) in 2003/2005 and was Co-Chair of the Harvard/IES 2nd International Coaching Research Forum in 2009, which addressed issues in measuring coaching processes and outcomes.

Alice Sinclair is an IES Senior Research Fellow specialising in work and well-being from a public policy perspective. She has an Honours Degree in Psychology and a Masters in Occupational Psychology from the Institute of Work Psychology at the University of Sheffield. Alice has expertise in designing and analysing large-scale longitudinal surveys, including using multivariate techniques.

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This summary is from the IES Research Network project report: *Impact of coaching: An empirical longitudinal study into coachee well-being, engagement and job satisfaction following a coaching programme at work*, by Hicks B, Carter A, Sinclair A. (2013).

The full report is available to IES members only who can download a free copy via the IES website [www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs) Non-IES members can expect the findings to be published in a journal during 2014-5.

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