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**Jones, Rebecca, Woods, Stephen A and Hutchinson, Emily
(2014) The influence of the Five Factor Model of personality
on the perceived effectiveness of executive coaching.
International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and
Mentoring, 12 (2). pp. 109-118.**

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3767>

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The influence of the Five Factor Model of personality on the perceived effectiveness of executive coaching

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Abstract

Limited research attention has been paid to influences on executive coaching effectiveness. This study explores whether a relationship exists between the Five Factor Model of personality and coachee perceptions of effectiveness of executive coaching. Thirty coachees completed a cross sectional survey measuring personality using scales from the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg, 1999). There was a significant positive relationship between extraversion and perceived coaching effectiveness. The findings have implications for organisations when considering whether their employees are suited to the development interventions on offer and whether the intervention will subsequently provide a good return on investment. Our study also contributes to the emerging literature on antecedents of coaching effectiveness by examining core aspects of individual differences.

Key Words: Executive coaching; personality; effectiveness; extraversion

Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion in the use of executive coaching as a learning and development tool in business (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh & Parker, 2010). However, relatively little evidence exists in the literature to outline exactly what constitutes effectiveness in executive coaching and what variables have an impact on that effectiveness. This study examines whether perceived executive coaching outcomes are related to the five factor model (FFM) of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992) with the aim of identifying those individuals who will engage fully with the executive coaching process and consequently benefit further. The findings have implications for understanding how individual differences are likely to influence executive coaching outcomes, which has potentially important implications in relation to coaching practice. It will also provide coaches and organisations with a practical method of analysing the perceived effectiveness of their executive coaching intervention.

Recent research by the CIPD stated that just over eight out of ten respondents in their 2010 Learning and Development survey reported that they now use executive coaching in their organisations (CIPD, 2010). Similarly, Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007) claimed that most people believe that executive coaching is beneficial for them and good for their business.

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MacKie (2007) reports that the evidence for executive coaching effectiveness is still in the embryonic stage, with no consensus as to exactly what constitutes effective executive coaching. There also appears to be no component analyses of what specific elements may result in a positive outcome. One of the challenges MacKie identifies as being related to this, is the sheer breadth of possible areas of change and development that could be targeted with executive coaching. Consequently, identifying generic outcome criteria is far from straight forward. Indeed, the CIPD (2010) found that only 36% of respondents to their 2010 Learning and Development survey reported having any type of system for evaluating executive coaching effectiveness. Similarly, Peterson (2009) described how less than one quarter of coaches surveyed provided any quantitative data on outcomes of executive coaching.

However, the executive coaching effectiveness research that is available shows that generally it is viewed favourably, resulting in increased satisfaction and productivity (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Other executive coaching outcome research has demonstrated improvements in relationships with managers, improved goal setting, increased engagement, improved productivity (Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker & Fernandes, 2008; Olivero, Bane & Kopelman, 1997); increased self-efficacy beliefs of setting own goals (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006) and improved multi-source feedback ratings (Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003).

Overall, although there is a body of evidence demonstrating executive coaching effectiveness, there appears to be a lack of consensus on what outcomes are measured. For example Grant et al. (2010) comment that the diversity of executive coaching outcomes utilised in research needs to be addressed in order to enable meaningful comparisons between studies. In addition to this, many articles call for further research on executive coaching effectiveness, in particular, with an exploration of what variables may predict greater effectiveness. For example, Kauffman and Scoular (2004) suggest that a key area requiring further research is whether or not some people are more suited to executive coaching than other development methods.

With regards to potential influences on executive coaching effectiveness, coachee characteristics are one area that has been proposed in key theoretical frameworks within the executive coaching literature. Kilburg (2001) provides an eight element model of coaching effectiveness including a variety of elements which he proposes influence coaching effectiveness. One of the eight elements within Kilburg's model is the "client's commitment to the path of progressive development" which incorporates the coachee or client characteristics such as self-awareness; curiosity; ability; willingness to learn; courage; development drive and motivation. An alternative theoretical framework proposed by Joo (2005) suggests that an important antecedent of coaching effectiveness is the characteristics of the coachee.

Within alternative areas of occupational psychology individual differences/characteristics, and in particular dispositional factors such as personality, are deemed to be predictors of learning and work performance (Herold et al., 2002; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). Research has also shown personality to have a robust effect on career success (Bozionelos, 2004); job and training proficiency (Barrick & Mount, 1991); and leadership effectiveness (Nelson & Hogan, 2009). Even critics of the dispositional approach to studying organisational behaviour, acknowledge that there are some stable individual attributes which have an effect on an individual's experience and reaction to the workplace (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989).

A few studies have been identified in the literature which attempt to examine the relationship between personality and executive coaching effectiveness. Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin and Kerrin (2008) examined whether personality impacts on effective executive coaching transfer. They found that there was a positive relationship between conscientiousness, openness, emotional stability and executive coaching transfer. However, results for openness and emotional stability and sustained changes in

behaviour over time were not significant. Stewart et al. conclude that the results of the study show that it may be possible to identify clients who could benefit from support interventions to aid transfer; although selecting individuals for executive coaching based on personality would be unwise. The partial support found for the study's hypotheses could however be attributed to a number of limitations with the outcome measure selected - transfer of executive coaching. This in itself does not provide a comprehensive measure of whether executive coaching was effective. There are many other outcomes which could have been assessed which may well have demonstrated a relationship with personality not found in Stewart et al.'s study.

Klockner and Hicks (2008) aimed to identify the personal qualities and dispositions of those who seek interventions such as coaching. They postulated that the identification of certain characteristics may help identify individuals who are likely to succeed in development programmes such as coaching. In a sample of 200 participants, they found that there was a significant relationship between openness to experience and extraversion and the prediction of intervention seeking. Klockner and Hicks infer from their findings that individuals who scored highly on openness to experience and extraversion are likely to welcome coaching interventions and such interventions may even be necessary for their self satisfaction. However, they did not find a significant relationship between conscientiousness, neuroticism or agreeableness and intervention seeking. Their study examined whether individuals had been involved in a psychosocial intervention only and not whether the programme had been successful in achieving their goals. An alternative explanation of the findings may therefore be that the characteristics identified predict those who would seek an intervention, but not whether coaching would then be effective for those individuals.

In their study examining the factors influencing executive coaching success, Duckworth and de Haan (2009) focussed on the relationship between the personality profile of both the coach and client as measured by the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). In their sample of 152 professionals and 31 coaches, Duckworth and de Haan found that there was no difference between perceived executive coaching effectiveness and personality type – all types rated the coaching intervention highly effective. This finding of no difference is interesting, it could however be attributed to the measure used, rather than evidence against the case for personality differences and executive coaching effectiveness. For example, Pittenger (2005) provides a critique of the MBTI, highlighting a number of issues with the measure. These include the lack of evidence for separate populations of personality types using the MBTI scoring procedure, meaning that the four letter type formula may imply statistically significant personality differences where none exist. It may well be the case that a relationship between personality and perceived executive coaching effectiveness can be detected if a more accurate measure is utilised.

The studies described suggest it is unclear if and how personality is related to executive coaching effectiveness. The research into personality and other workplace outcomes mentioned earlier suggest that it is unlikely that executive coaching effectiveness and personality are not linked at all. It is perhaps more likely that these areas have not yet been adequately conceptualised in the previous research. This study will build on this research by examining whether a relationship exists between the five factor model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997) and perceived executive coaching effectiveness. The FFM is a largely agreed taxonomy of personality (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Goldberg, 1993; McCormick & Burch, 2008). The following section provides a description of the factors and the predicted relationship between the dimension and perceived executive coaching effectiveness.

We expected extraversion to be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness as clients high on extraversion are more likely to be willing to talk about themselves and easily interact with the coach. Barrick and Mount (1991) also found that those scoring highly on

extraversion performed well at training proficiency. They suggest that this may be because extraverted individuals have the energy required to actively engage in the training process and consequently get more out of it. Such characteristics are thought to have a similar impact in an executive coaching environment. Indeed, Mount and Barrick (1995) found that training design moderates the relationship between extraversion and training motivation, i.e. introverts prefer learning on their own (such as through self-study or reading books) and extraverts prefer learning in groups or with others (such as in training, role playing, or potentially executive coaching). Research has also shown that extraverted individuals have a greater motivation to learn and consequently derive greater benefit from training programmes (Rowold, 2007; Barrick & Mount, 1991). Therefore the first hypothesis for the present study is:

H1: “Extraversion will be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness”.

We expected emotional stability to be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness. Research has shown that having a disposition which is insecure, negative and anxious (all characteristics of neuroticism) influences goal striving processes by lowering goals, disrupting concentration and instigating a failure orientation (Lee, Sheldon & Turban, 2003). The basis of the hypothesis for this study is that individuals scoring high on neuroticism (or low on emotional stability) will be unable to engage fully with the coach and will therefore be less likely to work with the coach to set and achieve goals. Consequently the second hypothesis for the present study is:

H2: “Emotional Stability will be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness”.

We expected agreeable clients to be more likely to place their trust in the coach and be keen to please the coach by behaving in a manner which they believe a client should behave in. Therefore the third hypothesis for the present study is:

H3: “Agreeableness will be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness”.

It was predicted that conscientiousness would be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness. Conscientiousness has consistently been shown to positively relate to overall job performance criteria (Barrick & Mount, 1991). It is believed that those individuals who score highly on conscientiousness will engage more thoroughly with the coach due to their desire to perform well; this in turn will mean that they will derive greater benefit from the experience. Therefore the fourth hypothesis for the present study is:

H4: “Conscientiousness will be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness”.

We expected that openness to experience would positively relate to perceived executive coaching effectiveness, as this dimension has previously been shown to correlate positively with training proficiency (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Those who have a positive attitude to learning experiences, such as those scoring highly on openness to experience, are more likely to be motivated to learn and change on entry, which means they may be more likely to positively take on board the executive coaching experience. Therefore the fifth hypothesis for the present study is:

H5: “Openness to experience will be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness”.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample was recruited via an e-mail sent to coaches identified via the BPS Special Group in Coaching Psychology Chartered members list and the Association for Coaching directory of coaches. Each coach was sent an e-mail request that they forward questionnaires on to their executive coaching clients who would then return the completed questionnaires directly to the researcher.

In total 30 participants responded to the research request. 13 of these were female and 17 were male. The participants ranged in age from 28 to 62, with a mean age of 42.77 ($SD = 7.95$). The number of executive coaching sessions ranged from 2 to 40, with a mean of 9.76 ($SD = 7.85$). The time period these executive coaching sessions were spread over ranged from 2 to 48 months with the mean time period being 13.20 ($SD = 10.86$). Prior experience of executive coaching included; none (14); a little (5); lots (3); and had provided executive coaching (8).

Materials

Two measures were employed, both were self-report and administered via e-mail. Self perception of executive coaching effectiveness was measured using a questionnaire designed by Duckworth and de Haan (2009). Duckworth and de Haan piloted their questionnaire with a group of experienced coaches who had also received executive coaching, to ensure that the face and content validity was good. The questionnaire included eight close-ended questions, with responses measured on a 7-point Likert scale and two open-ended questions. Examples of the close-ended questions are: 'What has your overall coaching experience with this coach been like?' and 'How would you rate the coaching in terms of impact on your performance at work?' An example of one of the open-ended questions is 'Please add any comments on, or clarification of your answer to any of the above questions'. The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability; the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .74 in the current study. Perceived executive coaching effectiveness was calculated as the average score given by coaches to the eight close-ended questions.

Personality was measured with the International Personality Item Pool 50 item scale that measures the five broad domains of the Five Factor Model (IPIP, 1999). Participants are presented with statements and are asked to indicate how accurately each one describes them on a 5-point Likert scale. The 50 item IPIP scale demonstrates good reliability with a coefficient alpha of .84 (IPIP, 1999). For this sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .86.

Procedure

Coaches were sent an e-mail requesting assistance in identifying participants for the study and were asked to forward the e-mail to their clients who have participated in executive coaching. The e-mail contained a cover note explaining the purpose of the research and had the consent form, executive coaching effectiveness questionnaire and personality questionnaire attached. Participants were directed to return the completed questionnaires directly to the researcher.

Analysis

The hypotheses were tested with correlational analyses. Inspection of the histograms for perceived executive coaching effectiveness showed negative skewness, so therefore non-parametric Spearman's Rho was completed.

Results

Table 1 shows the summary statistics for the data gathered and also for the relationships identified through the analysis. According to Cohen (1988), the strength of a correlation is small if $p =$

0.10 to 0.29, medium if $p = 0.30$ to 0.49 and large if $p = 0.50$ to 1.00 . A small negative correlation was found between perceived executive coaching effectiveness and conscientiousness ($p = -0.15$) which was contrary to the predicted direction. However, agreeableness ($p = 0.04$), emotional stability ($p = 0.12$) and openness to experience ($p = 0.15$) all demonstrated small positive correlations with perceived executive coaching effectiveness, as predicted. These relationships were not statistically significant. Extraversion was the only variable to demonstrate a significant medium positive correlation ($p = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$) with perceived executive coaching effectiveness, again in the direction predicted, i.e. higher scores on extraversion correlate with increased perceived executive coaching effectiveness and is shown in Table 1.

	Mean	SD	Correlation with perceived executive coaching effectiveness
Extraversion	36.33	10.07	0.32*
Agreeableness	39.30	8.12	0.04
Conscientiousness	38.13	5.06	-0.15
Emotional Stability	32.27	6.18	0.12
Openness to Experience	37.43	5.88	0.15

Table 1 – Summary statistics and correlations of perceived executive coaching effectiveness and FFM. * $p < 0.05$ (one tailed); Perceived executive coaching effectiveness mean = 6.40 SD=0.62

Discussion

This study sought to explore which personality variables have an impact on the perceived effectiveness of executive coaching. In the majority of relationships analysed in this study, the magnitude of observed correlations was relatively low.

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be a positive relationship between extraversion and perceived executive coaching effectiveness. This was the only hypotheses to be supported, with the results confirming that individuals who score higher on the extraversion scale tend to perceive executive coaching as more effective.

It is believed that the reason behind this relationship is related to the extraverts' preference of an interactive learning environment, such as learning through talking and doing (Rowold, 2007; Mount & Barrick, 1995). Similarly, other research has shown that the sociable, gregarious and high energy nature of extraverts appears to relate to increased training proficiency (Barrick & Mount, 1991). All of the previous research identified on personality and training proficiency examined the relationship in group training situations only. However, it is believed that extraversion still has a similar affect on the interaction in a one-to-one environment, such as with executive coaching, due to the social interaction required. Previous research by Klockner and Hicks (2008) has also identified extraversion as being significantly related to the prediction of intervention seeking. The current study therefore adds weight to the assertions in previous research that extraversion is related to a variety of job related outcomes and specifically to perceived executive coaching effectiveness. It is worth noting that in relation to coaching outcome research and personality research in general, the size of the correlation observed here is fairly substantial. Consequently, because of the nature of many coachees work roles, even small changes in performance can lead to large economic benefits for the organisation (Smither et al., 2003).

A small non-significant positive correlation was found between perceived executive coaching effectiveness and emotional stability, openness to experiences and agreeableness. These relationships

were all in the direction predicted. Past research by Barrick and Mount (1991) also found only weak correlations between emotional stability and job performance. Barrick and Mount (1991) concluded this may be because there is not a linear relationship between emotional stability and job performance. They suggest that there may be a critically unstable range, with those individuals who fall into this range opting out of the labour market. This suggestion may also explain the results found in the present study. In addition, agreeableness has not been consistently identified as one of the characteristics that is related to other job performance or training criteria in past research. Similarly it was not identified as being a significant variable in the other personality and executive coaching research reviewed; this study provides further support for this. The results for openness to experience support the previous research in the field, which has shown openness to experience to be positively related to executive coaching transfer (Stewart et al., 2008), to be significant in the prediction of intervention seeking (Klockner & Hicks, 2008) and positively related to training proficiency (Barrick & Mount, 1991).

The fourth hypothesis predicted that conscientiousness would be positively related to perceived executive coaching effectiveness. Conscientiousness has been a consistent predictor of job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991) and past research by Stewart et al. (2008) found conscientiousness to have a positive relationship with effective executive coaching transfer. The present study however identified a small negative relationship; therefore those scoring higher in conscientiousness perceived executive coaching as less effective. Although this relationship was not significant, it is interesting that it is in the opposite direction to that predicted and from the findings of the previous research. The reason why this direction of correlation was identified is not clear and it would be interesting to see whether it is replicated in further research.

Reviewing the results of the study, the small correlations could suggest that other factors play a greater role than personality in influencing how effective executive coaching is perceived to be. For example, it may well be the case that personality does impact on how effective executive coaching would be, were it not for the ability of a good coach to tailor their style accordingly. This is also why executive coaching as an intervention method may be more effective than other development techniques, such as training, which is a 'one size fits all' method. The one-to-one nature of executive coaching allows it to be customised and adapted to fit the individual's needs. Research by Duckworth and de Haan (2009) appears to support this suggestion as they found that all personality types seem to appraise executive coaching equally highly, with the quality of the coach/coachee relationship, as rated by the coachee, being a significant variable related to successful executive coaching. A potential area for further research would be to look at the coach's personality type in conjunction with their client personality types and perceived executive coaching effectiveness. Further research could also examine the executive coaching process itself in more depth to identify whether this tailoring of executive coaching style does actually occur, whether this is what makes executive coaching effective and practically how this can be replicated.

This particular study sought to examine only participant's perceptions of how effective executive coaching was. This does not demonstrate whether executive coaching had an impact on any of the other outcome or performance measures. Future research could measure whether executive coaching has an impact on other areas such as learning, behaviour and results. This research would be particularly beneficial due to the lack of existing 'hard data' evidence of the effectiveness of executive coaching (MacKie, 2007; CIPD, 2010; Peterson, 2009).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the present study sought to establish whether the FFM model of personality was related to the coachees' perceived executive coaching effectiveness. The study found that extraversion was the only personality characteristic to be significantly related to perceived executive coaching

effectiveness. Positive relationships were found between executive coaching effectiveness and agreeableness, emotional stability and openness to experience. Negative relationships were found between executive coaching effectiveness and conscientiousness. These relationships were not significant and the effect sizes were small.

The results provide the first evidence of the relationship between extraversion and perceived executive coaching effectiveness. This is valuable as it provides direction for further exploration of this area; to obtain additional evidence of the exact nature and extent of this relationship. Understanding what factors affect executive coaching effectiveness is important as, to-date, there is relatively little information available in this area. This means that organisations are unable to consider whether their employees are suited to the development interventions on offer and whether the intervention will subsequently provide a good return on investment.

Although the sample in this study was relatively small, research studies on this scale hold an important place in a nascent field such as executive coaching, as they help to build the foundations needed for evidence-based practice to be possible. Small scale studies such as these are also vital if future systematic reviews are to be conducted. Therefore, this study forms one of the first steps in assessing on a more tangible level exactly what the benefits of executive coaching are and who it is best suited for.

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