

How AI tools are transforming coaching in SA

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Coaching is a caring profession characterised by a trusted relationship, authentic connection, and a collaborative partnership between the coach and client. At the core of coaching lie deep, one-to-one, empathetic conversations. The 'human touch' is not just important, it's critical to the whole coaching endeavour. However, this is not to say that the coaching industry will in any way be immune to transformation by AI tools.



Lee-Ann Drummond, head of management and leadership faculty at SACAP (the South African College of Applied Psychology), a leading provider of coach education says, “Like everyone else, coaches are interested in improving efficiencies as well as enhancing their performance and capacities to reach and serve clients. AI models for coaches are already emerging to take on mundane administrative tasks, freeing coaches up to spend more time on client engagements. AI tools can help in analysing coaching data and delivering insights, personalising learning interventions to suit clients’ individual learning styles, and by providing platforms and virtual assistants that help coaches scale their practices.”

These technologies hold the promise of democratising the coaching industry, expanding access across business and society. In future, many more people are likely to be able to access expert coaching services that support them in leading more fulfilling lives and making significant contributions to their communities, and country. However, how will the latest technologies, driven by machine learning, integrate with the decidedly human-centric field of coaching?

Professor Nicky Terblanche, academic, executive coach and founder of coachvici.com is an early adopter of AI tools for coaches and coaching education. He says, “What is interesting is that in a recent research study I did, we found that clients are keen to use AI coaching, while coaches in the study were more sceptical and felt that the AI coach would interfere with the bond they have with their clients. I also think in general coaches are not necessarily interested in technology since they are drawn to coaching because of the human touch. Coaches, however, need to upskill themselves and become aware of the potential of AI. If not, they could be caught napping when AI tools surpass certain basic human coaching approaches.”

What types of AI tools are coaches using?

There's already a wide range of AI tools for coaches on offer, and often, coaches who are early adopters and interested in the potential of the technologies are involved in developing new and emerging AI tools, which include:

1. **Coach chatbots** – these text or voice models, which can be stand-alone or be embedded in a platform can engage with clients to answer questions, guide them through a process such as onboarding, provide feedback or facilitate coaching exercises and reflections. They are often regarded as a type of virtual assistant.
2. **Coach virtual assistants** – the aim of these tools, whether they are behind-the-scenes and administrative or client-facing is to take on standard tasks giving coaches more time to focus on their actual coaching sessions. Personalised coaching platforms – AI-driven coaching platforms create personalised coaching plans based on algorithms. They may include features such as goal setting and feedback mechanisms.
3. **NLP platforms** – Coaches can use AI-powered Natural Language Processing platforms to analyse clients' written or spoken language to identify patterns and themes as well as gauge sentiment. These insights can help the coach to tailor their approach and interventions for individual clients.
4. **Data analytics tools** – AI algorithms can identify trends and correlations, and present insights that help coaches track client progress, measure their coaching effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Maintaining the human-centric approach of coaching is critical in the AI-driven era. These new tools don't obviate the need for nurturing connection, active listening, and empathetic interaction. Coaches still need to empower clients to shape their own coaching journey, respecting their autonomy and agency. AI tools should support the client-centred ethos and not replace it. Coaches using AI tools also must monitor for biases in the AI algorithms and take the necessary steps to mitigate them. This highlights how important it is for coaches to be competent in using all their tools and how they must be equipped to have full oversight and accountability in the use of their AI tools.

Globally, coaching bodies are in the process of devising guidelines for the ethical use of AI tools for coaches. Full transparency and informed consent about the AI tools the coach is using is essential. There are also new data privacy and security issues that coaches will need to address as part of building a trusted relationship with their clients as well as meeting regulatory requirements.

Professor Terblanche concludes, "Coaches who embrace AI will be more productive and deliver better coaching. In one of my studies, it was found that AI can already perform as well as human coaches for very structured coaching conversations. Coaches who are not properly trained or who use simplistic coaching models could be replaced by AI coaches. In essence, AI is just another powerful tool in the Coach Toolbox. My suggestion to South African coaches is to investigate it, play with it and use it as it fits into your practice. But don't ignore it!"

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