

The Future of Coaching: Trends that Illustrate the End is Near

By Rey Carr

I don't believe the well-meaning, innovative and highly skilled pioneers of the coaching industry could have predicted the trends that are now occurring in coaching. Some of these trends will likely boost attraction to coaching, but others, and the ones I want to focus on in this article, are more likely to repel people from gaining value from coaching services. Since these trends will have a dramatic impact on the future of coaching, I will explore them in detail in this article with the hope that the actions I propose near the end of the article can eradicate these trends and keep coaching in the mainstream as a way for people to grow and develop.

I'm not the only, nor am I the first person to identify negative trends in coaching. In *Peer Bulletin No. 194* ([November 2, 2010](#)), author and coach Jan Newcomb identified five trends in coaching that she characterized as 'disturbing.' They included: unsavoury marketing practices, claims of ultimate authority, lack of relevance for certification and accreditation, coaches with too little experience, and the inappropriate use of certain practice standards from professionals trained in disciplines other than coaching.

The five trends identified by Jan Newcomb as well as the six that I have identified for this special issue of *The Future of Coaching* magazine—the glut of coaches; the creation of niche coaching, the proliferation of credentialing schemes, the influx of parasites, the misnamed practices, and the exclusionary practices of coaching organizations—are the result of the work of a relatively small group, but they appear to be having an impact on the general public as more and more cultural observers describe coaching practices in cynical or critical fashion, and the previous esteem and confidence accorded coaching by the public appears to be diminishing.

The Glut of Coaches.

<u>Estimate of Coaches in World</u>	
US Business coaches	40,000
Coaches outside USA	40,000
Life coaches in world	20,000
Call themselves coaches	5,000
Graduates per year	<u>25,000</u>
Total:	130,000

Coaching is one of the fastest growing industries. But no one really knows how many people are actively involved in coaching as a full- or part-time career. This number is important because it may be the underlying reason why the trends identified by Jan Newcomb and the five additional trends to be detailed later in this article have emerged, and paradoxically may also be the main reason why the public is becoming less accepting of coaching as a credible industry.

In my article, *Coaching Statistics, Facts, Guesses, Conventional Wisdom and the State of the Industry* (Carr, 2008), I quoted sources within the coaching industry that estimated there were approximately 40,000 business coaches working within the USA. Another 40,000 coaches were considered operating in other countries around the world.

The International Coach Federation in response to an August 14, 2015 question asked via Twitter, stated that the number of persons coaching worldwide was significantly less than the 2008 estimate. The ICF figure, based on their 2012 ICF Global Coaching Study, was stated to be 47,500.

Not only does this ICF figure under-estimate the number of coaches worldwide but it also (1) underestimates the number of coaches around the world who work informally, but also offer their services as coaches; (2) does not include all those people who engage in some form of coaching, but either chose not to complete the ICF survey or were not in contact with the survey request; and (3) could reflect the low reliability of their survey method (Carr, 2015).

In essence, a number of organizations have attempted via a survey method to discern the number of coaches worldwide. None have presented a compelling argument about the reliability or validity of their total figure. Consequently, the number of coaches worldwide has mostly been a guess. And there are many reasons why an organization like the ICF would underestimate the number of coaches worldwide.

But there are two additional calculations—that even though estimates—can yield some useful data. According to the latest figures available, there are approximately 665 coach training schools now in operation ([Coach Directory](#)). If, by conservative estimate we guess that each coaching school graduates 50 participants a year, that adds another 33,250 graduates each year to the existing worldwide total of coaches. Fast forward to 2015 the total, given attrition plus additional persons calling themselves coaches, the number of coaches worldwide is more likely to be closer to **250,000**.

The second additional calculation—and one that is more difficult to determine—is the number of persons who currently call themselves coaches yet have no coach-specific training. Many of these practitioners come from management consulting, motivational speaking, or marketing. In most cases they have added “coaching” to their repertoire. Note that this is not a criticism of the legitimacy or credibility of the coaching they provide; it is mentioned to illustrate an additional source of persons to add to our “number of coaches” estimate.

Many coaching experts have stated that anyone can benefit from having a coach, yet the number of actual clients willing to hire a coach is finite. If we add up the numbers mentioned so far, as well as other sources of help that are not coaches, including self-help and self-coaching, and all the psychology and social work practitioners, then the ratio of potential helpers per client gets much larger.

What this means is that there is an exceptionally large pool of coaches competing against each other for the same client base. An August 2015 search of the Internet using Google reveals that there are more than 84 million websites listed when the term ‘coaches’ is used (while at the same time eliminating other terms such as ‘sports, bus, clothing’ and other terms not associated with life and business coaches).

Increasing the number of coaches available or including the increased number of persons who call themselves coaches in the worldwide pool of coaches is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem arises when individuals expect to easily find clients. Instead, they learn that the number of coaches already in practice has been significantly and consistently underestimated, thus making it much more difficult to generate the revenue necessary for a satisfactory career.

In addition, many coaching schools and marketing specialists have stepped in to make the coaches think it is their own fault for not having proper or sufficient business and marketing skills to gain clients. Literally, dozens of these services are now generating considerable revenue off disappointed coaches. These practices can easily lead to charges of deception and misrepresentation.

The Rise of the Nouveau Niche.

Marketing specialists have made significant inroads into the coaching industry, seeking to convince coaches that if they want to make a living with paying clients they need to, among other tricks and techniques, distinguish themselves from their coaching colleagues. The primary way this differentiation has been implemented is through 'niche coaching.'

More than 60 distinct niche areas have been identified by one study, and many coaches have added multiple niche areas to their statement of practice.

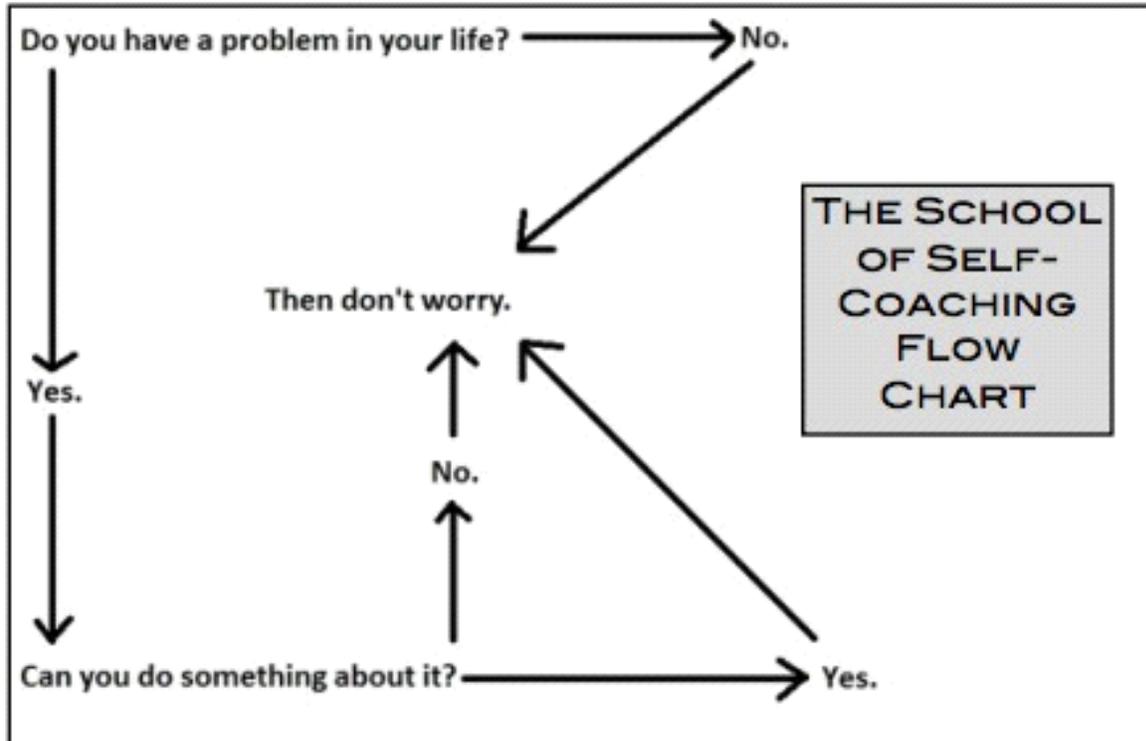
[A [website](#) devoted to a satirical review of the coaching world has identified more than 60 niche areas currently being promoted by "coaches."]

Boundless Scope.

There is hardly a challenge faced by a human being that a coach will decline to coach. There are birthing coaches, death and grief coaches, coaches for kids and teens, coaches for retirees and the elderly, and coaches for hospice and recovery. There are even coaches for our animal companions such as feline, equine and doggy coaches.

While the pioneers of coaching often would make a point of distinguishing themselves from sports coaches, that distinction is no longer appropriate as more and more life and business coaches now claim the niche of working with athletes.

What's more, the previously taboo land usually populated by clinical psychologists and psychiatrists now has coaches dealing with the wide variety of disorders, crises, syndromes and addictions mentioned in the DSM IV. Some coaches attempt to cover multiple niches. Their websites or biographies read as if they were worried about leaving out a niche that might result in a potential client searching elsewhere for a coach. Instead of narrowing their scope of practice to a particular niche, they have expanded their practice to include multiple areas of practice. It is not unusual to find a coach listing several traditional niche areas such as "coach, consultant, trainer, mentor, and clinical counselor" as part of their practice; or a coach listing where a coach provides "business coaching, executive coaching, life coaching, career coaching, health coaching." One coaching commentator speculated that coaches are doing 'keyword' searches on Google, finding the problems people experience that have the most frequent hits, and then adding those key words into their scope of practice descriptions.



The use of multiple or unique niche areas, rather than acting as a catalyst for helping people, has more likely resulted in a type of skepticism or cynicism about coaching. Rather than attracting clients, these two niche approaches may be seen by consumers as a form of desperation or lack of professional stature.

The Never Quiet Whiz Kids.

Another trend that has a paradoxical impact on the future of coaching is the willingness of coaches to speak ‘authoritatively’ about virtually any topic having to do with human behaviour.

While some of these individuals receive continual national exposure on TV-talk shows such as Oprah, Dr. Phil, Dr. Drew, Dr. Oz, the View, and other talk shows, thousands publish their advice in their own books, blogs, websites, newsletters, magazines, article clearinghouses, social media outlets and listservs. “There’s a free-for-all regarding what anyone calling themselves a coach can or will do;” a coach critic told me, “one of these days, I hope to find one instance of a coach saying, ‘Sorry, I really don’t know anything about that’.”

While individual coaches in their actual coaching interactions may be more reluctant to provide ‘advice’ to clients in order to facilitate the quality of the coaching interaction, they typically do not show the same reluctance to comment in public about almost every aspect of the human condition. As Grey Owl has noted, “Wisdom is divided into two parts: a) have a great deal to say, and b) not saying it.”

These public commentaries, typically based on life experience, are legitimate and well-meaning. However, their frequency, constancy, and expression in a variety of media venues has likely saturated the public with too much information. In other words, the appearance of such widespread “expertise,” rather than acting as a catalyst to garner respect, has led many people to likely be skeptical of coaching. “So many people have taken the title ‘coach’,” according to one Peer Resources Network member, “that even fewer coaches really know what true coaching is, and they seem to have lost any connection with professional boundaries.”

Nomenclature Confusion.

Another way that some members of the coaching industry are demonstrating a blurring of boundaries is through the increasing use by coaches of the terms that come from other helping disciplines; for example, the use of the term “mentor” as in “mentor-coach” and “supervision” of coaches. Whereas in the past, coaches made an effort to distinguish themselves from mentors (often writing short articles on the differences between the roles), now many coaches have added that role to their repertoire of practice.

For the most part, the addition of the ‘mentor - coach’ accolade to their resumes seems to be a way to elevate their skill status and promote and market their services to other coaches. The irony here is that acting as a mentor has been historically and is currently a free or completely volunteer service. Mentor-coaches have ignored or rejected this key element of mentoring and charge a fee to work with other coaches. In so doing they have again expanded the scope of their practice, added to the confusion about the difference in roles, and, rather than referring to their work with other coaches as supervision or consultation, have added the status, but not the accuracy of mentoring to their own scope of practice (Carr, 2015b).

The International Coach Federation, representing approximately 24,000 members around the world, defines mentor coaching as “coaching on coaching competency development of the applicant-coach as opposed to coaching for personal development or coaching for business development, although those aspects may happen very incidentally in the coaching for competency development.” (Marum, 2011). In other words, the ICF uses the term ‘mentor coach’ as a substitute for what almost all other helping professions such as medicine, psychology and social work call ‘supervision’ or ‘consultation.’

European coaching associations offer virtually identical ‘mentor coach’ services to help other coaches. However, the European groups refer to these as supervision, not mentor coaching. The EMCC, because their membership includes both mentors and coaches, uses a slash between the words mentor and coach as in “mentor/coach” when addressing members to indicate these are two distinct roles. The ICF, in contrast, uses the word

'mentor' before the word coach as a modifying adjective as in 'mentor coach'. (The ICF also insists on displaying the role term with uppercase first letters as in "Mentor Coach.")

Members of the ICF, supported by the ICF requirement for members to engage a mentor coach, have added this role to the services they offer. For example a recent promotional flier we received from two ICF-certified coaches titled their offering "Exclusive Mentoring in Advanced Coaching Techniques," and another ICF member sent a promotional flier requesting coaches to sign up for a "6-Figure Practice Mentoring Program." Both of these offerings required paying a fee to receive the 'mentoring.

In addition to confusion about and mis-use of the term 'mentor-coach,' there is considerable controversy now brewing in North America regarding the term "coach supervision." Such confusion is rare in Europe where experienced coaches, particularly those in the United Kingdom and those who are members of the two largest European coaching organizations, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) and The British Psychological Society Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP), emphasize services they call "supervision." Partly, there is little trouble with this term in Europe because of the large number of coaches who have come to coaching having first trained as psychologists, where supervision is common practice.

But the historical tradition of supervision in the clinical practice of psychology does not mean that it is appropriate for the practice of coaching. Supervision, in the traditional sense of one professional having responsibility for the quality of practice, ethics, and activities of another practitioner has no place in coaching. In her article on the dangers associated with the ICF initiating a coaching supervision model, Vikki Brock (2015) states, "...adopting clinical forms of supervision, using the language that applies to regulated areas of clinical practice in the USA holds significant risks for the coaching profession, as represented by the ICF."

In contrast to psychology, coaching practice has a long tradition of coaches consulting, conferring or collaborating with each other to improve, enhance, and strengthen each other's practice. Therefore, it makes more sense to use terms such as peer consultation or peer coaching rather than coach supervision. Ironically, one of the biggest advocates from the ICF for coaching supervision, has stated that supervision is important "because it is a way that all coaches will get an opportunity to reflect on our practice; a way to reflect, to see, to think; and many times when you hear the word 'supervision' experienced coaches are worried that supervision comes from psychology or supervision means control; that is when you hear the word 'supervision' we're talking about controlling instead of really reflecting; and instead of seeing supervision as a partnership where we are all learning" (Coaching Trends, 2015).

With the International Coach Federation leading the charge to create a coach supervision system where member coaches will be required to participate in order to renew their credentials one can easily conclude that like the paid mentor-coach, this coach supervision model is just another attempt to control coaches while at the same time increasing revenue

to the organization. Critics of the ICF's initiative have suggested that a former ICF president is "touting the area of coaching supervision as the next extremely lucrative revenue stream for coaches" (Email Thread, 2015), and the same person has described coaching supervision as "an opportunity for MCC coaches to develop their businesses" (Coaching Trends, 2015).

Surprisingly few coaches in North America are attending to this issue except for a small battalion of experienced coaches attempting to convince the ICF to change its approach. A July 2015 well-publicized forum on coaching supervision sponsored by a chapter of the ICF (Coaching Trends, 2015) was significantly under-attended, indicating that for most North American coaches this coaching supervision initiative on the part of the ICF is a non-issue.

Regardless of the size of the group of concerned coaches, one cannot help but be struck by the ICF interpretations of the terms "mentor coach" and "coaching supervision." While the intention of both these practices may be to ensure the integrity of coaching practice, the outstanding features of both of these poorly named practices is that they lead to greater control, or as Bob Garvey (2014) calls it, "neofeudalistic surveillance," as well as greater revenue for coaching associations.

The Influx of the Parasites.

I've been involved in the helping profession for close to 50 years. I've worked closely with psychologists, social workers, physicians, psychiatrists, childcare workers, psychotherapists, and other practitioners. In all that time and from my connections with the varied helping professionals I've never witnessed the influx of external sources offering these practitioners the types of services and products in the amount or to the extent that coaches typically receive. Not a day goes by without multiple email messages heralding six-figure income, multiple streams of revenue, marketing secrets, blog, article and web writing tips, skill enhancement, assessment tools, client attraction methods, and a variety of other practice improvement schemes.

Many of these offers come from people who describe themselves as coaches. They typically provide testimonials and persuasive 'squeeze' pages to encourage other coaches to sign up for their service or product. No doubt many of these are legitimate practitioners acting to share what they know with colleagues, but seen in a larger perspective they are part of a trend—a trend that preys on the fear of failure, lack of experience, vulnerability, and the promise that 'there must be a pony in here somewhere.'

Some coaches are so disturbed by this trend that they refer to the people who make these offers as vampires, vultures, exploiters and manipulators. This is a sensitive area because I'm sure the people who offer these services would object to this type of characterization. They see themselves as helping others to improve their practice— a goal we all strive towards. The problem, and the reason why this trend may be contributing to the reduction in respect and

regard for coaching, is that it's virtually impossible to distinguish between those offering credible, legitimate services and those offering bunk.

The Multiplying Credentials.

In 2005 (and updated in 2015) Peer Resources published a white paper titled *A Guide to Credentials in Coaching: Types, Issues and Sources* that documented the more than 65 distinct coach credentials available in North America and the United Kingdom. That review showed that some certifications are competency-based, some require attaining hours of course work, others require supervision by someone who has already attained the credential, some rely on self-assessment, some can be obtained without ever coaching a client; and some are just based on self-proclamation.

The proliferation of credentials in coaching has not slowed. More than 300 additional coaching schools are now in operation since the original version of the white paper, and most of these schools also offer some variation of one of the types of credentials listed above. And surprisingly there are even organizations that specialized in credentialing in fields other than coaching that have now jumped into offering their own system of certifying coaches.

The irony here is that research on how potential clients find or select a coach has little to do with credentials and more to do with experience. Yet the coaching schools and coaching associations continue to build more and more complex systems to reinforce the credentialing model. Some critics have even referred to this connection between credentialing, the coaching schools and the coaching associations as a coaching 'ponzi' scheme.

At the same time the promotional claims that so many of these schools make regarding their place in the coaching industry can be confusing, unsubstantiated, and close to deceptive. There are dozens that claim they are the 'first,' 'number one' or 'only' group that does X, Y or Z. These promotional claims often contradict coaching practice since most coaching engagements include a survey of the horizon in order to determine current reality prior to embarking on the rest of the journey. If the school did a Google search on X, Y or Z, they would likely find others also making the same claim.



In addition, the coaching associations appear to act as enablers of these claims in that they do not require any evidence of such claims when approving or accrediting the school's offerings. Our review of the relationship between coaching schools and coaching associations could not identify an instance of a coaching association expressing any warnings, cautions or reservations regarding the practices and policies of any coaching school. Nor does there seem to be any record of a coaching school losing its coaching association accreditation or approval status as a result of the school's policies or practices.

This ever-multiplying system of credentialing does little to protect the public from incompetence, shoddy practice and exploitation. Credentialing in coaching continues to grow with minimal credible oversight and accountability. This not only serves to confuse and exasperate the public, but it has also contributed to considerable skepticism from experienced coaches as well.

We're It and You're Not.

Another trend that will have a negative influence on the future of coaching is what can be called exclusionary policies and practices. These are actions, mostly associated with the 15 current coaching associations, to limit, restrict or control the evolution of coaching. On the surface their restrictions seem like a good idea: they raise standards, improve competence, identify best coaching skills; increase precision of coaching definitions and terms, and encourage on-going practitioner education. However, the associations typically exclude each other when making changes, and seldom, if at all, refer to the existence of each other. In their start-up phase most associations had membership policies that were inclusive—virtually anyone with an interest in coaching could join, but their current or pending membership policies are much more exclusive and require more extensive (and costly) training or other requirements.

An expert on the coaching industry sent Peer Resources an email that said, "Approximately 95 percent of the 500 organizations that provide training for coaches are 'for profit' businesses. They compete against each other to sell their coach training and in doing so they

must find numerous niches, specialties and unique issues that can boost their competitive positions.”

While most of the coaching associations hold not-for-profit status, they still compete with each other for members. Few individuals can afford to hold memberships in more than one of these associations, and their membership standards are restrictive enough that it would be quite unusual for an individual coach to qualify for membership in more than one. But the myriad of standards, definitions and promotion of membership benefits has created uncertainty among many coaches as to which one to join.

Typically, the coaching associations operate as if the other associations don't exist; and as of this date only one membership-based group actually mentions and fully acknowledges all the other coaching associations on its website. In addition, the coaching associations have increased their efforts to approve and accredit coaching schools, and thus gain allegiance to their model of a coach training curriculum as specified by the association. This system, in the guise of raising standards, contributes to minimizing innovation and experimentation, and homogenizes the offerings available.

Even more troubling is the fact that coaching associations have assigned themselves the authority to 'grant' accredited or approved status to coach training schools. No external authorities review or monitor their accrediting practices, and the associations are not accountable to any expert authority on accreditation or curriculum approval.

As far as I could tell from enquiries to the associations, none have the expertise and experience with accreditation and curriculum approval models that exist outside of coaching; none are members of various organizations that oversee accrediting procedures; few have consulted with or have an on-going relationship with existing agencies that have been engaged in accrediting and curriculum approval; and none have the expertise or staff hours to conduct accreditation or approval that would make them relatively equivalent to the most well-known and reputable accreditation models. Even the methods and standards used by the coaching associations to accredit or approve coaching schools are quite different from each other. This lack of authority and coordination can and does contribute to public confusion as to what those terms actually mean. (See our latest guide to the use of accreditation in the coaching industry on our website at www.peer.ca/coachingschools.html.)

Where Are Our Heroes?

Very few voices raise concerns and speak out about the coaching industry such as The Coaching Commons and before that the *Coaching Insider*, edited by Ken Winston Caine. These analytical sources are no longer available to provide forums for journalistic level critique, public commentary and independent editorial opinion.

What Thomas Leonard and other coaching pioneers started as an innovative and unique practice is exemplified by the majority of coaches today who have studied, trained, and continue to educate themselves. These coaches also honour the ideas and principles that Thomas created by recognizing the need to distinguish what they provide in order to attract clients and earn a decent living. Their progress, however, has slowed because the coaching industry is so overloaded with multiple certification schemes (at least 65 now available); is rife with the misuse of accreditation principles and practices; is beset by the unwillingness of coaching associations to cooperate with each other; and is suffering from the proliferation of highly disparate coach training schemes. The unfortunate result is that the general public has become even more confused and baffled by the coaching industry.

The trends identified in this article are all well-meaning, reasonable and make sense for individual practitioners to engage in order to survive in a highly competitive market. But seen in a 'big picture perspective' they appear to form an unintentional whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. Rather than increasing the public's connection and celebration of coaching and coaches as a way to achieve greater life happiness as well as business and career success, the trends identified here may signal a bleak future for coaching.

References

[To learn about the pioneers of the coaching industry and learn about their vision for coaching practice, there is no better source than Dr. Vikki Brock's [Sourcebook of Coaching History](#).]

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