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## Certified Professional Co-Active Coaches: Why They Enjoy Coaching

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### Abstract

The evidence-base for the *practice* of coaching continues to flourish, despite the fact that very little is known about the *practitioners* (i.e. the coaches) themselves. It is of value to understand how coaches perceive their practice. Such information can be utilized to create a common knowledge-base about coaches that can be used, in turn, to track trends and forward research that evaluates coaching services. As the use of Co-Active coaching in facilitating behaviour change continues to rise it becomes important to learn more about Certified-Professional Co-Active Coaches (CPCC). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate what CPCCs enjoy about being coaches. These results were contained within a larger survey. A total of 390 CPCCs who were over 18 years of age, could read English, and had access to the Internet participated in the current study. Findings included: that witnessing clients change their lives; the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from coaching; the collaborative relationship with clients; the autonomy and flexibility of the profession; and the gratification received from using their skill set were the main reasons CPCCs enjoyed coaching. This paper elaborates on these findings and makes suggestions for future research.

**Key Words:** Life Coaches; Co-Active Coaching; Coach Training; Survey

### Introduction

By the mid-2000s, the coaching industry had developed so rapidly that its growth outpaced the research needed to underpin its credibility (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004; Linley, 2006). Thus, there was a need to ground practice in concrete theoretical understandings and empirical tests. To date, the life coaching industry continues to grow and alongside its growth is an increase in research highlighting its theoretical underpinnings (e.g., Irwin & Morrow, 2005; Stober & Grant, 2006) and validating its effectiveness as a behaviour change methodology. More specifically, over the past ten years, research that operationally defined the type of coaching used and followed rigorous research methodology has been published in the areas of attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Ratey, 2002; Ratey & Jaska, 2002), diabetes (Joseph, Griffin, Hall, & Sullican, 2001), mental health (Grant, 2003), obesity (Newnham-Kanas, Irwin, Morrow, & Battram, D., 2011; Newnham-Kanas, Morrow & Irwin, 2011; Newnham-Kanas, Irwin, & Morrow, 2008; Zandvoort, Irwin, & Morrow, 2008; 2009), physical activity (Gorczyński, Morrow, & Irwin, 2008), and smoking cessation (Mantler, Irwin, & Morrow, 2010). Although the evidence-base for the *practice* of coaching continues to blossom, very little is known about the *practitioners* (i.e., the coaches) themselves. It is important to learn how coaches chose coaching as a

profession, what they enjoy about coaching, and how they have developed their practice. Such information can be utilized to create a common knowledge-base about coaches that can be used, in turn, to track trends and understand who these coaches are to forward research that evaluates coaching services. This information about coaches is necessary to inform and form the foundation of professionalism towards which the coaching industry strives.

In 2004 Grant and Zackon (2004) were interested in exploring the characteristics of executive, workplace, and life coaches by conducting an online survey of coaches who belonged to the International Coach Federation (ICF; the worlds largest coaching professional organization). This large-scale survey retrieved information on coaches' credentialing and training, prior professional career, how they coached (e.g. over the phone vs. face-to-face), how they ran their practice, client profiles, and coach demographics. According to Grant and Zackon, in order to foster the research needed to bolster the foundation of professionalism, researchers needed to continue tracking trends among coaches with future research extending beyond the ICF. A study conducted by Newnham-Kanas, Irwin, and Morrow (2011), surveyed Certified Professional Co-Active Coaches (CPCC) to create a profile of this one accredited classification of coach. The current study is part of that larger study.

Laura Whitworth and Karen and Henry Kimsey-House founded the Coaches Training Institute (CTI) in 1992. This particular style of coaching is based on a collaborative model whereby the coach and client work together to fulfill the goals/agenda articulated by the client (for a full review please refer to Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl 1998; 2007). As Co-Active coaching was later deemed to be grounded in behaviour change theory (Irwin & Morrow, 2005) and empirically tested as a viable behaviour change intervention for individuals struggling with obesity (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2008; 2011; 2011b; van Zandvoort et al., 2008; 2009) and smoking cessation (Mantler et al., 2010), it was deemed important to seek out additional information on the actual interventionists within the studies, that is, CPCCs. In 2004, 25% of coaches surveyed were trained at CTI and it was the most frequently cited training program. Given over 60 training schools, it is fair to say that CPCCs make up a fairly large portion of certified coaches worldwide. With permission from Grant and Zackon (2004), their survey was adapted and utilized to gain profile information on CPCCs. A common trend between the study conducted by Grant and Zackon and the current researchers (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011) was the extremely high (99.9% and 98.9% respectively) percentage of coaches who were trained in a prior professional background before becoming trained as a coach. Moreover, these coaches were continuing to coach clients even though the profession may not result in a large monetary reward. It begged the question: what is it about coaching that retains coaches in the profession? Therefore, the purpose of this study was to evaluate what coaches enjoy about coaching.

This specific question was contained within a larger survey and it received such an abundance of rich responses that helped to explain why Co-Active coaching has been an effective behaviour change tool that it deserved its own focus. This question was not included in the Grant and Zackon (2004) survey. Current knowledge suggests that this is the first time coaches have been asked what they enjoy about their profession. The information provided by CPCCs adds to the growing knowledge base needed to continue advancing the coaching industry towards professionalization. Specifically, this question provided insight into why CPCCs remain in the profession over or as an adjunct to their prior professional work and why they continue to engage in a profession that is performed primarily on a part-time basis.

## Methodology

Participants were CPCCs, 18 years or older, who were proficient in reading and writing English, and had access to the Internet were eligible to participate in the study. They were contacted via email addresses made available through CTI's online referral system. They were also contacted through the Co-Active network's e-newsletter and the main community discussion board accessed through the CTI website. A total of 390 CPCCs from around the world (the majority of whom resided in the United States (55.2%), Canada (25.6%), and the United Kingdom (4.6%)) accessed the survey and 82.9% completed the entire survey. The survey was available to CPCCs for three months. After this period, results were collected from an online server. A total of 351 CPCCs responded to the question, *What do you enjoy most about being a coach?* This was an open-response question to which participants could enter their unique answers. Completing the survey served as explicit consent. Further information regarding participant recruitment and response rate are provided elsewhere (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011). Ethical approval was received from The University of Western Ontario's Office of Research Ethics.

The final version of the survey included 63 questions with response options using a variety of different formats including: yes-no responses; frequency and extent rating scales; multiple response alternatives; and open-ended questions. Further information on the questionnaire development and pilot testing are provided elsewhere (Newnham-Kanas et al., 2011).

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

Inductive content analysis, previously described by Patton (2002), was employed on the responses. This technique was used to group the participant answers into main themes that emerged from the data. The lead researcher (CNK) and an undergraduate research assistant, who was not previously involved with the study, analyzed the data separately and then came together to compare themes and determine which themes were most prominent in expressing what CPCCs enjoyed most about being a coach.

## Results

The results for this study were grouped into six themes: witnessing clients change their lives; sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from coaching; collaborative relationship with clients; CPCCs appreciation of autonomy and flexibility that stem from being a coach; and CPCCs enjoyment in using their skill set. Themes along with illustrative comments that embody the majority of responses by participants are presented below.

### *Witnessing clients change their lives*

Participants credited helping clients transform their lives as one of the main reasons they enjoyed coaching. Whether it was challenging clients to help them meet their full potential, realize their true mission in life, or witnessing their clients take responsibility for their own life, CPCCs expressed their passion for assisting clients to make meaningful differences in their clients' lives. Illustrative comments that represent the majority of responses are displayed in Table 1 below:

“Transforming lives - letting go of needless suffering towards more inner peace/joy/fulfillment. Love and away from fear.”

“Being part of the growth and joy of my clients as they learn to love and believe in themselves and create lives that fulfill them.”

“Supporting people in recognizing and stepping into their own greatness.”

“Providing an opportunity for others to take the time to truly look at themselves and their lives.”

“Being part of the growth and joy of my clients as they learn to love and believe in themselves and create lives that fulfill them.”

“Contributing to people’s lives in a meaningful way. Knowing I have supported them is being and bringing more of all they are into the world.”

“Helping people move beyond self-imposed limitations and achieve a greater sense of joy, purpose and achievement in their life.”

“Working with people who want to make positive changes in their lives - and who want a coach to challenge them to go beyond what they believe is possible!”

**Table 1 - Quotations reflecting the “witnessing clients change their lives” theme regarding what coaches enjoy about coaching**

***Sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from coaching***

Participants expressed the fulfillment they received when working with clients to help change their lives as a main reason they enjoyed coaching. Through the changes clients were making in their own life, CPCCs felt they, themselves, were living their passion and doing what they loved. Illustrative comments that represent the majority of responses are displayed in Table 2.

“It is fulfilling to participate in the growth of others. My particular assignment has me being fully used.”

“The fulfilling aspect of the work, helping people attain their goals and see beyond their limits.”

“It fulfills me when I see others deeply enjoy and express themselves. Supporting development of others gives meaning to my life.”

“The ability to live the fullness of my Purpose and Passion...that is every single day; I am helping people to grow and evolve into higher consciousness...”

“It is extremely rewarding to play a part in a client’s life that enables them to realize their own strengths and capabilities. I enjoy being a witness to a client’s experience of self-realization.”

“Helping people come into their own, loving the satisfaction of the intimacy of the relationships and loving seeing people with a sense of accomplishment and new life skills.”

“Being the person who witnesses the transformation in people’s lives. I believe there is nothing more rewarding than that.”

**Table 2 - Quotations supporting the “sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from coaching” theme**

### ***Collaborative relationship with clients***

Participants articulated that not only through these collaborative relationships with their clients were they able to witness their clients changing their lives and engage in work they found to be truly fulfilling (as described in the themes above), but the connection and partnerships in and of themselves was another reason they enjoyed coaching. The connection and sense of partnership they experienced with clients fuelled CPCCs' desire to remain as life coaches. Illustrative comments that embody the majority of responses by participants for the following theme are presented in Table 3.

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| <p>“Collaborative relationship with clients is what I love about coaching</p> <p>“Connection to people, forward thinking clients and coaching people who would like to learn about themselves. Positive, engaged work.”</p> <p>“Creating a coaching relationship with my clients that empowers them to be their best.”</p> <p>“It's people centred work. I love working with people who are attracted to personal development. It's great to be immersed in positive forward focused work.”</p> <p>“Connecting deeply with another individual for the purpose of them finding their joy and fulfillment. Freedom of the profession - creativity and pioneering.”</p> <p>“I love working with others, particularly women in transition. The feeling of connection, excitement, seeing people take big risks and going for their personal, career, spiritual aspirations is thrilling.”</p> <p>“Working one on one with committed people that want to make a change.”</p> |
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**Table 3 - Quotations supporting the “collaborative relationship with clients” theme**

### ***CPCCs appreciation of autonomy and flexibility that stem from being a coach***

CPCCs disclosed the desire for professional autonomy as a benefit of being a life coach. Through a sense of autonomy, CPCCs described creating environments that were flexible and creative for clients to explore their issues. Illustrative comments that represent the majority of responses are displayed in Table 4.

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| <p>“Professional autonomy is one reason why I love coaching.”</p> <p>“The flexibility and autonomy in my work. Helping to shift culture in organizations.”</p> <p>“I appreciate having the flexibility to coach wherever I am, allowing me to pursue other unique opportunities, and to coach people from all over the world.</p> <p>“The creativity and variety of the clients. It's never the same twice.”</p> <p>“Independence and actually making a difference with people.”</p> <p>“I love that it is my business and I have the flexibility to manage my time to stay balanced. I love helping people challenge themselves to change, grow and be there best.”</p> <p>“Being an entrepreneur, creating my own style and business, helping others reach their goals.”</p> |
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**Table 4 - Quotations supporting the “CPCCs appreciation of autonomy and flexibility that come from being a coach” theme regarding why they enjoy coaching.**

### *CPCCs enjoy using their skill set*

CPCCs genuinely enjoyed using their skill sets to make a difference in clients' lives. Whether they used only the tools and techniques provided by the Co-Active model or as an adjunct to previous training, CPCCs revealed their skill set provided them with the opportunity to create positive change with their clients. Illustrative comments are provided in Table 5.

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| <p>“Having a professional tool kit to support the personal and professional growth of others<br/>Using my skills and talents to encourage others to remember and revitalize their strengths to live happier and fuller lives.”</p> <p>“The process of coaching, as I was trained, is so positive. It places the coach as a facilitator of another's insights and forward focus. It holds the clients big agenda. It is about more.... more happiness, more success, more fulfillment,... and about less.... less stress, less self-defending behaviours and patterns, less victim... more empowerment.”</p> <p>“Helping others see the bigger potential in themselves. Using coaching as a complementary skill to my consulting practice.”</p> <p>“I enjoy using what I think of as pioneering/innovative tools and skills to help people find their own answers in order to create meaningful and lasting forward movement and positive change. I also enjoy being in relationship with people in this way and being hired to guide them and work WITH them on behalf of their own growth, learning and forward movement.”</p> <p>“Applying the skills learn[ed] to assist others and myself in learning through experience.”</p> <p>“The opportunity to use my intuition and vision in a professional setting in a way that demonstrably moves others forward in achievement of their objectives while enhancing their self-knowledge.”</p> |
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**Table 5 - Quotations supporting the “CPCCs enjoy using their skill set” theme regarding what they enjoy about coaching.**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to discern the reasons CPCCs enjoyed coaching. Given that 98% of CPCCs who participated in the survey had prior professions, it intrigued the authors to try to determine why they would combine coaching with their prior profession or remain in a profession that may not reward them monetarily. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study that investigated why CPCCs enjoyed coaching and respondents rendered an overwhelming number of responses that provided insight into their fascination with and passion for life coaching.

CPCCs described being committed to their profession because it acts, in part, as an outlet for facilitating meaningful changes in the lives of others. Life coaching, in general, is a field where individuals do not have to invest in long undergraduate or graduate degree programs – something many CPCCs already completed before becoming a coach (Newnham-Kanas et al, 2011) – to make a difference in someone's life. Given the prior education level of CPCCs, perhaps coaching served as the perfect adjunct or missing component of fulfillment to their current profession. Specifically, CPCCs (the classification of coach examined in the current study) moved through four levels of required training prior to certification, which can vary in duration, followed by a standardized certification process that takes six months and can be accomplished simultaneously with working full time. However, like any longer-term training program, it can be viewed as a costly process for some; the necessary investment may serve to attract truly committed



individuals to the profession. That commitment translates into profound enjoyment in being a coach which, in turn, may contribute to coaching's success as an effective intervention for individuals struggling with behaviour change (Mantler, 2010; Newnham-Kanas et al.; 2011; 2011; 2008; van Zandvoort et al., 2008; 2009).

Participants in the current study described their passion for being involved in synergistic work that held such value and provided personal fulfillment for them. CPCCs also stressed the importance of the coaching profession's autonomy and resultant flexibility and creativity that was infused into their coaching sessions. True to the Co-Active model of coaching, a number of the themes presented in this paper reflected the client-centered collaboration between coach and client. The literature regarding behaviour change stresses the importance of empowering patients/clients in their change processes (Elfhag & Rossner, 2005; Kausman & Bruere, 2006). Listening to clients and involving them in creating solutions to their issues is one way to empower clients to find solutions that will actually work. When individuals feel they are involved actively in their change process, they are more likely to maintain the changes made (Elfhag & Rossner; Kausman & Bruere). Individualizing treatment is another component to successful behaviour change (Egger, Pearson, & Pal, 2005). These foregoing points speak to the collaboration needed between practitioner and client in order to create an environment for true change to occur and for those changes to be sustainable. Given the enjoyment CPCCs exuded through working co-actively with clients, it is not surprising that empirical studies assessing Co-Active coaching's effectiveness as a behaviour change intervention have garnered such success (Mantler, 2010; Newnham-Kanas et al.; 2011; 2011; 2008; van Zandvoort et al., 2008; 2009). Collaboration whereby the coach works with the client instead of telling clients what to do is the essence of co-activity and at the centre of why CPCCs enjoy coaching and the reason it has been demonstrated as a viable behaviour change tool.

### ***Limitations***

There are several limitations to the current study. It is well known that online surveys only target those individuals with access to a computer and who use regularly the Internet. As well, only those with valid email addresses on the CTI website and those who visit the discussion board received the study invitation. Therefore, only a select group of CPCC's were surveyed. Because this study utilized a Co-Active Coaching discussion board, it is unclear how many participants learned about the study through this modality. This study was limited to only CPCCs. However, it was recommended in previous studies (Grant & Zackon, 2004) to specifically target individual training schools.

### ***Conclusions***

Despite these limitations, results from this study illustrated that life coaching is a profession where its members are truly passionate and committed to the process of facilitating change in their clients' lives. This type of research is essential because it highlights what CPCCs enjoy most about their profession, how this may be used to strengthen training, or attract individuals to the profession. In 2004, 25% of coaches surveyed were trained by CTI (Grant & Zackon, 2004) and currently, there are over 4,800 CPCCs practicing their craft globally. As life coaching research continues to escalate and as pressure mounts toward standardization and professionalization, it is fundamentally important to create a knowledge-base regarding the individuals who are attracted to practicing particular styles of coaching. That is, this could be done for the 60 different schools that currently exist in order to gain an understanding of why individuals chose a particular school and style of coaching to study, what coach characteristics and what characteristics of each school's model contribute to the success of their particular style of coaching. Insight into these areas might serve to assist coaching training schools to continue evolving and assessing their model/method's effectiveness as a behaviour change tool and provide criteria for potential clients to use when choosing a



training school to attend or when selecting their own personal life coach. This information will continue to feed the knowledge-base needed to move the profession forward. This study and the larger study from which these results were removed contribute to and encourage the continued research needed to advance the professional field of coaching.

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