The use of technology to deliver therapeutic services has increased substantially over the past 15 years, yet coaching at a distance has had a surprisingly small uptake.

Jennifer Baker of TheCoachOnline says: "The coach's main concern is about losing the personal one-to-one interaction. Some coaches are not seeing the opportunity of how to use the Internet as a tool to enhance their business."

The rise of Web 2.0 social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn is making it increasingly difficult to ignore client demand for services that fit into modern day-to-day life.

"Integrating your coaching business with the power of the Internet opens up a new world of possibilities. It maximises the coach's time and effort and increases the return on your marketing spend by being able to reach more people," says Baker.

Defining what online coaching looks like is one of the main barriers to take-up. There are many different media, such as videoconferencing, chat, email, online forums and even virtual

Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn? Social media platforms are such an integral part of modern lives that clients are crying out for a more flexible approach to coaching. **Kimberley Gray and Liz Hall** describe the benefits of online coaching

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE

> 66 The need to keep up to speed with modernisation of the profession is evident. Clients of the future won't remember a time without the Internet or smartphones 99

reality such as Second Life, but this plethora of communication channels is its advantage.

Gladeana McMahon, chair of Association for Coaching UK (AC UK) says: "In many cases, distance coaching can be used as part of a blended approach so that a mixture of media are used, such as email, Skype, telephone or chat, as well as face-to-face sessions. This can be very useful for busy executives who find themselves travelling or have little time for face-to-face coaching, yet value the benefits that coaching provides."

Ethical issues

As with any new communication modality, there are implications that must be considered. Although historically less fraught with ethical issues of confidentiality and privacy than other helping professions, client material discussed and communicated in coaching deserves the same respect as its therapeutic counterpart.

Each technology brings with it its own ethical issues, as well as issues of coaching delivery; for instance, when distribution across the Internet is a click away, unencrypted email software has a huge potential for confidentiality breaches; videoconferencing is dependent on strong bandwidth if it is to benefit the coaching process; and seemingly harmless social media introduce real possibilities of dual relationships being formed through 'friending', 'following' or 'linking'.

Research shows that some coaches use distance communication frequently and have done for a long time, for example by telephone[1]. There are many apparent barriers to using technology to conduct or enhance a coaching relationship, such as translating a coaching modality to text or practical issues such as contracting, payment and confidentiality, but none of these are insurmountable.

In 2011, the Online Coach Institute developed a detailed ethical framework to address fears about online coaching and provide guidance on delivery issues[3].

Kate Anthony, co-founder of the Online Therapy Institute and the Online Coach Institute, a training provider and consultancy says: "When done with rigorous ethical consideration and awareness of the impact distance and technology has on the relationship, the benefits to both coach and coachee are immense, from both a practical and theoretical perspective."

However, McMahon says that while coaches need to set clear boundaries, they "shouldn't be put off by potential pitfalls".
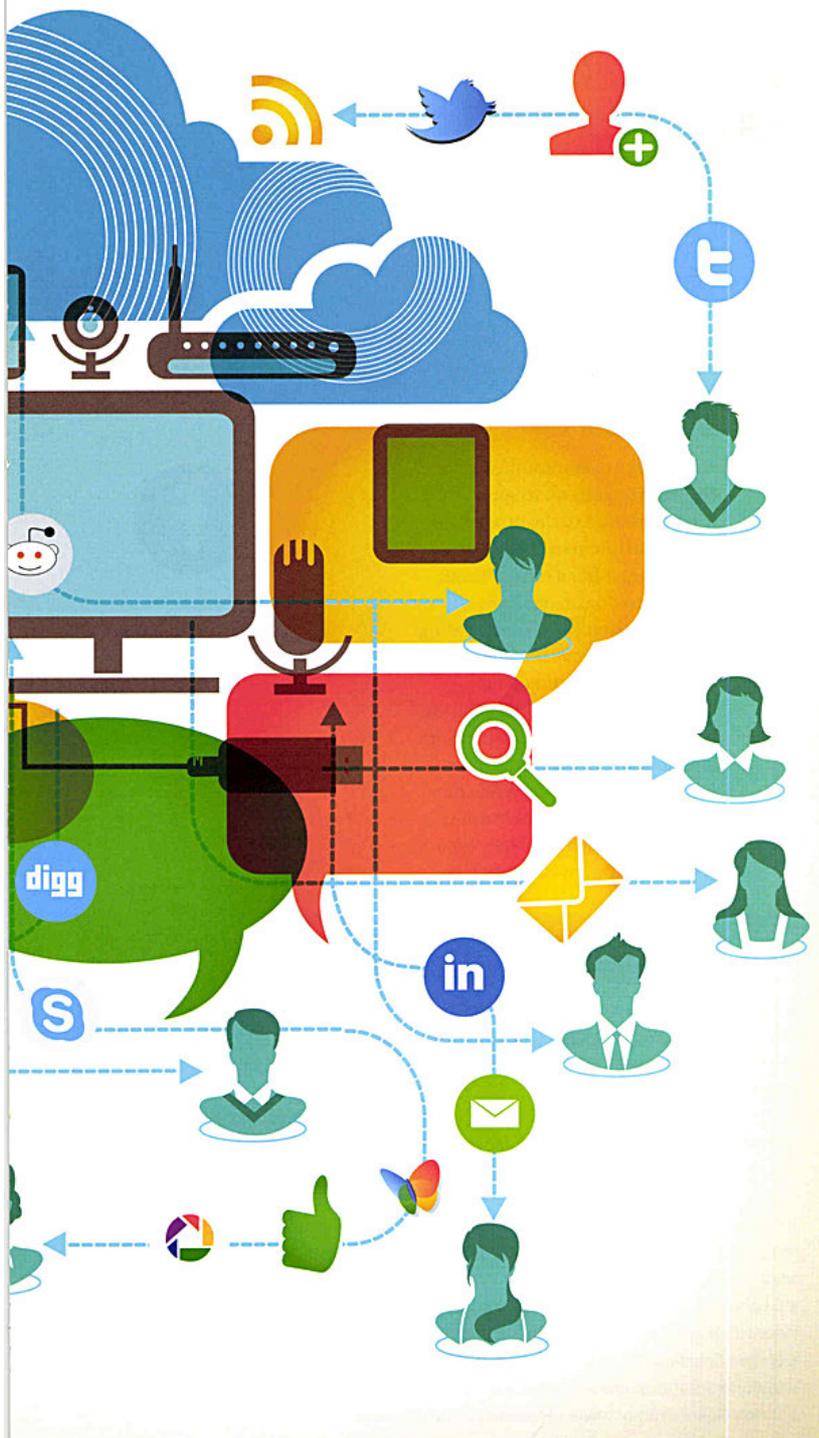
"Many of the pitfalls equally apply to face to face coaching, but it is the informality, immediacy of technology and misunderstandings in the written word that can often lead into difficult territory."

The practical reasons for embracing the use of technology

November/December | Vol 7 Issue 6 © 2012 | www.coaching-at-work.com

COACHING **ONLINE**

in coaching may seem obvious. Overheads are cut in relation to travel and office space, clients with geographical or accessibility problems can still receive coaching, and Internet resources are quickly communicated.

Even training and continuing professional development can be via online courses – for both traditional face-to-face work[1] and online coaching[2]. The flexibility that technology offers us is one of the main benefits of being an online coach.

The Disinhibition Effect

In the Disinhibition Effect[3], clients feel more able to share personal information in distance communication than face to face. In coaching, it can result in fewer sessions and an increased number of clients' needs being met.

Anthony says: "Certain online behaviours can be negative, such as acting out and cyberbullying, and an understanding of the culture of cyberspace needs to be recognised. However, for the most part, the coaching process can be enhanced by the lack of physical presence in a human relationship".

Tools

Many coaching tools and techniques are instantly transferable to cyberspace. A few examples are:
● *Vision Boards online*
Vision board software, such as Vision Board Studio, exists so that clients can create vision boards of their goals on their computers or mobile devices
● *Software platforms*
TheCoachOnline's platform, launched this spring in the UK and Sydney next year, supplements sessions with a facility to allow Q&As to be responded to easily. Coaches can also upload a

Association for Coaching

COACHING **ONLINE**

> ❝ When [a new generation of leaders] work more collaboratively using technology, why would they expect coaching to be any different? ❞

programme, set the price, link it to their website and start generating passive income. The platform allows for audio, video, documents and Q&A, says Baker.

● *Journaling via a blog*
JournalEngine[3] is recognised by the Online Coach Institute as ethically practising journaling software

● *Career and executive role play*
Many organisations now use virtual reality to recreate practical skills such as interviewing and training. Inworld Solutions offers video demonstrations of the use of its platform, and a video of managerial staff training[4]

● *Narrative coaching via 3-D virtual worlds*
Clients can create the endings to their story virtually

● *Twitter*
An effective way to disseminate quotes, resources and information

● *Smartphone apps*
An instantly accessible route to self-coaching and behavioural monitoring to remind the client of progress and improvement

● *Appropriate text messaging*
Examples, such as motivational directives, can keep the client grounded and focused

● *Online psychometric tools*
These can easily be integrated into a coaching programme.

Online coaching can go a lot further than one-to-one communication, developing a rich seam of tools for the client.

Anthony says: "Increasingly, we find that our clients are using

technology to communicate, and the need to keep up to speed with modernisation of the profession is evident. Clients of the future won't remember a time without the Internet or smartphones."

As McMahon says: "We are seeing a new generation of managers and leaders coming through our organisations that embrace the use of technology and the Internet and are using it in all aspects of their work and personal life. When they work more collaboratively using technology, why would they expect coaching to be any different?" ∎

References and further reading

1. S Goss, 'Online coaching research – the future is bright!', in *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, 1(4), pp14-17, 2011

2. J Suler, 'The online disinhibition effect', in *The Psychology of Cyberspace* [online], 2004

3. L Labardee, D M Nagel and K Anthony, 'An ethical framework for the use of technology in coaching', in *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, 1(4), pp24-33, 2011

● D Nagel, K Anthony and G Louw, 'Cyberspace as culture: a new paradigm for therapists and coaches', in *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, 2(4), pp24-35, 2012

● L Labardee, 'The 10 most important coaching web app features', in *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, 2(5), pp37-39, 2012

● Online Coaches/Therapy Institute: **http://onlinetherapyinstitute.com/**

● InWorld Solutions: **www.inworldsolutions.net**

● Vision Board Studio: **www.visualizeyourgoals.com**