

Have you got what it takes to be a coach?

Thousands of people are considering coaching as a career option, attracted by the desire to help as well as the chance to gain a slice of this £multi-million market. Report by **Erika Lucas**

IT SEEMS as if almost everyone you talk to these days has caught the coaching bug.

No self-respecting manager can afford to be without a business coach to help them reach peak performance. The life coach, meanwhile, is fast becoming the latest must-have accessory for stressed executives who need help managing their busy lives.

The industry is literally booming, with an estimated 100k coaches now operating in the UK, either independently, as part of consultancies or within the workplace.

Management development and training organisations like the Chartered Management Institute also provide coaching services to help organisations achieve their strategic goals and improve the performance of individuals and teams.

With interest in the subject at such a peak, it's hardly surprising that many people are now starting to look at coaching as a serious career option. The Association for Coaching estimates that a staggering 10-15k people are signing up for coaching courses every year.

But if you are considering dipping your toe in the water, how can you be sure that coaching is

right for you? How do you negotiate your way through the minefield of courses, qualifications and accreditation schemes that are now available? And at a time when there seems to be a coach round every corner, will it really provide you with a viable, long-term career or a lucrative business opportunity?

Is coaching for you?

Like any bandwagon, it seems some individuals are joining the rush to coach for all the 'wrong' reasons. Some think it's a licence to make money or see it as a way of escaping the shackles of corporate life, while others are influenced by misguided intentions about 'helping' people.

Simon Western, director of the coaching programme at Lancaster University Management School, says people wrongly attracted to the profession tend to fall into one of three camps.

"Often they are managers who are nearing the end of their career and are looking for a finale – and they think that because they have excellent technical skills, it will make them a good coach. But often they are not good listeners, are too directive and don't have the people skills that are needed," he explained.

"You also get wannabe therapists, who want to play at being counsellors without going through the rigour of the training or people who are 'rescuers', which is also not very helpful, as they have an over-abundance of the caring gene and disempower people by always stepping in to help."

Western says there are five key qualities that make for a good coach:

- Good people skills and self-awareness

- Understanding of the dynamics of relationships
- An awareness of 'boundaries'
- An understanding of what makes organisations tick.

According to Professor Cary Cooper, Vice President of the Association for Coaching, an academic background is helpful – if not essential – for coaches who want to help their clients make significant strides.

"It's not just about experience, you need to know something about human behaviour and to have that intellectual insight into the problems you are being confronted with," he says. "It's about knowing the range of behaviours you are going to get, knowing what you are capable of dealing with and what is going beyond your area of expertise."

Prospective coaches also need to think about whether their personality is suited to the role and whether they have the mental stamina to cope with the job.

"Working with someone on a one-to-one basis, for an hour at a time, is very draining work and you need to pace yourself so that you have some recovery time in between, says Elaine Gold, an ex-management coach and MD of Ys Weight.

"If you are the type of person who takes other people's problems on board, you are going to find it hard, because you can't carry around other people's emotional stuff. You do get to hear about the relationship problems and about how people have been treated badly at work, and you will get clients in tears. You have to be able to deal with that professionally with the client, but also deal with it yourself."

Carolyn Free-Pearce, Co-President of the International Coach Federation, suggests that getting your own coach could be a good way of getting an insight into the job.

"Could you see yourself doing what your coach does every working day for many years?" she says. "Does becoming a coach feel like a vocation or just a career change? A lot of coaches find coaching really fulfilling and would still want to coach even if they didn't need to earn a living."

Choosing the right path

Those who do decide to go down the coaching route face a confusing array of courses and qualifications, ranging from 'quick and dirty' tele-classes to fully-fledged masters programmes.

A good starting point is to decide what type of

coach you would like to be. Is executive coaching your bag or does the idea of being a life coach appeal? Or maybe you would be better suited to career coaching or skills coaching in a specialist area?

Professional association websites are a good starting point for information about key coaching skills and recognised course providers (see separate box). Narrow it down to a short-list of possible courses and look closely at the length and depth of study, the mix of academic and practical content and whether the method of delivery will suit your particular learning style.

It's also worth talking to established coaches in your chosen field to see what kind of training they did and how well they feel it has equipped them for their role.

Coaching in action

The other big decision budding coaches will need to make is how they are going to operate. As coaching becomes more widespread, there are likely to be new opportunities for salaried, in house coaches – although the role may not always have this title. And of course coaching is also increasingly becoming a key part of every manager's job.

Catherine Forrester, director of performance and communications at the National Lottery Commission, is about to embark on a two-year career-coaching course, which she believes will have immediate benefit.

"I don't plan to move into an exclusively coaching role in the near term. I think what I learn will be of real benefit right where I am now," she says. "I don't have anything against off-line coaches – far from it – but we shouldn't under-estimate the importance of the on-the-spot manager who works alongside people, day in, day out."

Established careers coach Jo Ouston has some useful advice for those planning to launch out on their own. "My advice is to be very clear about what your market is going to be, what you are offering in terms of knowledge transfer and how that world would expect it to be delivered," says Jo Ouston.

Most experts seem to agree that the best way to get a foot in the door is to stick to an industry you know – and find yourself a specialist niche. **PM**

...and opting to invest in coaching to help you and your team develop a clearer understanding of your roles and responsibilities. The Chartered Management Institute coaching service helps organisations achieve their strategic goals and improve the performance of individuals and teams.

Institute coaches have a wide range of professional expertise and all conform to the professional standards set by the European Mentoring and Coaching Council. For further information call 01536 207373 or e-mail cmd.customerservices@managers.org.uk

Further Information

- Association for Coaching - tel.020 7389 0746; www.associationforcoaching.com
- Coaching Psychology Forum – tel. 020 8293 4114; www.coachingpsychologyforum.org.uk
- European Mentoring and Coaching Council – tel. 077 0023 4683; www.emccouncil.org
- International Coach Federation -

- tel. 087 0751 8823; www.coachfederation.org
- Veronica Cooper - www.thecoachingalliance.co.uk
- Jo Ouston - www.jooustons.co.uk
- Lancaster University Management School - www.lums.lancs.ac.uk
- Elaine Gold, Ys Weight -

