

Life Coaching In Israel: An Overview of Israel's Burgeoning Life- Coaching Industry

Ofer I. Atad, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel

Yair Galily, the Interdisciplinary Centre, Hrzliyya, Israel

Anthony M. Grant, the University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Contact E-mail: oferatad@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract

The aim of the study is to shed light on the process by which life-coaching has become a thriving industry in Israel. By performing an Internet search followed by website analysis, document analysis and in-depth interviews with key people in the industry, we suggest that there is a distorted notion of life-coaching, both from a professional and an ethical perspective. It appears that the Israeli life-coaching industry is too immature and fragmented to have yet developed a standard. The main findings, as well as the industry's future directions and avenues for future research, are presented and discussed.

Key Words: Israel, Life-Coaching, Training, Positive Psychology

Introduction

Life-coaching can be broadly defined as "a collaborative systematic solution-focused, results-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of goal attainment, life experience, self-directed learning and the personal growth of the coachee" (Grant, 2003, p. 254). The aim of the present study is to shed light on the process by which life-coaching became a thriving industry in Israel. The study was supported by Tel-Aviv University and the University of Sydney.

Life-coaching is based on sport, education, psychology and management methodologies (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). Professional life-coaching has clear links to at list five established theoretical traditions: cognitive-behavioral approaches, solution-focus theory, humanistic theory, goal-setting theory and positive psychology (Grant & Cavanagh, 2010). It emerged in a significant way in the early 1990s, and has become a thriving industry with a vast turnover, which has spread worldwide and has become significant driver of professional growth and business development (Blair, 2011; Coutu & Kauffman, 2009). As a relatively new discipline, it is anomalous in that the practical side developed faster than the research and the theoretical field, thereby developing in the reverse order, with "the cart coming before the horse".

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Although there has been impressive development in the field of life-coaching in the last couple of years (Grant, 2011), there is still only a limited amount of quality life-coaching-specific empirical research. Furthermore, while significant progress has been made in the past decade with the introduction of coaching courses at an academic level, e.g. a postgraduate degree in coaching psychology at the University of Sydney (2000), the City University in London, and the University of East London (2008), as well as the establishment of the Special Group in Coaching Psychology (SGCP) as part of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Institute of Coaching at the Harvard Medical School (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007), there is still concern over the inadequate level of some of the commercial life-coaching courses (Grant & O'Hara, 2006).

It has even been claimed that "...Some commercial coach training organizations appear to be little more than coach 'credentialing mills' where, following a few days training and the payment of a suitable fee, one can become a 'Certified Master Life Coach'. It sometimes seems as if every man and his dog offer a coach certification programme" (Grant, 2006, p. 14). According to Grant and O'Hara (2006), many of the commercial life-coaching programs are of short duration and are based on questionable theories and techniques. Unlike many professions (e.g. medicine, psychology, law) where all candidates are required to undertake comprehensive university-level training, many life-coaches receive no coaching-specific training at all.

Grant and Zackron (2004) argue that life-coaches have diverse backgrounds and experience. Therefore, as long as there is no regulatory approval system and no specific entrance requirements or supervision of the content and quality of the coaching programs (Grant & O'Hara, 2006), there will be major concern regarding the quality, effectiveness and even appropriateness of some of the coaching courses available (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004).

Life-coaching is relatively new profession, and is considered by many to be more socially acceptable than psychological treatment. Some may also consider it to be an easy way to make money. The added bonus of no entrance requirements, set standards, regulations, supervision or uniform authorization in life-coaching studies has caused a rush towards a new career as a life-coach (Grant, 2006). The enormous demand for coaching courses has engendered the opening of many schools, most of whose only entrance criteria is the ability to pay the fees, and out of which, every year, coaches emerge in a number exceeding the local industry demand. The situation has reached a stage where it can be said that the main breadwinners in the industry are the schools that teach the coaches, and not the coaches themselves.

The large number of thriving life-coaching training schools was very conspicuous in the United States and Australia about five to ten years ago, but both the number of schools and the number of people showing an interest in the field have leveled off significantly in the last few years. This interesting development was discerned via Google Insights for Search¹, which identifies search trends according to time periods, countries and various search terms. These searches show a significant decrease from 2006 on in the number of internet searches made by Australians and Americans for the term "life-coaching".

¹ On September 27th 2012 Google has merged Google Insight for Search and Google Trends. Google Insights for Search has been absorbed by Google Trends.

These findings suggest that amongst others, the life-coaching industry has undergone a professionalization process based on rising client demand for evidence-based coaching in organizations and the use of personal coaching in medical settings (Moore, 2010). In addition, according to a search conducted via PsycInfo, there has been a dramatic increase in the publication of scientific articles on the subjects of health coaching (from 130 articles between 2000 and 2005 to 623 articles between 2005 and 2010) and executive coaching (from 2300 articles between 2000 and 2005 to over 3500 articles between 2005 and 2010).

The Israeli Coaching Industry

Considering the general situation of the industry, the case of life-coaching in Israel is particularly interesting. Israel has a population of eight million people, and has been an independent state since 1948. Since then, it has had to cope with a number of security, economic and social challenges, as well as the complicated matter of religion and state (Galily, 2007). In its 65 years of independence, Israel has made a variety of economic and academic achievements. Its regime is democratic, and the country is culturally connected to the West, with all the advantages and disadvantages attached to that culture. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that a thriving life-coaching industry would have developed in Israel, as it did in other Western countries.

The history of life-coaching in Israel is a bit vague, but life-coaching is believed to have arrived in Israel in the 1990s via sports people, businessmen and people who had attended EST (Erhard Seminar Training) seminars. The first coaching schools appeared in Israel at the beginning of 2000.

There are currently five organizations in Israel that claim to represent Israeli life-coaches: the Israel Coaching Chamber (ILCC), the Israel Association of Coaching and Solution-Focused Consulting, the Israel Coaching Association, the Israel Association for Coaching Psychology (IACP) and the Israel branch of the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Each organization charges a membership fee and provides its own membership certificate. There have been several attempts to unify the organizations and to create a single organization that represents all coaches, but to no avail; it is obvious that matters such as priority and precedence, prestige, differing goals and economic considerations prevent the possibility of the different organizations coming to any agreement.

In an attempt to regulate life-coaching in Israel, a proposal was made during the 17th sitting of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) for a “Coaching law”, which was formulated after meetings and discussions with several coaching schools and presented for approval on March 31st, 2008^{II}. The law determines who may be considered a coach, and would designate a supervisory governmental system with the authority to provide and revoke coaching certification. It is interesting to note that the proposed law did not deal with supervision over the coaching schools or their teaching curricula within the various organizations. However, the proposal was never raised for final approval and is probably no longer on the Knesset’s agenda.

^{II} "The Coaching Law", Law number (p/3519/17) proposed in the 17th Knesset on March 31st, 2008.

Since there are no binding legal requirements that pertain to coaching certification, life-coaching schools in Israel have significantly increased in number; as of October 2011, more than 80 such schools existed in Israel, each of which trains and certifies its graduates according to its own criteria. As of 2011, over 8000 coaches were estimated to have been certified, with about 20% of them actually practicing in the field (Katz, 2009).

Due to the lack of a uniform ethical definition, a supervising and enforcement body or an organized professional teaching and examination system linked to the various training methods, the life-coaching market has been inundated with people who claim to be coaches, even though they have never received the proper training to work in the field.

Method

The purpose of the current study is to shed light on the process by which life-coaching has become a thriving industry in Israel. To do so, the researchers choose to apply a qualitative design. This line of action is supported by Miles and Huberman (1994), Marshall and Rosman (1999), and Maxwell (1996), all of whom suggest that qualitative research seems best suited to answer questions of description, interpretation and explanation, from the perspective of the study participants. Qualitative research is a process of data reduction that simultaneously enhances the data's meaning. Moreover, qualitative design is appropriate when descriptions that are rich, vivid and deep are of interest (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative research seeks to assess and record participants' perceptions, assumptions, interpretations and presuppositions, as well as to generate propositions.

In order to produce a more complete and contextual portrait of the state of affairs, the researchers used a combination of several qualitative methods, including: internet search, website analysis, interviews with key people in the Israeli coaching industry, and document analysis.

The Internet search

The Internet search utilized a list of coaching schools that the researchers received from the ILCC, bolstered by a focused search on the Internet. In addition to the list of schools obtained from the ILCC, the researchers conducted an Internet search via Google, using the Hebrew terms for the key words: "coaching school", "coaching course", "life-coaching", "coaching diploma" and "coaching certificate". When an entry for a coaching school was detected, the researchers visited the corresponding web site, explored the teaching program and contacted the school by phone. After the identity of the school was confirmed, the school was added to the list of life-coaching schools.

Next, the researchers analyzed the content of coaching school's websites. The researchers developed a standard pattern of analysis to collect data for this article as well as for future articles. The following topics were included: the content of the opening page, a presentation of the school and the head coach, curricula, teaching staff and their credentials, exceptional declarations, entry requirements, fees and specialized programs.

Interviews

Conversational interview is perhaps the most common qualitative method practiced in qualitative research (Lee, 1999). Open-ended or unstructured interviews use a broad range of questions asked in any order according to how the interview develops (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995). Using open-ended questions, as we did in our study, allows the

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interviewers, if they wish, to probe deeper into the initial responses of the respondent to gain a more detailed answer to the question (Kvale, 1996).

In-depth interviews with key figures in the Israeli coaching industry were conducted in order to gain more information regarding their perception and experience of the growth of the life coaching industry in Israel in order to map this growing field. The researchers used several ways to locate the key people in the Israeli coaching industry: a telephone survey; reviewing advertisements in coaching magazines; finding information in daily newspaper articles that focus on life-coaching; searching the web and, finally, snowballing, i.e. asking interviewees to refer us to others who possess similar attributes (Berg, 2007).

The researchers contacted the head coaches of all the schools (in accordance with the ILCC list and the additional internet search), and asked them to recommend those individuals who, in their opinion, were deemed to be the key players and/or founders of the Israeli coaching industry. The following criteria were used in selecting key players in the Israeli life-coaching industry: candidates credentials, past and present influence on coaching professionalism, present role in the coaching industry, experience as coaches and as coaching educators. A final list was drawn up which included ten people. The researchers invited 10 individuals to participate in the study. Of the ten, nine (seven males and two women, aged 52-65) agreed to participate in the study, and interviews were scheduled. Collectively the participants had an average of twenty-five years of coaching/consulting experience, a Bachelor or Master degree, from established coaching schools, and were still working as coaches.

All interviews were conducted by two interviewers (one English speaker and the other bilingual – English and Hebrew) in English, and took an hour and a half on average. The interviewers had an average of ten years of coaching experience and a Master or Ph.D. degree in the field of coaching psychology. Seven interviews were conducted in person, in the interviewee's office or private residence. Due to time constraints, two interviews were conducted via video through Skype.

At the beginning of each interview the researchers explained the purpose of the study, insured confidentiality, thanked the interviewee for his/her cooperation and asked him or her to sign a consent form. The interviewee was then asked to state his or her name, age, and academic and coaching background.

The interviewers facilitated an open, empathetic and accommodating dialogue. In order to gather data on the participants' experience with regards to the Israeli life-coaching industry, interviewees were asked to consider the following topics:

- The evolution of the life-coaching industry in Israel
- Current characteristics of the Israeli coaching industry
- Characteristics the “typical” Israeli life-coach
- Teaching curricula, credentials and ethical issues
- What changes if any should be applied in order to improve the current state of life-coaching in Israel
- The future of the Israeli life-coaching industry

Discussion topics were not restricted and interviewees' were encouraged to discuss and elaborate upon any subject which in their view was deemed to be of relevance and of

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importance to study's theme. The use of an open-question prompted self-reflection and allowed the interviewees themselves to determine which issues they considered to be of higher importance. Following the interviewees' responses, and in order to deepen their understanding with regard to the issues in hand, the interviewers probed them with more specific questions. At the end of the interview the researchers thanked the interviewees and promised to send them a summary of the research findings. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Documents analysis

The researchers surveyed thirty-seven newspaper articles that were published in the main Israeli daily newspapers (Haaretz, Yediot Aharonot and Maariv), and in leading local business journals (TheMarker, Globes and Calcalist) between 2000 and 2010. The articles focused on individual coaches or discuss general topics in the Israeli life-coaching industry.

Analysis

The researchers used Atlas.ti computer software for text analysis of the interview transcriptions. The collected data and participants responses were systematically classified and grouped according to thematic content (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). Due to the different nature of the data collected from the Internet search and interviews, we chose to present the findings in two separate corresponding sections.

Findings

From the Internet search, and web sites and documents analysis, the following trends and findings emerged as to the characteristics of the Israeli life-coaching training industry:

- The average length of a training course is three months, although there are much shorter programs, while the longest course can be as long as nine months (one academic year).
- The cost of a basic coaches training course varies from between 3,500 Shekels and 25,000 Shekels (approximately \$1000-\$8000).
- In general, only a limited number of coaching schools offer a comprehensive program based upon a researched and valid model. Only one school follows the concept of empirical findings and evidence-based coaching. In a large number of schools the researchers found "models" that look and sound impressive, but are actually territorial, rigid and lacking in rigor or validity.
- The research uncovered some unsettling findings with regard to ethics and integrity.
- In almost half of the schools we found declarations that were not proven or based on any evidence. The declarations cover a variety of fields, such as: the credentials of the school, the head coaches' experience ("25 years of experience"), the school's reputation, the evidence for the effectiveness of the models and methodologies used, proclamations about the future success of coaches graduating from the school, and more. In many cases there is confusion over the definitions of coaching, mentoring and consulting.
- In the vast majority of schools there are no entrance requirements for the programs and no prerequisites. Most of the schools lack a valid screening process for selection of the appropriate candidates, and at present it seems that the only screening tool is whether the candidate can pay the tuition fees or not!
- Some coaching schools offer coaching programs that are clearly within the therapeutic (counseling) arena. These programs include: ADHD coaching, ADD

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coaching, coaching for eating disorders, weight-loss coaching, learning disabilities coaching, children coaching and more. One school even offers a combined accreditation of Therapist-Coach. As previously mentioned, these programs are open to the general public, and no previous experience, knowledge or educational requirements is required upon admission. (In some of the schools it appears that the teaching staff itself doesn't have the appropriate standard of education to teach these topics.)

- Only three academic institutions offer elective coaching courses as part of their undergraduate curriculum, and only one college offers a coaching module as part of its graduate program.
- It is interesting to note that during the period of the research we found a small decrease in the number of schools that actively offer life-coaching courses (the Israeli Coaching Chamber listed 86 schools. The Internet search revealed "only" 78 active schools). Further investigation revealed that reasons given for no longer offering the courses were: the swamped coaching market and/or the wish to concentrate on other directions or methodologies.
- A search conducted for the Hebrew term for Coaching via Google Insights for Search showed a significant increase in the search volume made since 2006, and only a minor decrease from 2009^{III}.

Responses from the interviewees reveal four major concerns regarding life coaching in Israel. The first, *defining the profession*. While some define life coaching as "...a process of self-discovery", others relate to it as "*the new psychology*". Whereas several claim that models are short-term and "...very goal related, intended to empower him/her to be connected to her/his vision and target", others speak about long-term intervention where the coachee is "*gaining the ability to be the leader of his life*". The second concern is *the process of becoming a coach*. Most of the interviewees agree that until 2004 most of the coaches had an academic background with at least a Bachelor's if not a graduate level degree. Since 2004 the profession has become an *industry* where more than 100 schools certify thousands of coaches each year. For them, "*professionalism is competing with commercialism*". One of the interviewees asserts that:

Coaching is a trend, a fad, everyone can be a coach so what kind of profession is it if everyone can do it? There is a TV show that everyone is taking their perception from, but it's not coaching, it's mostly guidance, very directed and aggressive, but the guy calls himself a coach (Interviewee A).

Thus, it is not surprising that the third theme emerging from the interviewees is the *bad image of the business*. When asked about their perception of the coaching business, they all agreed that it is "*not good*" or is "*problematic*". They say: "*You throw a stone on the street and you hit a coach*". One of the interviewees explains that:

The level of courses is very low, very few hours, little investment. The attitude is I don't have to study, I was born with it, I have it. ..Belief based coaching

^{III} There can be reservations about these findings due to the low general search volume based on the size of the population in Israel. Low general search volume can prevent the search engine from showing the full data. The term "life-coaching" does not have a corresponding term in Hebrew that can be used exclusively, and the search therefore compared the word *coaching* in English with its Hebrew equivalent.

rather than evidence-based coaching. New age feel... the syllabus is not serious... It's a bit of a joke...I would say maybe 10-15 schools are at a reasonable level out of a hundred (Interviewee E).

And when asked about the situation today, they describe the industry as:

Struggling, can't make a living, the schools are struggling. Out of some 8000 who did life-coaching courses I believe some 20-25% are coaches (full + part-time), but that's just a guess. Many more are presenting themselves as coaches but who knows? (Interviewee C).

Another one adds:

The coaching industry is at a crossroads, a lot of programs have closed. Coaching is looking for its way. In some ways it's in a crisis (Interviewee D).

Looking ahead, the participants believe that if we want to improve life-coaching's position, utilities and public perception, a comprehensive *transformation* in curriculums, set standards and regulations is required. Interviewees were all in agreement that life-coaching needs to be a regulated profession, and even an academic one:

Not just hours. Two years of education including practicum after an undergraduate degree. We don't have enough know-how; we must commit for a long time, like the psychology student who studies for 10 years. Here (in coaching) you study for 50 hours, 200 hours, it's nothing. Cut the number of schools. Develop an academic (degree) program, and fast (Interviewee C).

They all agree that the focus has to be on advancing life-coaching professionalism. It is participants' view that cooperation with one another should be a focal process in Israel, but this isn't easy to achieve because a great deal of competition and ego are involved.

Discussion

People coming for coaching often don't know what they want: light psychology, advice, or some kind of fantasy of a quick strong change. The public is confused. They don't really know what coaching is. There is no differentiation between coaching skills that everyone can learn and use and coaching as a profession (Interviewee D).

The discipline of life-coaching is on the borderline between consulting and therapy, and therefore there is reasonable concern that deep personal issues can surface during the coaching relationship (Cavanagh, 2005). Although coaching is defined as a process meant for "mentally healthy" people, it often happens that a coaching candidate is not clinically suited to take part in the process and should be referred to therapy (Grant, 2007). For example, research shows that 52% of a sample number of people who want to undergo coaching suffer from significant levels of depression, anxiety and stress (Green, Oades & Grant, 2006).

One of the reasons that clinical cases seek help through coaching is that coaching is considered to be more socially acceptable. Although coaches and therapists can use similar methods such as goal setting and solution-focused techniques, therapists have the

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qualifications and the ability to adopt the right pace and intensity for clinical patients. Coaches should be accountable for recognizing the limits of their qualifications and knowledge, and for making correct assessments of each and every client before beginning the coaching process. Coaches are not therapists, and therefore are not required to make clinical assessments, but they must be knowledgeable enough to identify clinical cases that need to be referred onward, know how the treatment referral system works, and be informed about who specializes in which of the various different clinical problems (Spence, Cavanagh & Grant, 2006). Coaches facing matters pertaining to mental health (whether knowingly or not) could, without the appropriate knowledge and qualifications, cause the client considerable harm (Berglas, 2002). Most of the Israeli life-coaching schools do not have even the most basic training in matters of mental health that could prepare future coaches for the problems they might face in terms of evaluation and referral to therapy.

An additional problem that is already materializing in Israel is that there is a distorted notion of coaching, both from a professional (what is coaching?) and an ethical perspective. This is due to the fact that anybody who wants to can call him or herself a coach, or can take a superficial course that qualifies him or her to practice. One of the interviewees claims that:

I have a very harsh opinion about the Israeli industry. Many of those who started the schools recognized a wonderful business opportunity. They went on the Internet and just translated material from English to Hebrew. Unfortunately, as opposed to the pioneers who saw an evolutionary possibility, they saw a business opportunity. I was the first to be interviewed on the subject (of coaching), there was a lot of exposure in the media. It started to develop in a charlatan way but over the years these charlatans learned the profession and developed. (Interviewee B).

At the same time, however, “...there are many that call themselves coaches without studying, because they were organizational consultants, so they said ok I’m a coach...” (Interviewee C).

When one of the interviewees was asked if there is a theoretical basis to his work, he answered without hesitation that it was based on a “...Methodology that he developed” (Interviewee D). This conduct is problematic and detrimental to hundreds of Israeli coaches who have the appropriate background, knowledge and qualifications, and who have invested in developing professional and ethical practices. Moreover, any coach (or person) can freely open a life-coaching school and start teaching. At present there is a limited number of serious, well-grounded life-coaching schools in Israel. This raises an ethical concern regarding duty of care in an unregulated industry.

It seems that there are several reasons for the current situation in the Israeli coaching industry, beginning with the way the profession arrived into the country. In Europe, America and Australia, coaching was at its peak five to ten years ago, at which time it was only just beginning to burgeon and take off in Israel. It has, therefore, only now reached its maximum capacity. The Israeli tendency towards entrepreneurship, as well as the pursuit of a profession that is both satisfying and pays well, brought about a profusion of life-coaching schools and certified life-coaches that was completely disproportional to the size of the country’s population. This, in turn, led to occasional standard deviations, inappropriate certification of coaches and the opening of life-coaching schools without the professionalism required and by people who were not competent in terms of managing educational and training

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establishments. The bottom line is that there is a far larger number of life-coaches than the demand, and it seems that the life-coaching schools are the ones making the money and not the coaches, who are the ones providing the services.

Future research should keep track of the Israeli life-coaching industry maturation process, and analyze it in comparison to similar processes in other countries. Moreover, lessons from the Israeli life-coaching experience could be used to prepare for the penetration of life-coaching or other unregulated professions in other countries around the world. The Israeli experience may be applied to a-priori structuring of regulations, standards and guidelines, suitable for local market demands and in adherence with international standards. These standards may cover ethical, professional, educational, certification illegibility, unionization, financial, certification authority and regulatory concerns.

Concluding Remarks

There have been attempts to regularize the matters discussed above, and action has been taken by the ILCC to standardize the certification system and the criteria of life-coaches. However, there does not seem to be cause for optimism as to the unification of the various coaching organizations and the formation of an umbrella organization for all the life-coaches in Israel. It appears that the Israeli life-coaching industry is too immature and fragmented to develop a united standard, a situation that can be seen in some other countries, for example Norway (Svaleng & Grant, 2010). There also seems to be little chance that a law regulating coaching in Israel will be implemented in the visible future.

The researchers of this paper believe that as the market and the coaching consumers mature, the industry will develop in a manner similar to that observed in the rest of the world: the number of schools will decrease, there will be more demand for coaching according to researched models and clients will no longer be satisfied with uncertified programs and/or unqualified professionals. Another important step will be to make coaching an academic subject to be studied in colleges and universities as part of their psychology and management studies.

It seems that the way to position coaching in Israel will be via the education track and via the maturing of coaching consumers, and if we go by past experience in other countries, this will probably take a few more years.

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Ofer I. Atad, M.Sc., M.A. is a coach and a Ph.D candidate at Tel-Aviv University. Ofer holds an M.A. degree in "Psychology of Coaching" from the University of Sydney, Australia.

Yair Galily, Ph.D is an applied sociologist, mass media and management researcher and Senior lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Centre, Herzliyya and the Zinman College, Wingate Institute, Israel.

Anthony Grant, Ph.D. is a coaching psychologist, founder and director of the coaching psychology unit at the School of Psychology at the University of Sydney, Australia.