

Practices Employed in Coaching Relationships:
The Difference Between Face-to-Face and Virtual Deliveries

Tara Moore

University of the Rockies

School of Organizational Leadership

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Abstract

This dissertation study explored the experiences of coaches who are currently working with their coachees in a virtual environment. It was the aim of this research to explore the current practices of coaches and determine if these practices are different between face-to-face and virtual deliveries. The qualitative research collected through 16 interviews and the subsequent data analysis phase supported that the practices of virtual coaches are different, even if only slightly, than those in face-to-face engagements. This study found that although the participants did not report using different practices, whether working face-to-face or virtually, the conclusions of this study indicate that they are in fact using a different set of skills between the deliveries. The final discussion in this work details the distinctions between the deliveries.

Chapter I: Introduction

Although not an entirely new concept, coaching has continued to become a widely recognized strategy used in many organizations when addressing performance improvement strategies, as well as leadership and executive development initiatives (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Corporate Leadership Council, 2003; Paige, 2002). The popularity and reliance on coaching has been initiated through both one-on-one deliveries and group settings (Burdett, 1998). Coaching today is taking on a variety of new and innovative forms, deliveries, and definitions in order to keep up with the rapid pace of organizational change and development.

Although there is no uniform or standard definition used to define coaching, this study summarized coaching as a professional engagement where the individual being coached (herein after referred to as the coachee or client) has the objective to improve performance or work towards the achievement of professional goals and development (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Boyatzis, 2002; Dwyer, n.d.). This study does not limit coaching to merely coaching of executive level employees but rather all individuals who have a vested interest in the professional and performance improvement related benefits that can be achieved through working with a qualified and capable coach.

Today more than ever, organizations are in need of cost-effective and convenient ways to assist their training efforts in developing the skills and abilities needed to most effectively lead, manage, and even participate in the complex and ever changing business environments for which they currently work. According to e-Coaching Associates (2011), today's employees need enhanced training, such as individual coaching, in developing their skills in areas, such as the ability to deal with difficult people, running a meeting, effective collaboration, setting goals, prioritizing, and overcoming obstacles to change. Organizations are finding that internal or on-

the-job training alone is not enough to cut the ongoing support that employees require for the further development of their skills and abilities (e-Coaching Associates, 2011). The supporting study conducted by e-Coaching Associates (2011) maintained the argument for continued employee training and or development programs, such as individual coaching, by finding that those employees who participated in an additional coaching engagement increased their productivity by 85-90%, whereas those participating in an internal training program without additional coaching only increased productivity by 20-25%. Although the productivity increase of employees through internal training was noticeable, it was not comparable to the results produced by employees who received coaching services.

The results of a Corporate Leadership Council study in 2003 concluded that coaching is best used as a performance improvement tool to enhance management capabilities, such as one's confidence in experimenting with new approaches, one's shifting to an enabling style of an approach to management, improvement in one's ability to deal with conflict, and increasing one's ability to delegate tasks thus freeing up more time for strategic development and planning tasks. Ozkan (2007) also concluded that most coaching relationships are initiated due to the need for performance improvement and skill enhancement in midlevel managers with promotional potential.

Studies of multinational corporations ranked coaching as one of the top 10 learning methods utilized in talent management initiatives and are expecting their coaching investments to continue increasing in the coming years (Bennett & Bush, 2009). Organizations strongly advocate for coaching because they believe the benefits outweigh the costs. The benefits organizations are experiencing after investing in coaching include an identifiable increase in the establishment and maintenance of professional relationships and networks, promoting positive

feedback and conversation, and increasing internal and external employee collaboration (Rossett & Marino, 2005).

The benefits of coaching are becoming so widely recognized that organizations are now investing in and expanding the services as an important strategy for corporate leadership development and change (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Bush, 2004; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). Historically, coaching was used primarily as a tool to work with high level executives; however, now we see coaching moving outside the executive offices and throughout the entire organization (Ahrend, Diamond, & Webber, 2010; Bennett & Bush, 2009). In addition to the trend moving outside the executive offices, organizations are now investing in coaching as a mechanism for continued improvement more so than a historical means of addressing correction or transition (Charbonneau, 2002; Sherpa Coaching Survey, 2012).

Companies are beginning to train their management teams in coaching skills in efforts to promote an overall coaching culture where continual learning and development are the norm (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Bush 2004; Sherpa Executive Coaching, 2012). According to the corporate participants in the 2012 Sherpa Coaching survey, 1 in 3 organizations already have programs in place that teach coaching skills to managers and executives, while almost as many participants reported that they have similar programs in the startup or design mode. This survey also found that 1 in 4 organizations have coaching-based programs available for teams, whereas the other participants reported that they also have coaching programs in startup or design mode.

The expansion of coaching services outside the executive offices brought on one of the first major changes into the field of coaching. Outside of coaching becoming more accessible to a larger audience, technology and the rapid pace of technological change have also added a whole new playing field to the arena and have drastically altered the way people and

organizations work. As a result of lowered prices on computer equipment and accessories, increased accessibility and affordability to computer-based services, such as high-speed internet and more user friendly products, once traditional, face-to-face coaching interactions and even telephonic communications are being replaced by computer-based exchanges, such as e-mails, instant and text messaging, video conferencing, and desktop conferencing (Charbonneau, 2002 “E-coaching Enhances Executive Experience”, 2006).

Although, according to the Sherpa Executive Coaching survey (2012), face-to-face coaching still holds the largest percentage of the service delivery (41%); technological communications are gaining momentums. Sherpa Executive Coaching reported that telephone coaching is still the second most relied upon delivery at 31%, whereas webcam services are at 14% , followed by e-mail and instant messaging at 11%, and live high definition teleconferencing at 3%. The Sherpa Executive Coaching survey further concluded that as the live high definition teleconference equipment becomes more readily available, this delivery will eventually overtake all, including face-to-face delivery methods. With more and more people gaining access to technology based services, one can assume that the historical ways of conducting face-to-face business relationships may be transformed to keep up with technological advancements of today’s society.

General Statement and Study Definitions

As we continue to move into a more technology driven era, traditional work practices and environments are beginning to change at a more rapid pace than ever before. Corporations and executives are seeing the benefits that can be achieved through expanding outside the local office through increased utilization technologies, such as the telephone, e-mails, instant and text messaging, and video conferencing, to name a few. Adding access to these and other

technologies has allowed workforces to begin to produce results across boundaries of time, space, and even culture (Featherstone, 2004).

Coaching as a field has also begun expanding its reach through the focus on technology based delivery or what this study will call virtual coaching (Ahrend et al., 2010; Caudron, 1998; Dwyer, n.d.; Rossett & Marino, 2005). Traditional coaching was once a practice where face-to-face communication was the preferred method of delivery between a coach and a coachee. Over the years, the delivery has shifted to utilizing telephonic communications in addition to face-to-face meetings or eliminating the face-to-face meeting altogether and working strictly over the telephone. Now after experiencing the successes of lessening the reliance on face-to-face communication and more actively utilizing the telephone, many coaching engagements are expanding the reach even further through supplementing telephone engagements with other virtual means, such as video conferencing, instant and text messaging, and e-mail exchanges to name a few.

Much like the definitions and delivery of traditional face-to-face coaching, the delivery of virtual coaching can in itself take on many different formats and delivery designs. Virtual coaching today (Ahrend et al., 2010) is known by a number of terms and deliveries including telephone coaching, e-coaching (Dwyer, n.d.; Rossett & Marino, 2005), distance coaching (Rossett & Marino, 2005), computer-mediated coaching, Internet coaching, e-mail coaching, online coaching, and cyber coaching, to name a few. Through reviewing research, although these terms are oftentimes used interchangeably, by definition they each have a somewhat distinct delivery format or requirement that makes each slightly distinct from the others. For example, by definition, e-coaching is “a partnership where all or most of the learning takes place using e-mail, either as the sole medium or supplemented by other media” (Clutterback &

Hussain, 2010, p. 4). Per this definition, e-coaching is primarily different than the broad term of virtual coaching in that it emphasizes e-mail communications more so than any other media and does not include telephone coaching. Likewise, the numerous terms and deliveries can be differentiated from one another based on the time delivery of services. Some deliveries, such as telephone coaching and video conferencing and other chat communications, happen in a synchronous manner, meaning that they occur in real time. This form of delivery has been found to be most beneficial to the participants who are looking for an immediate social exchange and when looking to ask and answer questions in a real time manner (Hrastinski, 2008).

On the other hand, e-mail or e-coaching, typically happens asynchronously and is also a very viable and popular form of communication; asynchronous communications can be exchanged amongst the participants even when both are not online at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous communication has become popular among busy individuals because it makes it possible for them to log into the e-environment at any time and exchange communications. Likewise, asynchronous delivery can benefit its participants by allowing more time for individuals to develop and refine their contributions, and this can, in turn, be more considered and thoughtful compared to synchronous communication that somewhat requires an immediate response (Hrastinski, 2008).

Another way to distinguish between the various deliveries of virtual coaching is to note the ability to have audio and visual communications integrated into the delivery without having to be face-to-face. For example, video conferencing communications, such as Skype and Facetime, allow the participants to not only experience the sessions visually but also to hear audio communications in a synchronous manner. Although not a complete list of delivery possibilities, Table 1 below offers a visualization of the differentiations between options of

coaching delivery. For the purposes of this study, all options except “Face-to-Face” are considered to be “virtual coaching.”

Table 1

Differentiations Amongst Coaching Delivery Types

Name of Delivery	Visual	Audio	Computer Mediated/Based	Asynchronous	Synchronous
Face-to-face	X	X			X
Telephone Based		X			X
Video Conferencing	X	X	X		X
E-mail			X	X	
Instant Messaging and Chat			X		X
Online Discussion Boards/Blogs			X	X	

Increased accessibility to technology has allowed for more entry into coaching relationships for both the coaches and coachees. This increased access to coaching services has heightened the need for current research to be conducted empirically that specifically looks at the experiences of coaches delivering their services primarily in a virtual delivery. While the topic of coaching has been studied empirically for many years and evaluated from many different angles, there is an identifiable gap in the research as it relates directly to the experiences of coaches in virtual environments. Research comparing the practices of face-to-face coaching and virtual coaching is, too, very limited. Understanding the differences in delivery will serve as yet another supporting aspect to the standardization of coaching policies, practices, and procedures.

This study explored the experiences of coaches that currently work with coachees through virtual delivery; the research seeks to contribute to the general field of coaching by

looking specifically at the experiences of coaches who use virtual delivery as the primary communication channel to build and manage their coaching processes and relationships. The research is also meant to explore the specific experiences and practices used by coaches in the establishment and maintenance of a cohesive coaching relationship using technology. This study further looked at how these coaching practices may be different among those coaches working virtually rather than face-to-face.

It is important for this study to first create clear definitions of the terms that were used throughout the study. As previously stated, many terms were used throughout the current literature to define the same concept, thus it is important for this study to define the concepts by using consistent terms. The current study used the following terms and definitions:

- **Coachee:** The individual receiving the coaching services
- **Coaching Relationship:** A professional collaboration built on a foundation where an equal exchange of trust and rapport between the coach and coachee is the norm.
- **Virtual Coaching:** A coaching service/delivery that occurs through technological means such as telephone, e-mail, instant or text messaging, or teleconferencing. Any delivery that is not done face-to-face.

Statement of the Problem

Advancements in communications and information technology have created new opportunities to build and manage virtual relationships and teams (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002). Although technology has allowed a whole new working paradigm to be considered in coaching, it has also presented many new challenges. Although the study did not specifically look at coaching, Kirkman et al. (2002) found some challenges specific to virtual teams that can be related to virtual coaching. When looking at the challenges of virtual teams,

Kirkman et al. (2002) surveyed executives on 65 virtual teams to identify the key challenges that present themselves during the establishment, maintenance, and ongoing support of virtual based teams; the challenges found in Kirkman et al. (2002) included the ability to establish a cohesive relationship, built on trust and rapport, between two (or more) individuals that have never met one another.

Kirkman et al. (2002) also found that virtual based teams face added difficulties in selecting participants who have the appropriate balance of technological and interpersonal skills and abilities that are required to be most productive in the virtual environment. Again, although the Kirkman et al. (2002) study was not specifically evaluating a coaching specific team, a similar comparison can be made of the relationship established between a coach and coachee, which for the purpose of the engagement, the two must become an effective team.

Because the accessibility and cost effectiveness of virtual coaching is becoming increasingly attractive to many organizations, it is important to explore the current experiences and delivery styles of virtual coaches and examine whether or not these styles are the same or different regardless of delivery style. This is an important concept to explore as the increased access to virtual deliveries is driving the question as to whether virtual relationships can be as productive and purposeful as previous face-to-face coaching experiences through face-to-face coaching.

Statement of Purpose

The new paradigm of virtual coaching presents many questions. Of particular interest to this researcher is exploring the current trends of virtual coaching and identifying the key practices that relate to the coach's ability to establish a collaborative and purposeful relationship with a coachee through virtual communication. The specific purpose of this research study was

to explore the experiences and practices of coaches who are currently working with coachees through technology. The practices used by virtual coaches during the establishment and maintenance of the relationship were a major focus.

This basic interpretive qualitative study was designed to collect and analyze data on virtual coaches' experiences through interviews with coaches who have experience in coaching through a variety of technologies. Common themes were identified pertaining to the specific experiences of coaches, who at some point have utilized technology as the primary delivery method of their coaching engagements. The primary research question asked in this study was: "In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?" The specific research sub question was: "How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?"

Although not a main focus of the research, the study did explore amongst the coaches their definition of virtual coaching. This researcher felt this to be an important exploration as the current literature offers so many variations to what practices and deliveries are within the parameters of virtual coaching. Some researchers eliminate the telephone from inclusion in the virtual coaching definition, while others say telephone exchanges are still considered virtual. This study explored the definition of virtual coaching amongst its participants to develop an understanding of what the current field defines as virtual coaching.

The results of this study may assist coaches and coachees in their decisions pertaining to the usage of technology in their coaching relationships and may provide insight and some concrete recommendations into how relationships can be established and maintained in a virtual coaching engagement. The results of this study may be used in informing future researchers which may be focused on standardizing the practice of virtual coaching and delivery.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The following chapter provides a general overview of coaching beginning with a brief literature review pertaining to the following areas: discussion of coaching in general, the delivery of coaching, the coaching relationship, and additional practices recommended for positive outcomes. The following section will briefly discuss what coaching entails before moving into the literature pertaining to the delivery of coaching and the importance of relationship building in coaching engagements.

What is Coaching?

Executive coaching is a relatively new and developing field of practice and is the topic of many discussions between practitioners, researchers, and even consumers. As can be supported by the recent influx of coaching literature and research, the popularity of coaching has seen a rapid growth over the last 15 years (Augustinijnen, Schnitzer, & Esbroeck, 2011). Although there is not a standard definition of coaching, there are a few major themes that are common across the board; the numerous definitions can be considered a reflection of the different interests of those entering the field as coaches as well as those purchasing the services (Augustinijnen et al., 2011).

The multiple definitions range from defining coaching as purposeful and planned interactions between the coach and the individual being coached (Rossett & Marino, 2005) and a tool used to offer a forum for employees to have a safe and personalized environment to advance their personal and professional abilities (Olivero et al., 1997). Coaching can also be defined as a series of outlined conversations that are focused on the discovery and subsequent actions that will help the coachees achieve their desired outcomes or goals that most typically include the

objective to improve or enhance management skills, performance, and career development (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Bush, 2004; Orenstein, 2006).

Coaching is intended to provide continuous and individualized support for individuals in an effort to further develop the competencies associated with good leadership and performance (Finger, 2007). Unlike internal employee training that typically focuses on developing the technical skills required to perform specific job functions, coaching focuses on the relationship between the individual and the coach and their ability to achieve changes in the individuals thinking, attitudes, and behaviors (Finger, 2007).

Coaching is a confidential, highly personal learning process (Witherspoon & White, 2003) that is typically designed to bring about effective action and personal growth for the individual being coached. Coaching is found to be more complex than other forms of organized learning, such as workshops and classroom learning, because it is individualized to the individual and his or her unique knowledge base, learning pace, and learning style (Witherspoon & White, 2003).

Dwyer's (n.d.) article supported the idea that the goal of coaching is to facilitate individual growth and potential by assisting the coachee in identifying needs, developing goals, building strategies to meet these goals, and providing support and encouragement in order to ensure these goals are being met. Olivero et al.'s (1997) article further explained coaching by highlighting the importance of coaching interactions because these interactions can emphasize and enhance goal setting, collaborative problem solving, and also decrease supervisory involvement.

Coaching has been most commonly found to be a tool used to enhance performance and effectiveness by eliminating behaviors that are undesirable in the workplace and in the

individual's current position (Bennett & Bush, 2009; Liljenstrand & Nebeker, 2008). Ozkan (2007) found that coaching has also proven to be a benefit in situations where the individual is a high potential employee and where coaching gets them better positioned for future promotions and responsibilities (Bennett & Bush, 2009). According to Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) and Ozkan (2000), the latter example, where coaching is a tool used to work with high potential employees rather than performance improvement, seems to be the new target population within coaching.

Bennett and Bush (2009) found that a key focus of coaching should be on the individual and how he or she will soon achieve his or her professional objectives. With the assistance of the coach as a facilitator, it is presumed that through the coaching relationship, the individual will become more self-directed in his or her future learning and development and improve his/her overall professional and personal performance (Bennett & Bush, 2009).

Potential benefits of coaching in general. Through effective coaching, the development of leadership and performance competencies can help the organization motivate employees, boost productivity, and stimulate employee morale and retention. Coaching has been found to help executives understand themselves and gain better insight into others; build committed, engaged, and proactive workforces; and optimize decision making, team performance, and innovation (Finger, 2007). As summarized numerically by Finger (2007), benefits received from a coaching program were reported as an increase in the quality of direct report and supervisor relationships by 70%, increase in teamwork by 67%, increase in the quality of working relationships amongst peers by 67%, and an overall increase in job satisfaction by 52%.

Rossett and Marino's (2005) study found that the above mentioned benefits as well as numerous others were achieved through coaching; specifically, this study found a fourfold

increase in productivity and performance amongst employees who followed up their initial job training with 8 weeks of one-on-one executive coaching. The study by Rossett and Marino (2005) found that coached employees show greater improvements in performance than did their non-coached counterparts. Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) found the benefits of coaching to include increased confidence, feeling good, positivism, a feeling of value, and improved career.

Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) also conducted a study that looked specifically at coaching and explored the potential benefits of a successful coaching relationship. They, too, found numerous benefits for which can be obtained through coaching. The benefits found by Liljenstrand and Nebeker (2008) included (from most frequently occurring to less): (a) adapting better to change, (b) balancing work and personal life, (c) building trust in relationships, (d) clarifying and pursuing goals, (e) improving communication, (f) improving delegation skills, (g) improving listening skills, (h) improving strategic planning skills, (i) improving technical skills, (j) increasing sales, and (k) managing career.

The Delivery of Coaching

In addition to the lack of a universal definition of coaching is the lack of a standardized coaching model and delivery format (Augustinijnen et al., 2011). The interactions between the coach and the coachee can take numerous forms and can be delivered through a variety of media. Traditional coaching was once designed around the face-to-face interactions between the coach and the coachee; however, with the increased access to technology based communication and resources, coaching services have expanded into a whole new arena. Some view this as a positive movement into a more technology driven area; however, according to the Sherpa Coaching Survey conducted in 2012, coaches who have routinely delivered their services face-

to-face are reluctant to fully support technology as a viable means to conduct a coaching relationship.

For years, outside of face-to-face interactions, coaches have primarily relied on the use of landline telephonic communications to reach coachees as a less expensive alternative to more costly in person sessions. The 20th century advancements in computer mediated and virtual technology, such as wireless and high speed internets, e-mail communications, and instant messaging, as well as conference and video calling, have all had a considerable impact on the traditional face-to-face delivery of coaching services (Sherpa Coaching Survey, 2012). This shift in delivery is represented by the Sherpa Coaching Survey, which found that 40% of coaching delivery is still done face-to-face, followed closely by 31% over the telephone, and 28% through other virtual means, such as webcam, e-mail, and video conferencing.

Regardless of this shift in coaching delivery options, the Sherpa Coaching Survey (2012) also found that both coaches and coachees (participating in their study) still preferred face-to-face versus telephone or virtual delivery as the most effective form of coaching delivery. This study found that coaches with more experience tend to prefer face-to-face delivery; however, those more recently entering the profession show a slight preference in using virtual means to communicate. Even though the Sherpa Coaching Survey found that the preference still remains to be face-to-face communication, studies (Marino, n.d.; Goldsmith & Morgan, 2003) have shown that the effectiveness of virtual coaching, specifically through telephone exchanges, is comparable to that found in face-to-face deliveries.

In the study conducted by Goldsmith and Morgan (2003), the results of the effectiveness of virtual coaching, specifically telephone sessions, was examined and compared to the results of effectiveness in face-to-face coaching. This study was able to support that “there was no clear

indication that either method of coaching superior to the other” (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2003, p. 5). The evidence of virtual coaching effectiveness could be a driving force behind the shift in coaching delivery.

Defining Virtual Coaching. Like the definition of coaching, in research and practice, virtual coaching takes on numerous definitions and deliveries as well. Historically, telephone coaching was considered the primary means to conduct a virtual coaching engagement. Due to the rapid pace of technological change, telephone coaching is now only one of the many deliveries that can be considered under the virtual coaching delivery umbrella. For example, virtual coaching is also used interchangeably in some research as e-coaching, cyber coaching, or distance coaching (Clutterback & Hussain, 2009; Dywer, n.d.; Marino, n.d.). These are relatively new terms within the field of coaching and can broadly be defined as any form of coaching that takes place through technology and distance communication methods.

Although some research uses the terms interchangeably, others take the stance differentiating e-coaching from the broader scope of virtual coaching stating e-coaching is more specific to the strategic use of Internet resources moving the coaching process completely online whereas virtual coaching encompasses a vaster variety of media such as the telephone (“Coaching Goes Electric”, 2006). This specific definition is further emphasized by stating that e-coaching, unlike other deliveries of virtual coaching, such as telephone sessions, uses electronic means as the primary form of communication within the relationship, rather than merely a channel which can be used for supplementary tasks or follow-up (“Coaching Goes Electric”, 2006). Although the research conducted by Hamilton and Scandura (2002) was focused on e-mentoring rather than coaching, their definition of the “e” concept of delivery also described it as being the process of using computer mediated delivery as the primary form of

communication within the relationship; internet, e-mail, chat, web, and message boards are the communication channels that are included in this particular definition.

Whether telephone communication is included in the definition or not, virtual delivery brings with it two separate categorical deliveries: asynchronous and synchronous. Synchronous tools are those such as instant messenger services, audio and video teleconferencing, and webinars. Asynchronous tools are those deliveries such as e-mail, online discussion groups, dedicated online coaching platforms, and automated self coaching programs. The synchronous deliveries are more reflective of face-to-face coaching sessions where the coach and coachee are available at the same time; both are present and the coaching is happening in an interactive delivery format, offering immediate response and feedback (McNamara, 2011). Asynchronous tools are most commonly being used as supplementary communication channels that allow the coach and client to have access to each other between more formal coaching sessions (McNamara, 2011). Asynchronous tools allow the individual to interact directly with the content presented in the coaching engagement via a technology, which again maximizes the engagements flexibility in timing and allows the individual to have more control over pace, schedule, and location (Edwards, 2009).

As a form of synchronous delivery, the telephone is still being utilized in most coaching sessions. and it is believed to be the essential form of communication that must take place to promote meaningful contacts between the coach and the coachee (Dean, 2011). Dean believed that virtual coaching relationships are not defined by the exchanges over the Internet, e-mail, or fax but rather the live, interactive communication that exists through telephonic conversation. He believed that asynchronous resources, such as the Internet, e-mail, and fax, are good forms of

communication to be used between sessions but does not support them as the primary delivery of virtual based coaching without regular telephonic contact (Dean, 2011).

Rossett and Marinos' (2005) research supported that the increased access to the Internet has opened the doors to expanding the concept of virtual coaching as a model that moves the coaching process to an online modality and often times completely eliminates the need for face-to-face communications or telephone phone conversations. Rossett and Marino (2005) and "Coaching Goes Electric" (2006) disagreed with Dean (2011) as their research found that the Internet and other online tools should be supported as the fundamental form of communication in the coaching engagements and not an afterthought.

Potential benefits specific to virtual coaching. Virtual coaching has become a convenient and cost effective way to achieve the performance and personal development objectives as identified both by the individual being coached and even possibly their organization (Ahrend et al., 2010). Virtual coaching has begun allowing coaching relationships to thrive at any time and from any place through the reliance on the telephone, webinars, e-briefings, instant messaging and other forms of media ("Coaching Goes Electric", 2006; Dwyer, n.d). As found by Hakim (2000), Billings (2009), "Coaching Goes Electric" (2006), and Kerfoot (2010), virtual coaching has become an accessible and practical way to provide continuity for learning, change, and growth at any time and from any place all while increasing the possibility that development initiatives do not need to disrupt your workflow.

According to Marino (n.d.) and Feldman (2002), virtual coaches can be better positioned to access electronic support systems such as knowledge bases and data repositories in a real time manner, while in the coaching moment. Face-to-face coaches have access to these channels as well, however when not working out of their offices they may not have immediate access to

these resources in that particular moment. Having immediate access to these and other electronic support systems may leverage the virtual coaches' ability to enhance the coaching moment by adding outside support and learning tools.

Some research (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2003; Marino, n.d.) argued that virtual communication can be just as effective and even maintains that in some instances, eliminating face-to-face communication can be more effective. Clutterback and Hussain (2009) stated the immediate feedback and conversation flow of face-to-face communication can come off as "relatively shallow and unconsidered" (p. 12). The style of face-to-face communication can almost require that both parties keep the communication and conversation flow at a steady pace and fosters a need to respond or react quickly to the immediate topic. When you remove this "pressure" from your communication, as some forms of virtual communications do, it allows all parties more time to formulate and detail their thoughts and responses prior to including them in the conversation.

Marino (n.d.) and "Coaching Goes Electric" (2006) supported the ability of virtual coaches and coachees to connect in a global manner increasing the likelihood that the match is specific to the goals of the coachee and that the coach is a highly qualified and credible guide to achieving the goals. The greater flexibility in the coach-coachee match in virtual coaching has shown to assist in establishing and sustaining the coaching relationship as it allows greater selection when determining the match (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003).

Challenges to virtual coaching. It seems that research has supported the effectiveness of virtual coaching, found many benefits, and found that it is a highly useful alternative to traditional, face-to-face coaching delivery. Due to its recently increased popularity, many researchers are discussing the benefits that can be achieved, specific to virtual coaching, that may

not be as possible in a face-to-face relationship. Although there seem to be many benefits, there is the argument that virtual coaching presents challenges that may not occur in a face-to-face coaching relationship.

It is clear that some are reluctant to fully support the idea of solely using technology to reach the objectives identified by both the coach and the coachee. Research conducted by Walther et al. (2005), which focused on virtual groups, supported that it is only through meeting face-to-face that the relationship can reach its full potential as it allows the group leader to pick up on visual cues, body language, and the participants' passion; the group leader can also use these face-to-face signals to determine avoidance factors, anger, fear, and even happiness. Hakim (2000) found that many executives are reluctant to communicate via virtual or remote means as they believe that without the initial face-to-face interaction that rapport has not been established causing the initial development of the relationship to feel distant and unfamiliar.

Much research, such as Hakim (2000) and Walther et al. (2005), criticized virtual relationships as the challenges due to the dispersion and communication limitations impede the participant's ability to be effective and successful from the beginning. Walther et al. (2005) found that the geographic dispersion amongst the members creates a number of disruptive effects, such as the incongruities in the work environments and social structures, dissimilar organizational cultures and experiences, and cultural type differences associated with different locations.

Kirkman et al. (2002) questioned whether cohesion and team identity can be established without the critical component of face-to-face interactions. Despite the flexibility, responsiveness, and diversity of perspectives that virtual relationships can foster, a longstanding concern is that virtual relationships face numerous, unavoidable, challenges due to the dispersion

and communication limitations that are present in most all virtual relationships (Walther et al., 2005).

Kirkman et al. (2002) and Dwyer (n.d.) also believed that the lack of face-to-face interaction and the missing elements of communication, primarily body language and facial expressions, are the key challenges that would hinder the ability of a virtual relationship to be successful because it is extremely difficult to build trust in this environment; with trust being the building block of the relationship, one can see where these authors would question the effectiveness of technology based coaching. Kirkman et al. (2002) continued by stating that the specific challenge in virtual based teams, compared to face-to-face teams, is the increased difficulty to establish trust between members who have never seen each other. Kirkman et al. concluded that trust is very difficult to build in teams and for it to be established, frequent face-to-face interaction is necessary.

Others argued that the belief that face-to-face interactions are a necessary step is merely a preference to what as a society we are used to and not necessarily a requirement. According to Harrington (as cited in Clutterback & Hussain, 2009):

There is no obvious reason why text based computer mediated communication should necessarily be a poorer medium than face-to-face communication for conveying social information. It may hinder expressively rich communication, but need not entirely prohibit it. With sufficient time, effort and attention to the task, it is perfectly possible to pack text full with social meaning. Indeed the world of literature makes clear that face-to-face interaction has no inherent advantage over text in this respect” (pp. 11-12).

Outside of the potential challenges that virtual coaching may face by removing face-to-face communication, there are other downsides being discussed in the literature as well. It has

been discussed throughout the research that virtual coaching allows greater access to online resources, tools, and communication channels which can all be used interchangeably in a virtual coaching relationship to promote connectedness and enhance the coaching relationship.

However, Williams and Kaye (2011) discussed that navigating technology can get complicated, which can create more work and become a distraction from the actual coaching. As the relationship is dependent on technology, it is more important that both the coach and coachee keep and maintain up-to-date technology and systems, which in itself can be costly; if the technology fails it will put an immediate strain on the relationship (Colky & Young, 2006).

Specific to asynchronous computer mediated communication, these virtual relationships miss out on both the audio and visual cues that often add dimension and understanding to the coaching conversations; in text only communication the relationship misses out on the emotion and inflection that can be seen and heard through audio and visual communication (“Coaching Goes Electric”, 2006). Naquin and Kurtzberg (2010) found through their research, specific to text only communication, people are more willing to be dishonest, less restrained, more negative, and less personal. Additionally, communicating solely through electronic means has been found to lead to more misunderstandings that may not occur in face-to-face communications (Colky & Young, 2006).

Other criticisms, again more specific to text only communications, are that these channels leave far too much room for personal interpretation of messages when left through e-mail and instant messaging communications; missing important communication elements, such as body language and tone of voice have been attributed to causing negative impacts on the coach-coachee relationship (Dwyer, n.d.). Likewise, these forms of communication fail to capture the true emotion that the message intends to deliver as electronic communication lacks nonverbal

cues that can show the presenters true feelings (Iacono & Weisband, 1997). Critics believed that without verbal conversation the flow of the communications may be jeopardized and rapport building will be overlooked.

Missing nonverbal communication in virtual coaching: pro or con? By removing the face-to-face communication in all forms of virtual coaching except those engagements conducted through using video conferencing, the reliance on nonverbal communication indicators becomes challenging. Nonverbal communication, or body language, includes facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and posture. It can be said that understating and using nonverbal communication can be a powerful tool used to help connect with others, express what is really meant, navigate challenging situations, and build better relationships through deeper understanding of communication.

Nardi and Whittaker (2002) found that virtual based communication is not able to provide the nonverbal communication indicators that allow the partners to ensure that the other is paying attention, listening, and staying on task. Although not focusing specifically on virtual coaching but rather virtual teams, Clark (2006) supported this research and found through his own study that the lack of nonverbal and paraverbal cues, which are missing in a virtual informational exchange, may lead to the deterioration of the relationship.

In exploring the need for the visual cues that are found in face-to-face communications, Charbonneau (2002) stated, “All coaches without exception described a strong need for visual cues under specific circumstances. The first circumstance is the first meeting, where the coach and his/her client are trying to develop a trusting relationship” (p. 79). The study further went on to detail one particular participant’s very clear response to the question of establishing a relationship without visual cues stating:

You really have to spend some time. I don't think you can start off a coaching assignment in any other way than a one-on-one, face-to-face thing. And I think you really got to go into two or three sessions before you're comfortable to even bring up any other kind of medium. Because you are really building trust with them. You are trying to get bonding. (p. 80)

There seems to be a clear argument pertaining to the necessity of nonverbal communication indicators in a coaching relationship; however, there is argument that removing these from the conversations can be a positive rather than a negative. Clutterback and Hussain (2009) and Hamilton and Scandura (2003) argued that eliminating the social and visual cues from the conversation will allow the parties involved to be more able to focus on the message rather than the messenger. Specifically, Hamilton and Scandura (2003) wrote:

Face-to-face interactions may be distracted by visual cues, and issues related to setting, context, and atmosphere which may hamper communication. E-mail and text based messaging are learner communication channels that allow for more direct information transfer- thereby minimizing contextual issues. (p. 389)

Studies recommended that coaching commitments be initiated with at least one initial face-to-face interaction followed by any combination of virtual communications throughout the remainder of the relationship. Nardi and Whittaker (2002) found that face-to-face interactions are critical for establishing collaborative, interpersonal relationships that are built on non-task communication early in the working partners' interactions. Although Hakim (2000) supported virtual coaching as a valuable tool to be explored by organizations, he too wrote that at least one initial face-to-face interaction is needed at the onset of the relationship. Without at least one

initial face-to-face meeting, it may be difficult for the partners to fully establish a solid foundation of trust and rapport (Hakim, 2000).

It is also argued that it just takes training and skill on behalf of the coach to be able to pick up on the same expressions through alternative cues such as the coachee's silence, speech cadence and voice inflection; virtual coaching allows active learning experiences that are authentic yet safe (Billings, 2009). To minimize the potentially negative effects that virtual communications can have on a relationship, coaches must enhance active listening effectiveness, especially in emotionally charged situations as often times coaching engagements can become.

Wysocki (2011), who wrote from experience, found that although they lose out on the visual cues in virtual coaching, coaches can learn to pick up more on voice intonation, pitch, pauses, quavering, etc. Coaches can enhance their effectiveness in virtual relationship building by listening for specific words, turns of phrases, and descriptions that offer a lot of information (Wysocki, 2011). Williams and Kaye (2001) described that it is not about the face-to-face interactions that make the relationship, but rather showing a high level of personal presence through increased listening skills and attending to pace and tone of voice.

The Coaching Relationship

One of the most important variables to an effective coaching process, regardless of the method of delivery, is the coach-coachee relationship (Bluckert, 2011; Boyce, Jackson, & Neal 2010; Bush, 2004; Gregory, 2010; Leedham, 2005). Much research (Baron & Morin, 2009; Bush, 2004; Charbonneau, 2002) showed that the first step in employing an effective coaching process is developing a stable relationship centralized around trust, good rapport, credibility, communication and ongoing interaction. Gregory (2010) found that the relationship between the

coach and coachee is “the basis upon which the coaching is built and without a relationship the coaching would not be as effective as it could be” (p. 5).

According to additional research by Iacono and Weisband (1997) and Walther, Bunz, and Bazarova (2005), establishing trust and rapport in your relationship is the first major accomplishment for a virtual relationship and allows the participants to convert their individual strengths into a collaborative effort that works for the relationship; each person must reduce their uncertainty about the other and trust the relationship. Through the research of Gyllensten and Palmer (2007), it was found that trust, transparency, and a valuable coaching relationship were the main components necessary to have an effective coaching engagement. It was also found that without developing a good relationship, relevant achievements in the coaching engagements will not be made (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007).

Trust in a virtual environment. There are many factors that can be attributed to a “healthy” coaching relationship, however throughout the literature the establishment and maintenance of trust consistently seems to be the most important element to ensuring positive coaching outcomes (Augustijnen, et al., 2011; Dembkowski & Eldridge, 2011; Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007; Machin, 2010; Marino, n.d.; Williams & Kaye, 2011). Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) and Augustijnen et al. (2011) found that the coach’s ability to establish trust within the relationship is the most important component, as without trust the coachee shares less information and consequently does not gain the full benefits of the relationship. Another reason, why trust has been found to be critical within the coaching relationship is because it enables a higher level of acceptable challenge by the coach (Machin, 2010).

First and foremost, all parties involved in the coaching relationship must be able to trust one another and be willing to genuinely talk about their strengths and their challenges

(Stevenson, n.d.). Bluckert (2011) stated that a coaching relationship without trust is incomplete as it is found that trust is what enables the client to feel safe enough to share his or her thoughts and reflect on his or her mistakes and/or deficiencies and is what allows the coachee to be fully honest with himself or herself and the engagement.

Bush's 2004 study reinforced the importance of trust by focusing on the bond that is/must be established in the coaching relationship; Bush (2004) concluded that trust is one of the main factors that needs to be established between the coach and coachee to ensure ongoing positive interaction throughout the coaching relationship. As supported by Charbonneau's (2002) study, developing and maintaining trust is essential in any coaching relationship; Charbonneau (2002) found that 8 out of the 10 coachees reported that a close and trusting relationship with his or her coach was the most essential element to the success of the engagement.

Early in these relationship development phases, Hakim (2000) found that many coaches, as well as coachees, can be reluctant to communicate via virtual media; the initial hesitation may stem from the fact that trust in the relationship has yet to be established. Oftentimes the fear of the unknown may overpower the relationships ability to establish the initial boundaries and expectations for which the remainder of the commitment will follow (Hakim, 2000). However, Clutterback and Hussain (2010) argued that there is no distinct evidence that supports people are more reluctant to initiate a relationship online and may even be more open to communicating with someone that is geographically distant and not involved.

In 2010, Machin employed a case study approach to looking at the nature of the relationships between coaches and their coachees. Machin (2010) supported that key to the coaching process is the establishment and maintenance of trust within the coaching relationship and goes deeper into the topic by establishing specific recommendations on the practices that can

be employed in doing so. Through Machin's (2010) research, it was concluded that empathy and listening skills were absolutely critical when establishing the coaching relationship. Additionally Augustijnen (2011), "Coaching Goes Electric" (2006), Machin (2010), and Marino (n.d.) found the practices of having and maintaining a non judgmental attitude, coach congruence, brief self-disclosure, the initial fit with the coach, client readiness, and clear goal identification and agreement are also very important practices necessary to establish and maintain trust within the coaching relationship.

Feathersome (2004) found that maintaining trust will be the biggest challenge a virtual relationship will face throughout the duration of the engagement. According to Feathersome, this challenge makes it difficult for coaches to work through their coaching engagements. However, with practice, research has shown that maintaining trust is possible within virtual delivery (Wysocki, 2011). Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) offered recommendations that can be practiced by coaches to continue building and maintaining the trust between the coach and coachee. These recommendations included the following:

- Establish a safe and supportive environment by developing a personal connection.
- Identify a trust link (an individual that you both know and trust).
- Establish communication rules to increase awareness and clarify miscommunication, emotions, or misunderstandings.
- Provide substantive and timely responses.
- Follow-up on deliverables and explain reasons for any delays.
- Addressed perceived discontent as early as noticed.
- Review unsatisfactory dialog. (Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010, pp. 161-162).

Gyllensetn and Palmer (2007) and Augustijnen (2001) also found that trust within the relationship will be enhanced through establishing and following confidentiality practices and guidelines. When both the coach and coachee believe that the information shared will be kept between the parties, it becomes easier to share information that may be sensitive such as discussing personal limitations and difficulties (Gyllensetn & Palmer, 2007).

Rapport in a virtual environment. Outside of creating a relationship that is built on trust is the importance of having a foundation built on good rapport between the coach and the coachee. According to Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010), “Rapport is at the heart of the coaching relationship” (p.156) and can come almost naturally or with little effort in face-to-face interactions. As rapport is a critical element in a coaching relationship, Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) concluded from their individual research and experiences that coaches pay close attention and are mindful to the processes in order to ensure that rapport is established as well in a virtual environment.

As part of their research, Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) developed recommendations coaches should employ when establishing and maintaining rapport in a virtual relationship. The recommendations are listed below.

- Initiate disclosure and sharing professional and personal information to quickly identify commonalities and develop rapport.
- Use peoples’ names more than you usually would face-to-face.
- Demonstrate that you are paying attention by asking open-ended questions and rephrasing.
- Identify shared experiences and discuss similar and dissimilar perceptions of those experiences.

- Mirror communication (for example, match clients preferred level of information; preferences for visual, auditory, kinesthetic learning modalities; and key words and phrases).
- Schedule the first two to four sessions close together to establish a foundation and build trust. (p.161).

Additional Virtual Coaching Factors

From the literature, it can be concluded that the relationship, emphasized by the presence of trust and rapport, is a critical element necessary to produce positive outcomes in the coaching relationship. Outside the numerous studies looking specifically at the relationship, the current literature also offers additional components that should be present within the coaching engagement to contribute to not only its overall success but the establishment and maintenance of the relationship in general.

Virtual coaches cannot expect to be successful without employing the practices found to be effective in face-to-face relationships; suggested practices, regardless of delivery, include skills, such as sharing similar experiences to establish an initial connection; showing engagement, client readiness, selection of a coach; and establishing confidentiality guidelines. However, when virtual coaches facilitate the relationship within the numerous tools afforded virtually (internet, e-mail, online chat, instant messaging, etc.), they must add into these practices a few recommendations specific to working within the specified delivery. A critical practice found in virtual coaching is the establishment of communication boundaries and guidelines (referred to as communication strategies; Feldman, 2002; Human Capitol Institute, 2007; Marino, n.d.; Williams & Kaye, 2011).

Feldman (2002) detailed this practice as the process of placing definitive parameters around each form of communication and what types of information can be shared through which medium. Williams and Kaye (2011) and Marino (n.d.) added that it is not only about determining which tools (telephone, e-mail, instant messaging) will be used but also defining how they will be used to best support the relationship; Marino (n.d.) supported that defining the context and content that can be delivered through each media will lessen the impacts that miscommunications may have later in the relationship. An example of this would be establishing an agreement that e-mail communication is only an acceptable form of communication when it comes to logistical pieces of communication and not specific coaching conversations. These parameters will help ensure that information exchanged through specific media is delivered appropriately. This practice will add benefit to the overall relationship as communications become less likely to be overlooked or misinterpreted.

As found by the Human Capitol Institute (2007), virtual deliveries can require additional effort to create the relationship but again offer recommendations that coaches can practice to overcome the challenges faced in virtual relationships. Although this work was written about virtual mentoring, the similarities in concepts can be easily related to virtual coaching. This work was based around the primary communication channel being through the telephone, supplementing these distance relationships with e-mail communication to strengthen the connection.

Referred to as the “practice tips for virtual partnerships,” the Human Capitol Institute (2007) offered the following recommendations as strategies for ensuring the success of a virtual partnership: lock-in prescheduled meetings (Marino, n.d.) to overcome the reluctance to deal with distance and time, be prepared by having an agenda that includes a discussion of the success

and challenges that have occurred since the last communication, follow-up on every communication with an e-mail that summarizes the session and reviews action steps (Marino n.d.), and talk more frequently in the initial phases to clarify roles, responsibilities, and communication guidelines. Again these practices will strengthen the coaching relationship as they offer the partners both structure and boundaries, which again strengthen the communication and subsequently the relationship.

Additionally, the match between a virtual coach and coachee is just as important as the match found in face-to-face relationships; all coaching partnerships, regardless of delivery, need to be matched appropriately to meet the goals and objectives of both the coach and coachee. Individuals and organizations can and still should select a virtual coach who meets the requirements of a pre-selected set of criteria, such as competence factors, commonalities, compatibilities, referrals, or previous work within the field (Boyce et al., 2010). Likewise, the importance of coachee readiness and the coach's willingness and ability to facilitate the virtual relationship must be given careful consideration in order to ensure the effectiveness of the partnership achieves the same benefits of face-to-face interactions (Boyce et al., 2010).

Research has shown that regardless of the limitations virtual communications can present, virtual coaching can produce the same positive results and foster a learning atmosphere that promotes shared support and positive change so long as the coaching goals and expectations are clearly defined during the initial phases of the relationship (Dean, 2011). Dean, who wrote from personal experience as coach, found that the similarities of creating an effective virtual relationship coincide with those it takes in a face-to-face relationship. Dean found in his own experiences that coaches, regardless of delivery method, must focus on creating a space of safety

and closeness in order to ensure that real learning can take place as defined around a set on concrete goals and actions.

The virtual methods of communication may present more of a challenge than some realize; however, research supported that these communication barriers can also be overcome by conducting frequent and regular meetings through a predetermined media, as well as investing more time from the beginning in building and strengthening the relationship. Charbonneau (2002), studying media selection in executive coaching, further supported that the rapport and trust that is established in the first stages of the relationship can in fact be maintained through computer mediated communication. Much like the recommendations supported by Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010), Charbonneau's research stated that the initial foundation to the relationship will be established once the coach and coachee initiate communication, make a commitment to the process, and agree on a set of goals. Charbonneau (2002) wrote that it is not the method of communication but rather the coach's ability to listen and understand the situation from the coachee's perspective and through a clear set of guidelines and confidentially disclosure.

Conclusion

All of the practices referenced in this chapter have been discussed in the current literature as strategies to promote effective coaching engagements. As concluded from the literature, establishing and maintaining a positive coaching relationship, founded on trust and rapport, is a critical practice that needs to be employed within the engagement (Baron & Morin, 2009; Bluckert, 2011; Boyce et al., 2010; Bush, 2004; Charbonneau, 2002; Leedham, 2005; Gregory, 2010). This literature review found that regardless of delivery, establishing a coaching relationship is a necessary component of any coaching engagement. Although not directly

correlated in the literature to being practices necessary to establish and maintain the relationship, all practices within this literature can be influential in the development and maintenance of the coaching relationship.

Although many of the practices discussed in this research can be fairly universal amongst many delivery options, employing them in a virtual relationship can happen and simply take a little more work and emphasis. For example, the coach-coachee match is critical in any relationship; however, given the global pool of potential matches a coachee may need to spend additional time ensuring that the coach they are choosing adequately meets the criteria they have listed and that both parties are ready and willing to conduct the coaching engagement virtually. Another example, would be the importance of gauging a coachee's readiness to be coached; again, this is necessary regardless of delivery. However, when a coach is determining readiness to be coached, consideration to the readiness to be coached virtually must also be given.

Much as the practices employed to ensure the success of the engagement are standard regardless of delivery, as are the challenges that can be presented in the coaching relationship, again regardless of delivery. For example, Hakim (2000) and Walther et al. (2005) found that virtual coaching engagements tend to face communication limitations oftentimes being attributed to dissimilar organizational cultures and experiences, as well as potential personal cultural barriers. These barriers found in virtual coaching can also be present in face-to-face relationships as these partners too can share dissimilar organizational cultures and experiences, as well as personal cultures. As such, it seems both the recommended practices and challenges can be very similar in any coaching engagement, regardless of delivery.

Chapter III: Method

This chapter begins by briefly restating the problem and purpose of this study and continues with the rationale and explanation of the research design and the selection of participants. The chapter further focuses on the methodology used to explore the practices employed by coaches in establishing and maintaining a relationship in a virtual coaching environment. This chapter also discusses how the researcher investigated the differences in delivery practices between coaches using technology versus those working face-to-face.

Because research specific to the practices of virtual coaching and its delivery is somewhat limited, the current study was qualitative in nature and aimed at achieving an in-depth exploration of the experiences of coaches currently delivering their services primarily through technology. This chapter has further been organized to outline the steps that were implemented during the data collection and analyzing phases of this research.

Methodology Selected

As the research shows, whether the coaching engagement is delivered through face-to-face communication or virtual delivery, it can be stated that establishing and maintaining trust and rapport throughout the entire relationship is a critical component necessary to ensure the success of the partnership. Although research references many additional elements necessary to ensure the success of the engagement, this study focused specifically on the relationship defined by the establishment and maintenance of trust and rapport through virtual delivery.

As the purpose of this study was to identify and understand the experiences of the coaches providing the coaching services, a descriptive, qualitative approach in both the design and analysis was employed (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000; Neill, 2007). This researcher chose to employ a qualitative study as stated by Merriam (2009) in that it is best to employ a qualitative design when the focus of the research is on understanding the meaning of the specific

experiences. Merriam's definition was parallel to this particular study's overall purpose which was to understand and explore the experiences of coaches using technology as the primary form of communication and delivery of their coaching services.

A qualitative design was chosen to be able to gather more detail from a smaller population in regards to their specific experiences. Additionally, because this study was aiming at exploring, understanding, and analyzing the reported experiences of the coaches, rather than determining cause and effect or predicting the anticipated outcome such as the focus of quantitative studies (Merriam, 2009), the qualitative approach was again determined to be the preferred methodology for this particular study. There was no significant or underlying theory to test or verify but rather an opportunity to allow new theories and concepts to emerge throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study.

Because qualitative research required me to slightly personalize each interview based on individual responses and follow-up questions, I remained somewhat adaptable throughout each interview staying within the "boundaries" of the designed protocol while being sensitive to the responses of the participants (Trochim, 2006). Again, I chose the qualitative, in-depth interviewing approach as this style emphasized myself as the primary instrument for data collection and allowed for more detail to be drawn out from each interviewee (Locke et al, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Neill, 2007).

The design of the questions and open structure of the interviews and protocol assisted me in thoroughly exploring the research question: "In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?" It also assisted in being able to find the data relating to answering the research sub question: "How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?"

Participants

The participants in this study were coaches who all have experience in numerous modalities of coaching deliveries, primarily through the use of technology which includes (but is not limited to) telephone exchanges, e-mail, video and teleconferencing, and instant chat or text messaging. It was required that participants have some experience in face-to-face coaching so they could reflect on those engagements when asked questions about their experiences through numerous forms of delivery. The questions related to the establishment and maintenance of trust and rapport in their coaching relationships. Additionally, I required that each participant have at least two technology-based (anything but face-to-face) coaching contracts or commitments (two clients) lasting at least two months.

The first sample of coaches that participated in the study was originally recruited through my professional affiliation with a particular coaching organization; the justification for this form of network sampling was merely my immediate access to participants. This initial sample of participants was much more difficult to assemble than originally anticipated. I started recruitment by e-mailing a personal invitation to nine participants (Appendix A) from the coaching network of affiliation that in turn resulted in the initial three interviews. When planning for this sample, I originally thought that I would be able to solicit all participants from this one recruitment effort; this effort proved to be much less effective than expected.

The second, and larger recruitment sample, came from a posting (same format as the personal invitation as shown on Appendix A) on the website managed by the International Coaching Federation. From the second advertisement-solicitation request, 13 participants were selected on a “first come first serve” basis and scheduled to be interviewed. Throughout the

recruitment process, an additional nine candidates expressed their initial interest, however, for one reason or another opted out of participating in the interview process.

A total of 16 participants completed the interview process from start to finish and were offered, upon interest, a summary of the results obtained in this study. All participants self-identified as coaches and were selected to because they have personal experiences with numerous modalities of coaching delivery.

Procedure Followed

Through the invitational posting, participants contacted me on an individual basis to express their interest. I first ensured that each potential participant met the two criteria listed on the invitation posting before proceeding any further; the two initial participation criteria included having experience through multiple modalities of coaching delivery and participated in at least two-technology based coaching engagements. Once this determination had been made, I extended the offer to each participant allowing them the opportunity to ask any additional questions they may have had prior to agreeing to participate.

After this initial e-mail contact and criteria determination was made, I scheduled a telephone interview at a time most convenient to the participant. Prior to each interview, I ensured that an informed consent form (Appendix B) and a demographic summary (Appendix C) had been completed and received from each participant. These forms were sent and received electronically or via fax, with the delivery method at the preference of the participant. At this point, I also sent the interview protocol (Appendix D) to each participant allowing them to review the questions ahead of time if they so chose.

The demographic summary served several purposes. First, it allowed me to double check that the participant met the initial criteria for participating. Secondly, it allowed for me to collect

demographic data without having to lengthen the interview, which was used to compile a summary of the participants and their professional experience. And finally, I used the questionnaire as a way “to get to know the participant” prior to each interview. At the start of the interview, I reviewed the questionnaire from each participant in order to establish an initial understanding and background of each participant. Specifically, the demographic questionnaire focused on the participants’ professional affiliations, education, and whether or not they had any coaching specific training or certification. This questionnaire also asked for information in regards to the number of coaching engagements they have had, both face-to-face and virtually. It also asked about the durations and frequency of their coaching engagements.

After the first three interviews, the initial interview protocol changed to become more specific and ask more targeted questions. The initial interview protocol was very broad and did not give me much data that could be used to make any thick descriptions to directly answer the research questions pertaining to the establishment and maintenance of the relationship. The initial interviews and transcriptions were not thrown out as they did provide usable data but did not follow the same protocol as the remaining 13 interviews.

One semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant of the study. All interviews were scheduled over the phone or via e-mail and were all conducted over the phone except for two that were conducted by e-mail. Although the telephone exchanges offered immediate access for me to ask follow-up questions, using e-mail was not a hindrance to my ability to obtain usable information with these two e-mail participants. The turnaround time with these e-mail interviews (and back and forth exchanges to ask clarifying questions) was about the same amount of time as it took between the telephone exchanges and obtaining a completed transcription of the interview.

I began each telephone interview by first asking the client if he or she had any logistical questions prior to starting the actual interview; once this area had been addressed, I offered a brief background to the study and requested permission to audio record the telephone interview. Although the information collected in the study was not sensitive in nature, at this point I again assured each client that his or her anonymity would be protected, as the data from all interviews will be aggregated. At this point, I explained that exact quotes may be used to reflect the participant's experiences in his or her own words, in which case any identifying information would be removed or changed.

Upon receiving permission, the audio recorder was turned on, and the actual interview commenced. Interviews lasted an average of about 45 minutes, with a range between 23 and 55 minutes (this is the actual recorded interview portion, not including the conversation/clarification time that happened prior to starting the interview). The first couple of interviews were the shortest in duration; however, each interview became longer and more in-depth as I began feeling more comfortable in the process. Although shorter in time, the initial interviews did yield pertinent data.

Confidentiality and Ethical Considerations

The participant's name and personal information were respected in all regards. When sending the audio recordings to the contracted transcriptionist, no personal or identifiable information was provided outside my name for billing and delivery purposes. The organization of affiliation for which each participant received the invitational request was not notified regarding final participation. Throughout the entire process, I ensured that no names, only initials, were used so that again all personal information was protected.

In this study, ethical considerations were followed in accordance with the guidelines set forth for the protection of human subjects as outlined in the Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects and the Institutional Review Board of the University of the Rockies. All participants voluntarily consented to be included in the study, and nothing was offered in exchange for their participation besides an electronic copy of the study upon completion if they were interested.

Data Analysis

Once the audio recordings were returned as written transcriptions, the transcripts were each examined, compared to the audio recordings, and corrected. The transcripts, along with the demographic data, provided the raw data for the study. During this phase, I added any additional notes to the written transcriptions that were relevant based on what may have been missing between the recording and the transcription; at this point, I corrected any transcription errors prior to any actual analysis phase of the research.

I listened repeatedly to each recording, paying careful attention to what and how each response was being delivered. I also made notes on the transcriptions that related to the voice tones, periods of emphasis, and inflections during certain portions of the interview. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that all dimensions of these interviews were evaluated from every angle, even by looking at the “how” something was expressed rather than the “what.”

During this phase, I also began developing a list of important topics, or codes that could potentially be further explored during the data analysis phase of the research. The initial coding list included basic concepts of coaching, such as “definition of virtual coaching,” “coaches preferred delivery method,” “usage of e-mail communication,” and “struggles of virtual coaching” to name a few. As the initial attempt at coding progressed, the list of codes much

longer and more detailed in order to capture and reflect the specific experiences more accurately.

Table 2 below is a representation of the initial list of potential codes I considered exploring in more depth.

Table 2

Initial Topics to be Considered

1. Why Virtual Coaching?
2. Preferred Introduction with Client
3. What is your definition Virtual Coaching?
4. Benefits of visually aided Virtual Coaching
5. Struggles of Virtual Coaching
6. Done Differently Virtually when Developing Trust and Rapport
7. Maintaining trust and rapport
8. When is trust/rapport developed?
9. How long to establish a virtual relationship?
10. Done Differently Virtually/Maintaining Trust and Rapport
11. Cues
12. Overcome misunderstandings?
13. E-mail Communications
14. Other non Visual Communications
15. First Meeting
16. Does it take longer in virtual coaching to establish a relationship
17. Selection of Coach
18. Asking the right questions
19. Confidentiality
20. Setting clear expectations
21. Client Readiness

At the conclusion of this phase, I determined that this initial list was too extensive and did not truly capture that data representation needed to adequately address the research questions and sub questions as identified as the goal of this project.

After the initial review of the audio recordings and transcriptions, a more detailed look at the code list above was explored. I chose to not use any data analysis software but rather coded each transcription manually, beginning with the above referenced list of codes that was initially

deemed reflective of the data. The approach I chose to take at this point was known as inductive analysis. I stepped back from the initial list of codes and reread the transcripts to look for richer meanings and relationships amongst the responses. While reading over each response, I evaluated each line by asking: “What is this about? What is being referenced here? How does this answer my research questions?”

Throughout this process of open coding and inductive analysis, I began completing a list of deeper meanings and richer codes to best reflect the data at hand and answer the research question, “In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?” and sub question, “How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?” The initial coding list served its purpose of offering some general categories to consider and paved the road for the more detailed codes in which the study used to define the results in Chapter IV.

Several of the initial codes that were originally represented as a unique idea were eventually tied in with other codes as I was able to identify a distinct relationship between the concepts or ideas. For example, on the original code list “preferred introduction,” “first meeting,” “asking the right questions”, and “confidentiality” were listed as separate concepts. However, after further study, they were all clustered together into one theme as they are truly related in that they are the means to which coaches feel trust is established. Moving forward throughout the data analysis phase, these four originally individual codes became one under the heading (or code) “establishing the relationship.” This form of coding, according to Borgatti (2009) is known as *selective coding*. Specifically, selective coding is the process of choosing one category or code and defining it as a core category in which others can be related.

According to Borgatti (2009), this concept is intended to “develop a single storyline around which everything else can be draped” (p. 3).

The continued goal throughout the data analysis phase of the current study was to generate themes amongst the participants in regards to how they are using technology in their virtual coaching engagements. The results of the final analysis phase yielded 202 direct statements for which I felt would answer the questions at hand and fit within the parameters of the study. I made several attempts at establishing a list of codes and finding reflective statements to empathize the meaning behind these codes.

The focus of this chapter was to describe the process I took to explore the experience of coaches that currently deliver their services through virtual technology. To study this appropriately, research subjects were chosen based on their experience in numerous modalities of delivery. A qualitative design was used throughout the research to identify the final codes, statements and findings that were collected and analyzed to answer the research question: “In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?” and sub question: “How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?” The findings of this qualitative approach are presented in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Results

This study explored the practices that executive coaches currently use when establishing the coaching relationship with their coachees and how that relationship is subsequently maintained using technology. It further explored how particular virtual practices may be different than those utilized in face-to-face coaching engagements. This chapter first offers a descriptive summarization of the study sample and continues with a discussion of the results obtained through the qualitative data analysis of data collected from interviewing coaches who used both virtual and face-to-face modalities in their coaching. The specific findings are presented to answer the research question and sub question:

1. In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?
2. How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?

Description of the Study Sample

This section describes the demographics of the final interview sample including their education and professional backgrounds, the formal training that the participants may have had directly related to coaching, and the length of time each participant has been practicing as a coach, working both within traditional face-to-face deliveries as well as virtual deliveries.

Description of participants and years as a coach. Sixteen coaches participated in telephone interviews; of the participants, there was an equal split of 8 female (50%) and 8 male (50%) subjects. Of the 16 total, two coaches reported the most longevity in the field as having been a coach for 30 years, whereas the newcomer reported practicing for just over 3 years. The

average tenure amongst all coaches was just over 11 years (11.1875 years). Table 3 below represents the number of years each participant has been working as a coach.

Table 3

Number of Years as a Coach

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Years as a Coach	15	6	6	3	30	4	30	10	10	7	11	6	6	10	17	8

Educational background, professional title, and certification. Of the 16 participants, all but one reported having a completed educational diploma ranging from bachelors to doctorate degrees. The one participant without a completed diploma did report to having some college but never graduating with an earned degree. Of the 16 participants, 31.23% reported a completion of a bachelor's level degree, 40% reported having obtained a master's degree, and 25% reported the achievement of a doctorate degree.

All 16 participants reported they consider their professional title as a Coach whether this is their full- or part-time employment commitment. Within the responses, there were several versions of their coaching titles; specific titles included Executive Coach, Life Coach, Wellness Coach, Leadership Coach, and Professional Coach. Regardless of the preferred professional title, all 16 participants shared similar experiences in professional level coaching. A total of 6 (37.5 %) participants also considered their primary role, in addition to coaching, to be an organizational consultant. Other responses of professional titles included Leadership Development Specialist, International Project Manager, Author, Blogger, Trainer, and Entrepreneur; each response was given in addition to their association as a Coach.

Although there is no standard certification to be a coach, all but three coaches (18.75 %) identified having gone through at least some form of formal training or certification process to

become a coach. Participants disclosed having gone through training programs, such as the 12-Step Vision Coaching Certification program, coaching certification programs accredited by the International Coaching Federation, Results Coaching Certifications, Coach U Certifications, Business Coach Certifications, Integral coaches training program, and Leadership coaching certifications.

Current clientele. Another important description of the participant demographics is the breakdown of current coaching clientele, face-to-face versus virtual. Of the 16 participants, 9 reported to be currently working with clients both face-to-face and virtually, whereas the other 7 are only working virtually. All 16 participants reported that they are currently engaged in a virtual coaching relationship. Table 4 below offers a visual representation of which participants are currently working with clients in each delivery, face-to-face and virtual, as well as the total number of current clients in each delivery.

Table 4

Number of Current Clients

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Current F-2-F	0	0	0	4	25	2	2	10	0	8	0	1	0	2	3	0
Current Virtual	15	6	1	2	15	18	9	6	1	3	8	5	1	8	20	3

Completion number and average duration of coaching engagements. Of the 16 participants, 3 reported the same and highest number of completed face-to-face coaching engagements at 500 plus total completions. The participant reporting the fewest number of completed face-to-face engagements was three completions; one participant did not answer this question, so it is unknown if the response would have been less than 3 completions. The participant with the highest number of completed virtual engagements stated he had completed

several hundred coaching commitments (reported below at 200+), where the participant with the least number of virtual completions reported four engagements. Table 5 below offers a visual representation of the responses pertaining to the number of completed face-to-face (F-2-F) and virtual coaching engagements.

Table 5

Number of Completed Engagements

Participant Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Completed F-2-F	100	0	14	20	500+	4	500+	10	10	20	50	20	16	500+	50	3
Completed Virtual	50	40	4	14	150	31	200+	6	50	75	100	30	45	500	120	38

When looking at the duration or average length of contract of completed coaching engagements, participants reported in different numerical manners, thus making this summary a bit more difficult to define as a whole. For those participants (n=5) who reported in weeks/months, the average, face-to-face contract was 13.4 weeks; the average duration in minutes/hours (n=9) was 212 minutes or 3.5 hours. A comparison cannot be made between the two as it is unknown, on average, how many hours in each week the first category of participants are spending with their clients or vice versa, how many weeks the time is being spread out for those reporting average length on contract in minutes/hours.

The same holds true for the reporting of average duration on virtual contracts; some participants reported in weeks/months (n=8), while others (n=7) reported minutes/hours. The average duration of virtual coaching engagements in weeks/months was 12.3 weeks and again 212 minutes or 3.5 hours. Again, a comparison is difficult to make as I was unsure how one is related to the other.

Examination and Discussion of Major Themes

This section addresses specifically the research question and sub question based on the responses obtained primarily through one-on-one, telephonic interviews with each participant. Additional responses were obtained through e-mail communications as two of the participants included in this study were not able to participate through a telephone based interview. Although the format of these two interviews was structurally different, pertinent data was obtained and will also be discussed in this results section. This section groups the specific responses into themes and discusses the major components as the areas of greatest importance to the participants. Each theme is broken into subcategories (codes) within this section and is discussed individually.

The topics emerging from the interview transcripts were categorized into four major themes: (a) utilizing private space, (b) utilizing multiple modalities, (c) general relationship building skills, and (d) navigating the logistical pieces of the coaching relationship. Before discussing the actual themes found in this research, the first section summarizes the discussions amongst participants as it was related to establishing a baseline definition of virtual coaching that was used throughout this study. In the following sections, I will subsequently present each theme individually and in some cases use the participants' actual responses with minimal editing for authenticity and emphasis.

Summarization: Definition of Virtual Coaching

Although not directly related to answering the research question or sub question, I first explored what the study population determined to be their definition of virtual coaching. I felt this was an important concept to explore, as the newness of virtual coaching's popularity has yet to solidify a universal definition of the term. Early in the study, I defined the specific definition for this particular project however felt it was important to get an idea of what each coach used as

their definition to ensure similarities. Likewise, as the current literature has shown, virtual coaching takes on a variety of definitions that can vary greatly from one coach to another, again emphasizing the importance of discussing the definition of virtual coaching with the participants.

For the most part, participants were very vague in defining virtual coaching. All but one participant was asked this question directly. I do not recall why this particular participant was not asked and did not feel this question alone warranted a follow-up with that one participant. Of the 15 who were asked directly, 6 responded very similarly stating that virtual coaching was simply “Anything that is not done face-to-face.” When asked directly, these participants did not elaborate on the definition, nor were they asked to do so at this point of the interview.

Other participants expanded the definition with more detail by adding that virtual coaching is “using technology to conduct the coaching exchange” or that “it is normal coaching, but instead of physical presence there is virtual presence.” Others supported the concept that virtual coaching is more than just coaching outside a face-to-face relationship; it is coaching by being totally present, virtually, emotionally. Participant 5 stated, “The virtual presence of a coach can be just as impactful so long as the coach remains present, remains engaged, and remains committed.” Participant 4 sided with this theme by stating his definition as the following: “I define virtual coaching as the ability to talk and interact with a client, no matter where we each are. Whether we are in different geographic regions or whether we are very close geographically we are choosing to work together. We have made an agreement and are connected virtually and emotionally, we are mentally present throughout the engagement.”

At this point, I delved into whether there was a difference between the definitions of virtual coaching as it relates to the actual service delivery. I explored the numerous modalities with each participant, such as visual and audio assisted communications as found in technologies

such as live video conferencing. Although I found that the general definition of the term did not vary outside the popular responses of “any coaching not done face-to-face,” it was concluded that the participants indeed relied more heavily on some forms of technology more than others when delivering their services.

For example, Participant 15 defined virtual coaching as “a coaching relationship between a coach and one or more clients, where two way communications takes place via technology. The examples of technology are SKYPE, instant messaging, texting, online assessment tools, and other computer mediated communications, such as teleconferencing. This technology allows for a way to have a human to human connection with nearly anyone, anywhere.” However, through further probing, the same client stated that he does not consider telephone based exchanges as part of this definition, but rather that the telephone is a delivery all its own, similar to face-to-face. He stated, “When I think of virtual coaching, I think of service delivery over the computer; when I think of face-to-face, I see the client; and when I think of telephone coaching, I merely hear the client.”

These definitions mirrored what was presented in the Chapter 2: Literature Review; some definitions clumped all deliveries together outside of face-to-face, while others separated telephone coaching out of the virtual coaching category. Similar to the general representation in the current literature, this research was unable to identify an uniform or standard definition of virtual coaching. This research did, however, establish a working definition, based on the coach’s responses, that states virtual coaching is coaching that removes the face-to-face interaction and supplements it with virtual media. The emphasis placed behind this definition by the coaches was that virtual coaching is not a different form or practice of coaching but rather a different delivery. As backed by Participant 14, “For me virtual coaching is--actually I don’t

define virtual coaching. Honestly, I think all coaching, there is your face-to-face, on the phone, videoing and e-mailing is actual real coaching. I don't really consider virtual."

Theme One: Utilizing Private Space in Virtual Coaching

The first true theme that emerged throughout this research that differentiates the practices of face-to-face and virtual coaching is the concept of effectively utilizing the private space that occurs when the coach and coachee are in different physical places. Generally speaking, the concept of this private space means that the coach and the coachee are in different locations, allowing each participant to take full advantage of their personal and private space. In this type of engagement, each participant has the luxury of choosing a "meeting space" that is most comfortable to their personal preferences; neither party has to locate to the other's preference. This space is somewhat lessened in synchronous, visually aided communications as the anonymity of the space is now visually noticed.

When coaching in this private space, the coach has many tools that can be utilized to make the engagement most effective and, in turn, make up for the missing, and seemingly important, element of body language. The overall theme of maximizing the private space can be separated into four subcategories: (a) sophisticated listener, (b) gauging what the silence is saying, (c) note taking, and (d) productivity. Each subcategory/code is discussed individually below.

Sophisticated listener. The clear and distinct difference between face-to-face communications and nonvisual virtual communication is the missing element of body language. The research focus of establishing and maintaining a relationship through virtual delivery became one of trying to understand how coaches develop and preserve the relationship without being able to see the coachees' body language to pick up on the unspoken words, messages, and

emotional indicators. Oftentimes in face-to-face communication, one can see emotions without having them be expressed verbally; these visual emotions can be a clear indicator of when it is time to redirect the conversation or even to “dig” a little deeper to gauge where the emotion is truly coming from. So, how exactly can coaches ensure the continued comfort in the relationship without also being able to gauge the nonverbal emotions? How can coaches maximize the private space that occurs through virtual coaching?

All coaches, without exception, reported that the visual cues that are missing from virtual relationships are easily replaced through “listening with a third ear.” Listening with a third ear was described as listening with your eyes closed, removing any distractions, being totally present in the moment, and listening to every part of the verbalization of words; this means listening for emphasis, pauses, voice inflection, and deep or heavy breathing. Listening with a third ear implies that everything means something. This type of deep listening can offer the coach the same unspoken indicators as can body language.

When I am working with a virtual client, I am listening more intently than I when I am with face-to-face clients. This is not to say that I am not listening carefully when face-to-face, but rather virtually I am only focused on what they are saying, and I am not trying to decipher their body language and visual cues. I'm listening with the third ear, and I'm really tuning in to the quality of my own presence, my own consciousness and what is being said at that moment of time. Listening with a third ear means I am totally and undoubtedly present -Participant 11

According to the participants in this study, the visual cues lacking in virtual relationships are not a necessary component needed to establish and maintain trust and rapport in the relationship. These coaches reported that they are more effective throughout the establishment

and maintenance of their audio-aided coaching relationships when they develop and continuously practice advanced listening skills, such as asking more clarifying/feeling specific questions, paraphrasing more to ensure the coachee the message was received, and asking permission to interject statements that may be touchy or interpreted as confrontational.

The theory of this, virtual coaching, is that it is still a human relationship and it must be treated as such. Coaching can be highly personal and sometimes very sensitive in nature. When I am establishing a connection with my client, I always ask permission if something feels like it could be a sensitive area. Early in the relationship, I prep my clients for these situations and allow them to not answer if they aren't ready. This not only empowers my clients, but begins earning their trust.-Participant 11

With my virtual clients, I live in a constant state of curiosity. I listen very carefully to everything that is being said and ask more questions. Never assume you know; always ask. I only ask very specific questions. I never ask questions just to fill the silence. Every question I ask is based on what the client has told me and I use specific parts of our conversations to formulate my questions.-Participant 14

I always ask the client permission to interject your thoughts, opinions, beliefs. The conversation is their agenda not mine. I never tell the client what to do, and I routinely ask if I may offer suggestions. The client is always in total control. I do not offer my own suggestions without first asking because this can break trust and make the relationship more authoritarian rather than partnering.-Participant 13

Virtual coaches responded that it is about listening effectively that enhances the relationship in ways that are similar to being face-to-face. Participants reported that they must make a more conscious effort to hear not only the words that the coachee is saying, but also,

more importantly, they must try to understand the complete message that is sent. In a face-to-face relationship, the message is not only interpreted by what is said but also by what can be seen; whereas, virtual coaches must go off the unseen and often times unspoken. These coaches reported that through virtual deliveries they must fully and totally concentrate on what the coachee is saying and not allow themselves to become distracted by what is going on around them or be thinking of what to say next when the client stops speaking. Maximizing the private space allows the coach to listen intently, often times with their eyes closed and really hear and understand the words.

I listen really carefully to my clients more so virtually then face-to-face. Virtually I am focused strictly on their words rather than trying to interpret body language or visual cues. I mirror back what I am hearing them say, and I am able to focus more on what needs to be said. Listen for voice inflections and ask more clarifying questions when you hear voice change.-Participant 2

Throughout some part of each interview, every participant stressed the emphasis that is put on their listening skills when working with audio aided communications. It was apparent that coaches practice a somewhat standard practice of active listening; they focus on open ended questions, they offer reflective and clarifying feedback, they talk less and listen more, and they always remain in a non-judgmental stance. Again these skills were comparable to those necessary in face-to-face engagements but receive more emphasis in virtual engagements due to the fact that listening is the only way to collect information and gauge emotions.

I must listen more closely to every word that my client is saying. I must listen more than at the surface level. Once I have listened to every word that has been said, I reflect back

to my clients what I heard. Through this practice, I am showing that I am listening and attempting to understand their view and that I my understanding is correct....

....This skill is emphasized virtually; I am not able to see my clients' reaction I have to hear it. I have to clarify that what I am hearing is what they are delivering.-Participant 7

Although the visual cues may be missing, these coaches did not see this as being an issue or having an impact on the relationship. Participants reported that the lack of visual cues can add value to the establishment and maintenance of the relationship. According to the coaches, the lack of visual cues helps keep them more focused on the conversation; they are less distracted by what is going on in the surrounding environment (background noise, visual distractions, etc.) and, therefore, are able to remain totally present throughout the entire session. Instead of trying to decipher body language and focus on the unspoken, virtual coaches feel the advantages of removing these elements, allowing them to place emphasis solely on what is spoken rather than what is interpreted. Focusing strictly on what the client is saying can enhance and maintain the relationship as the coach can ensure that they are hearing everything that is being said and that there is no judgment based on physical characteristics such as height, weight, clothing, choice of hair style, and the sort.

When taking the focus away from the visual, you are forced to pay more attention to words, phrases, pauses, etc. You must listen to everything that I said, thus enhancing the exchange of information. You aren't missing elements of what is being said when you are fully listening to your clients. -Participant 4

I prefer my work to be done over the telephone. People are more switched and engaged when telephone coaching; the visual distractions are lessened.-Participant 6

Phone conversations are much more focused, and we accomplish more in less time without having the visual distraction. When establishing a face-to-face relationship you can be more focused on the context rather than the content. It is easy to get visually distracted when you don't have those visuals you can focus more on the content and be more productive.-Participant 15

During interview conversations relating to active listening and maximizing the private space, coaches felt that they were more comfortable listening intently when their client cannot see them; again, it goes back to not focusing on the actions but rather the words. Participant 5 stated:

When I am coaching virtually, I sit back in my chair, my eyes closed and I listen. If I were in front of that client I would be uncomfortable closing my eyes. I feel I listen better with my eyes closed as I am totally focused on my sense of hearing rather than that of seeing. Being in this space allows me to listen and respond without any judgment based on visual representations.

When exploring any potential drawbacks that can be encountered in the private space, the coaches discussed the importance of practicing professionalism and personal responsibility through choosing a meeting location that is free of distractions. According to Participant 9:

Being a virtual coach is a privilege and not a guarantee. I take pride in my profession and I do so by ensuring that when I am working with a client, I remove all distractions such as if I was in a more structured office, employment setting. My clients are my bosses and I always ensure that when I am working I am a great employee.”

Likewise this discussion concluded similar responses pertaining to multitasking when in the private space.

It would be easy for me to do many projects when working virtually and to get more tasks done at the same time. However, I take my role as a coach very seriously and therefore, when I am wearing my coaching hat, it is the only hat I am wearing at that time. –Participant 5

Gauging What the Silence is Saying. A second component of effectively utilizing the private space that occurs in virtual relationships is the ability of the coach to manage silence. Oftentimes silence can be deemed a bad thing as it can represent inaction amongst the conversation. However, the coaches in this study said that a good (audio-aided) virtual coaching session is able to use silence as a very powerful form of communication and subsequently used to enhance the coaching relationship. To the participants, silence in conversations can mean that the client is in deep thought or truly contemplating a thoughtful response. It can mean the client is anxious or fearful of speaking; it can also be a sign of agreement, dissent, frustration, or even anger. Participants agreed allowing silence, in the private spaces, is as good as gauging body language.

People are more comfortable with silence over the phone, so I allow more time for responses and insights that can lead to more profound outcomes. In person people tend to want to fill gaps of silence and do not take as much time to think. -Participant 6

An important concept that emerged when discussing silence and what it can mean in a conversation was the discussion that it may be more difficult virtually to gauge whether the client is done with a thought or whether they are pausing to rephrase or redirect the conversation. Not being able to determine what the silence “is saying” could be damaging to the relationship as it could lead to constant interruption of the conversation and the client’s thought process. When asked how virtual coaches deal with gauging silence in private spaces, these coaches stated that it

is again through their enhanced listening skills that they are able to determine whether the thought was completed or whether the client needs additional time to process.

Participants reported that it is about listening carefully for pauses and allowing them to happen without immediate interjection. It was discussed in the interviews that silence is truly a part of conversation and a very important part at that. In these private spaces, participants believed that pauses indicate learning, thinking, and processing. Failure to appreciate these pauses can lead to an interruption of a thought that could have value and could lead the client in another direction. Participant 3 stated that “silence is not always a bad thing; I appreciate silence as it tells me that my client is processing and thinking about what is being said.”

Coaches reported that allowing silence is an important piece of the relationship as constant interruption can be extremely damaging to the exchange. Participant 1 stated:

I listen carefully for pauses. Given the context of the pause you can tell a lot about what the client is thinking. Silence is typically an indicator that the client doesn't have the answer or is uncomfortable with what was just said. Don't interject too quickly, let the client process or you will lose this moment.”

I always enjoy and let pauses happen; I allow pauses for greater effect. I always wait a few seconds after I am beginning to feel uncomfortable then I ask the client specifically what they are thinking. Silence is a great indicator of thought. I do not break up silence with a discussion of a new topic or me leading the conversation, I ask them specific questions in order to help me understand the silence.-Participant 14

Let them sit with their thoughts in their silence. Learning and processing is happening here. Then when you feel the silence has run its course, wait an additional 5 seconds before speaking.-Participant 16.

When focusing on what silence can mean, the participants in this study concluded that silence is more comfortable virtually, in the private space, than when face-to-face. As part of what some considered natural conversation flow, silence can be a sign of a lack of interest thus putting pressure on the parties to fill this void with less impactful conversation. Virtually, these coaches felt more comfortable with silence and allow it to play its natural course in the coaching conversation. Participant 15 stated, “I feel less pressure virtually to keep the conversation flowing, I allow more processing time thus enhancing the coaching moment.”

Note taking in telephone coaching. Although not all participants reported taking notes as a tool to be used to enhance the coaching relationship, a discussion regarding note taking arose that warrants brief recognition in this study. When asked when or why they would take notes, it was reported that they practice this skill to write down specific words so that they could repeat thoughts, verbatim, in order to make more of an impact on their coachee. The participants reported that the strengthening of the relationships comes partially through their ability to challenge their clients and using exact quotes keeps the challenges productive and not harmful.

Those who did state that they do take notes of verbatim expressions (specifically speaking on audio aided coaching) also expressed that they absolutely would not take notes if they were face-to-face. It was reported that they felt when they are face-to-face with a client and try to take notes, they lose eye contact and focus, and this oftentimes becomes damaging as it can shift the conversation from where it was going to wondering what is being wrote; in face-to-face engagements, note taking becomes a distraction to both the coach and the coachee. Participants, however, feel that when in private space, this tool can be used well without the client knowing what you are doing, they were careful to report that it is not about keeping it a secret that you are keeping notes, but not making it an issue either.

When comparing note taking between virtual deliveries, outside the usage with telephone engagements, coaches reported that they do not take notes in modalities outside telephone coaching. For example, when coaches are working with a client on a video conference, they do not take notes for the same reasons they would not do so if the client was face-to-face. It becomes distracting. In other virtual deliveries, such as e-coaching (e-mail based), you already have a recorded dialog to reference verbatim so there is nothing that needs to be noted.

I take notes virtually when I would not do so face-to-face. Taking notes in person tends to be scary to the client, and they pay more attention to what you are writing. You must watch yourself when it comes to note taking as it can take your thoughts out of listening –

Participant 13

I take more notes while on a call because when I am face-to-face I have to maintain eye contact. When I am virtual, I do not take notes word for word, but I do take them. I have found that this is helpful when I need to go back and remind the client of previous thoughts. Again these notes help remind the client where they have come and where they are going. These reminders keep our energy alive and our relationship growing.-

Participant 9

I do not take notes face-to-face as it feels uncomfortable; I do, however, take them virtually. I use my notes to deepen our connection by recalling specific statements in my clients own words. –Participant 14

Productivity. Another benefit of capitalizing on the private space found in virtual coaching is found in the productivity of the conversations. Coaches reported that they feel during virtual communications, primary telephone, or audio assisted sessions (web conferencing without video), the sessions are, from the beginning, on topic and on task; these sessions seem to

more naturally and immediately pick up from where the last session ended. When virtual sessions are scheduled, you know you have a certain amount of time, typically 60 minutes, to get started and work through the task of the session. When meeting face-to-face, there is a certain element of social conversation that takes place and can be hard for a coach to divert that conversation into getting immediately on task.

I prefer telephone coaching because the calls seem to be richer. I think this because virtually there is less chit-chat. When working face-to-face, there is a certain social environment that you have to acknowledge. “How was the drive?” or “Oh, you changed your hair.” There seems to be this unavoidable 15 minutes of chit-chat before you start, and if you get into something in this 15 minutes, you have to wait for the natural conclusion of the conversation before you can move into coaching or you derail the conversation and risk the rest of the session being uncomfortable. When you have an appointment over the internet or telephone, you don’t have any of the visuals or social contexts that need to be acknowledged, you can just jump in once the engagement is connected. -Participant 14

The results of this study indicate that coaches believe that the loss of using body language as an indicator of thought, frustration, hesitation, and anger to name a few, can be counterbalanced through maximizing the benefits of what can be termed the “private space.” Listening more intently, allowing silence, taking notes, and the productivity of the virtual conversation are all emphasized and enhanced through effectively utilizing the private space between the coach and the coachee.

Theme Two: Utilizing Multiple Modalities

Although, on the surface, the practices of establishing the coaching relationship may not be entirely different whether done virtually or face-to-face. Similarly the practices employed to maintain the relationship, whether working face-to-face or virtually, may not be entirely different either. However, a clear distinction between virtual and face-to-face coaches is the fluidity between modalities. Through utilizing media, the virtual coach has numerous communication channels to work within in order to have an additional impact on the coaching engagement. Coaches and coachees who can maneuver between the different modalities not only have immediate access to resources but also have access to a variety of immediate and alternative communication channels.

Although face-to-face coaches still have access to virtual resources, virtual coaches can again capitalize on the private space by being in their office and can simultaneously move between the virtual modalities at their work stations. When employing a face-to-face engagement, a coach typically leaves his or her individual work stations to meet at the coachee's preferred location thus lessening the immediate access to numerous modalities and resources the coach may have at their personal workstations. Having access to his or her workstation allows the coach to more seamlessly move between the different media without a time delay or follow-up.

The theme of utilizing multiple modalities was broken down into three subcategories: (a) immediate access to resources, (b) usage of media, and (C) transitioning between modalities and practices. Each subcategory is discussed in detail below.

Immediate access to resources. Amongst the differences explored by these participants is the immediate access to resources and other documents that coaches may not have right on

hand when meeting with a coachee at his or her preferred location. For example, if the coachee prefers to meet face-to-face at a local facility, the coach may not bring all the resources he or she may have in his or her personal files. Through virtual communication, the coach has immediate access to his or her computer and other files that may be necessary, at the moment, to enhance the coaching session.

Likewise, the participants reported that virtually they have immediate access to a computer where online search engines and databases can be accessed to again find information to enhance the learning at that moment in time, rather than at a later point through a follow-up e-mail. Participants reported that when the information is exchanged directly at the time, they felt that their clients were more likely to take the resource into consideration more so than if the information is sent as a follow-up after the coaching session.

I prefer technology based coaching--telephone, SKPYE, FACETIME. When working virtually you have immediate access to your documents and other resources. You can send something right away over e-mail, rather than saying I will get that to you later. There is a bigger likelihood the client will access these resources directly rather than getting them later. –Participant 10

Usage of media. A virtual coach has more immediate access to a variety of media and can move through the delivery options in the moment. However, participants felt that more so than in face-to-face, a virtual coach must be able to put appropriate parameters around communications to ensure that each mechanism of delivery is most effectively utilized and managed. For example, coaches reported that often people take e-mail communication for granted due to accessibility. These coaches stated that it is critical to the maintenance of the relationship to establish clear boundaries around using virtual forms of communication, such as

e-mail in the beginning. A virtual coach has access to numerous deliveries (telephone, e-mail, SKYPE, instant messaging) and must decide what level of emphasis can be put on each media.

When establishing the relationship and setting boundaries, expectations, and timelines, these coaches felt that it is important that they also define what communications are acceptable through which medium. The coaches who participated in this study typically use telephone sessions as their primary channel of communication but also supplement these engagements with the ability to communicate through other media. They do, however, ensure clear boundaries are in place such as what can be exchanged over e-mail.

I must work with my clients to decide how we can virtually communicate most effectively; I must ensure to them that I am accessible even though I am not physically present. When I am establishing these boundaries, which is important when I am establishing a relationship with my client, we explore which activity is appropriate through which delivery. For example, I request that my clients save the more complex discussions for when we can verbally communicate. I open the door to e-mail communication as necessary to again ensure my client that I am there for them. Being there for them is a way to maintain their trust and respect throughout the relationship. – Participant 12

When specifically discussing coaching through e-mail and how it can be used in the relationship, the majority of participants reported using e-mail only for supplementary activities, such as appointment scheduling and verification, and simpler coaching activities, such as sending brief updates and activities for homework purposes, offering a quick check in point as a means to “tell” their clients they are thinking of them between sessions (building and maintaining rapport), and as a means to offer quick responses and additional suggestions between sessions.

All of my coaching packages included unlimited e-mail and client support. I do, however, reserve the right to differentiate with each client between what is considered e-mail support and what communications are best reserved for telephone conversations. –

Participant 15

E-mailing in my mind is not an immediate way to get a strong sense of emotional connection. You are not going to hear tone of voice; you're not going to hear hesitation or get a strong sense intuitively with your client when it's over e-mail because e-mail is impersonal in my opinion. When establishing and maintaining a virtual relationship, you cannot take any chances with your clients when it comes to the delivery of services. I do, however, offer my clients the ability to connect via e-mail if they have concerns or questions that come up and they need to contact me prior to our next call. –Participant 16

Allow checkpoints with your clients. Send the client an e-mail early in the relationship just to check in or tell them that you are thinking of them. This opens the communication channel with your client and lets them know that they are an individual and not just a number. This also lets them know that they can e-mail as well and creates more of a connectedness. –Participant 14

Participants who stated they used e-mail outside of supplementary activities reported, using e-mail as a forum to ask probing questions to get the client to really think about their responses and have time to process what is being asked. The participants reported that they use these “check-ins” to offer more realness to the relationship and create a deeper connection throughout the engagement. When asked directly, these same participants stated that they use this tool more with their virtual clients than their face-to-face contracts.

Using this tool virtually was emphasized by these virtual coaches as in their experiences virtual coachees seem more adapt and willing to move through numerous modalities and communication channels than do face-to-face coachees. Participant 7 stated:

I use this tool more so with my virtual clients as these are the clients who more open to a flexible communication style. I also use this tool when maintaining the relationship with my virtual clients to show that even if I am not physically present with them, I am mentally.

In tying the power of e-mail exchanges into the theme of maximizing the private space that was previously mentioned, these coaches also placed an emphasis on the importance the private space can have when challenging their clients to ponder concepts that may be difficult or even confrontational. Participant 7 supported the usage of e-mail exchanges in, private space, by stating:

I send follow-up items and ‘things to ponder’ via e-mail. Through this medium it allows the clients to have more time to reflect on what I am asking. Communicating in person and over the phone (by nature) requires an immediate response, whereas through e-mail it allows my clients to really think about and evaluate the truth.

Likewise, these virtual coaches emphasized the use of e-mail in virtual relationships to create connectedness, more so than in face-to-face, as e-mail offers another link to the relationship thus bringing an additional element of dimension to the unseen partners in this relationship.

Looking back, I think I send more e-mails to people I am interacting with virtually. This brings in another communication style that shows my clients that I have a personality; as

a virtual coach you need be more diligent about showing your clients that you are real and assisting them in understanding you without seeing you. –Participant 13

Four participants stated that they specifically use e-mail to show appreciation to their coachees and to offer praise for the work that has been achieved.

I typically follow-up each session, with a brief e-mail that is merely used to offer my client continued support and encouragement. When I send an e-mail in this effect, it makes my clients feel appreciated and respected which in turn increases the effectiveness of our communication. –Participant 6

Although the reliance on e-mail seemed to be more heavily utilized in virtual relationships, these coaches discussed the importance of setting boundaries around communications and taking extra measures to ensure clarity of written messages. Being mindful of the role that personal interpretation can play in written communication, virtual coaches stated that they pay close attention to the written words in order to ensure that the message is clearly communicated and leaves little room for misinterpretation.

Using e-mail can be a great virtual tool, if used carefully and correctly. When using e-mail you lose the ability to immediately clarify what is being said. When I use e-mail with my clients I am very clear and very detailed; I offer more extensive explanations in order to make sure that my point is clear and that I have minimized any room for interpretation. –Participant 3

Transitioning between modalities and practices. The results of this study indicate that virtual coaches believe that virtual coaching can be advantageous as they feel they have more immediate access to resources through the usage of numerous media. They also believe that virtual engagements often occur through a variety of media allowing more accessibility to the

relationship. Again this is not to say that face-to-face coaches do not move through different media, but virtual coaches and their coachees tend to be more comfortable with technology.

Although the virtual coaches in this study regarded access to numerous modalities as a benefit, they also stated that they need to be more versatile in their skills and must be able to transition between emphasized practices simultaneously. For example, when working with a telephone-based coachee, a virtual coach using multiple modalities must transition between hearing what is being said during telephone sessions and interpreting words in e-mail communications.

One participant discussed transitioning between modalities on the fly when, because of a technology issue, he had to call a coachee whom he would have typically engaged through video conference. This participant discussed the criticality of being able to shift his skill set from interpreting body language and facial expressions to merely working with the client through audio cues alone. The discussion pertaining to the ability to transition between modalities came up in many of the interviews and shed some light to the concept of the need to be comfortable and versatile in your skill set in order to effectively utilize the benefits and resources of virtual coaching.

Theme 3: General Relationship Building Skills

The third theme presented in this study pertained to three specific skills that are empathized in virtual coaching in order to better establish and maintain the relationship. These skills include: (a) sharing similar experiences, (b) showing engagement, and (c) timing.

Sharing similar experiences. The coaches reported in this study that when establishing the relationship, they sometimes will interject a brief self disclosure to show their coachee that they, too, are a “real person.” Gaining your clients trust through brief sharing conversations not

only emphasizes the coach's credentials to the client but also serves as a means to create the initial connectedness and begin establishing the relationship. Simple and harmless self-disclosure (such as favorite sports team or vacation spots) can bring life to a person who is unseen; sharing similar experiences with a client can show him or her that his or her coach is real. When participants were asked whether they share similar experiences with their coachees as a practice used to establish their virtual relationship, the responses were about half and half: some do and some do not.

In order to build rapport, you need to interject some harmless self-disclosures; it brings life to a virtual person. -Participant 15

Showing your own vulnerability opens them up to showing theirs. It makes you more real to them. I do not share as much in person, because they can see I am real merely by my physical presence. -Participant 14

I do not share similar experiences. This is not at all about me, it is about them. What I do share is an empathetic voice. -

Showing engagement. Virtual coaches reported the criticality of interjecting acknowledgment to show engagement and deepen the relationship when using a telephone modality. Coaches reported that this can be something as simple as a "uh-huh" or more complex practices, such as effective paraphrasing, reflecting feelings back, and summarizing what was just said. These skills are used in a face-to-face environment as well but are believed, by participants, to be more important virtually as it ensures the client that you are truly engaged in the moment and not multitasking at your desk.

Participants went further in-depth into discussing the practice and importance of acknowledgement by stating that an occasional "uh-huh" doesn't always mean that you are

agreeing with what is being said, but rather that you are listening. Although this “uh-huh” may show your interest, these coaches feel that interjecting the occasional question or more complex practice (paraphrasing or summarizing) further communicates to the client that you are listening to and understanding the words that are being delivered. According to Participant 5, “Paraphrasing is an excellent way to show your coachees that you are listening and understanding what they are saying.” Through showing a client engagement in the conversation, a coach can again reassure them that they are fully present, even if not physically.

Additionally, when discussing the topic of engagement, some coaches responded to using their clients’ names more frequently virtually than if they were face-to-face. According to Participant 3, “Using one’s name tends to draw in their attention. I use this skill to offer me more assurance that they are in the moment and I have their attention.” Overall, it was about an equal split between those participants reporting that they do regularly say the clients name in this manner (to grab attention) versus those who do not.

I do say my client’s names more virtually as it is a good way to grab their attention, draw them back in or express a point. Saying their names oftentimes signifies to a client that what I am about to say is important. -Participant 8

I do not like to do that because I know the impact it has on me. Using my name makes me sound like you’re calling a dog or that you just going through the motions with me, like I am just this <name> guy here and tomorrow you are just going to be talking to this Mark guy, then this Susan you know. Participant 13

Timing. When working virtually, timing seemed to be a critical element that many coaches stressed as important when establishing the relationship. Knowing when to ask what is

very important, as asking sensitive questions too soon, can cause your client to withdraw and even become scared of the potential repercussions of answering. Participant 14 stated:

When your client has yet to accept that you are a real person, a nonjudgmental person, it is critical that you do not ask the more sensitive questions in the beginning. You must bring your coaching to that point when your client feels safe with you and understands your motives. Moving too quickly may be very damaging to the establishment of your relationship.”

When establishing the virtual relationship, these coaches unanimously stated that it was about taking it slow. They believe that it takes more effort, not necessarily time, to establish trust and rapport virtually as the human elements can be removed and replaced with the “computerized elements.” A virtual coach should be mindful to not move too quickly and should ensure that the coachee is at a point where the coaching can begin and where the coach has established trust and rapport.

According to the participants, the establishment phase is somewhat like tiptoeing around the client’s comfort level with communication; it is about knowing when the client is ready for the more challenging conversations but also about not letting them be avoided or drawn out too long. When coaches are working face-to-face, they report that the comfort level is most oftentimes established sooner once the initial introduction takes place, and the coachee sees that the coach is a mere professional just as they.

The difference is that in face-to-face sessions (and visually aided video conferencing), the coach can see the coachee’s readiness; body language is a key indicator to determining the comfort level of the coachee. A virtual coach will recognize the hesitancy of the coachee and

will take the introductory phases slower as to offer time for the identity of the relationship to develop.

Spend time up front just talking. Do not jump right into coaching, save that for future calls. Be investigatory, not pushy. Ask simple questions and let the coachee do the talking and lead the conversation where they want it to go. Remember that it is about the client not the coach. -Participant 13

Start by asking every day, non-personal questions. Get the clients talking and eventually they will become more comfortable and a level of connectedness will emerge. Do not be so restrictive on the time of initial calls, leave yourself plenty of room. -Participant 10

When establishing a virtual relationship, I use a lot of structure in the beginning. I start with the first call and cover logical information only. I then move our second call into building the relationship, establishing trust and rapport. I never combine the two. - Participant 11

Additionally, the coaches in this study agreed on the importance of scheduling ample time in the initial communications to give the conversation time to come to a natural conclusion rather than a forced ending due to time restrictions. The virtual coaches discussed the importance of not cutting off a coachee during an initial call when the coachee is starting to open up. Allowing the coachee the time to share in the beginning will strengthen the bond throughout the relationship. Whereas, cutting them off due to timing may close off the coachee from sharing an important revelation that may not otherwise be shared. After these initial conversations, the virtual coach can, and should set, clear timelines around scheduling and conversations.

If a client is talking do not cut them off due to time restrictions on your initial calls.

Leave plenty of flexibility in the schedule of this initial call do it doesn't feel so structured/scripted when establishing the relationship. -Participant 10

Theme 4: Navigating the Logistical Pieces of the Coaching Relationship

The fourth and final theme that encompasses many standards of practice that are typical to the initiation of any contractual relationship is navigating the logistical pieces of a coaching relationship, emphasizing certain practices to ensure the success of a virtual coaching relationship. Many of these practices are employed regardless of delivery; however, the participants reported in this study the criticality of paying special attention to the following practices to ensure success. The discussion on navigating the logistical pieces of the coaching relationship was broken into four subcategories: (a) client readiness, (b) selection of a coach, (c) setting clear expectations, goals, and timelines, and (d) addressing confidentiality and privacy.

Coachee readiness. First and foremost, the coaches reported that establishing and maintaining a successful relationship between a coach and coachee is dependent on the coachee's readiness to be coached and the reason the engagement was initiated in the first place. If the engagement is on the coachee's own accord and desire for self and/or professional improvement, the establishment phase of the relationship is much smoother and easier to navigate. If, on the other hand, a client is being forced to work with a coach as a means for performance improvement identified by his or her organization, there may be more hesitancy in the initial stages. Participant 5 stated that "coaching is like anything else. If you are working with a coach based on a personal decision or desire, you are excited about the opportunity, whereas if you are being forced it just brings with it an entirely different element to consider."

The coaches noted that coachee readiness is very important to the success of the relationship, no matter what delivery. This study found that within virtual delivery, there is also an added dimension to the coachee's readiness to be coached that also includes their readiness to be coached through virtual means and technology. Participant 5 stated, "When working with a virtual coachee, it is not only about their readiness to be coached by their ability and willingness to engage in the process through technology."

These coaches felt that virtual communication adds another barrier to cross when trying to establish the initial connection, but through the remainder of the initial sessions, this barrier can be turned into a positive outcome. Participant 1 supported this by stating:

During virtual delivery, you can have more obstacles to overcome when establishing the relationship than you do face-to-face. A virtual coach must pay close attention to the client's readiness to participate in the process before proceeding. Again, without the face-to-face interaction that brings realness to the participants, a virtual coach must continually ensure that the coachee is ready to move and willing to forward and within the specific delivery. Without this, the relationship can easily become irreparable."

Selection of a coach. A second point that the coaches emphasized is the selection of the coach. If the engagement is one initiated by the client himself or herself, he or she can put more time and consideration into who he or she chooses to work with; he or she can define what his or her ideal coach "looks like," and through virtual deliveries, he or she can search worldwide to find this person. Whereas, if the engagement is elected by the organization, the client most often times does not always have the luxury of coach selection.

When my client chooses me, there is almost an initial connection as they have taken the time to get to know me, through research, and understand my credentials. I have also

been in situations where I have been contracted with a large firm who has assigned me to work with certain individuals. Taking out the element of individual selection in such a personal experience is sometimes difficult on the client. -Participant 7

Coaches reported that the selection of a coach in virtual delivery has its advantages, as there is a much more diverse pool of potential coaches to be considered than in face-to-face deliveries; without incurring the extra costs associated with travel and lodging, you can only choose from a group that is geographically close in proximity. The selection of the coach again becomes important in that a client wants to believe that his or her coach is an expert in his or her field. Again, an individual is going to research the credentials of the coach before making contact for even a consultation, whereas forced engagements again sometimes do not have this luxury.

During the initial establishment phases of the relationship, a good coach will be able to display to the client, no matter how the relationship was initiated, their credentials without being boastful or making the conversation about the coach. As stated by Participant 8:

A good coach doesn't have to be an expert in the clients' particular field, but rather be an expert in guiding the client to find his/her best answers. The coach will be able to gain his client's respect by sharing just enough of his background to not allow the conversation to shift, but rather allow the client to see that the coach is qualified and capable."

Setting clear expectation, goals, and timelines upfront. Although setting expectations, goals, and timelines in the initial calls does not seem to be directly related to establishing a relationship, they truly do go hand and hand. Participant 4 believed, "The key to establishing the relationship is defining the terms and conditions for which everything else will fall. Identifying

these terms up front will bring them to the table and offer an understanding of how the partners will eventually work.” When the coach is upfront with the client regarding his or her expectations, the client can exchange his or hers as well; this exchange again can enhance the familiarity between the partners and promote connectedness. Likewise establishing timelines reiterates to the coachee that this commitment is not forever, and through dedication from both parties the goals will be achieved.

The participants in this study differentiated between virtual deliveries (all forms) and face-to-face in that setting timeliness needs to be the first priority. The overall experience of virtual coaches is that they find it easier for themselves, as well as their clients, to make excuses when meeting virtually as sending a cancellation e-mail regarding a scheduled call would be easier than canceling an appointment at someone’s office. Participant 1 stated, “It is easier to cancel a telephone session or act like you didn’t get a challenging coaching e-mail than it is to cancel a face-to-face session.” It is easier to make everything else your priority when you can easily reschedule a phone call or video conference; virtual coaches need to make it a priority for both parties to make it a commitment to meet as scheduled, every time.

Addressing confidentiality and privacy. The coaches in the study emphasized the importance of addressing confidentiality and how the information from the sessions will be shared, especially when working virtually such as through e-mail. Confidentiality is important in any coaching engagements; however, extra care may need to be practiced with virtual clients as many of the exchanges, such as e-mail threads, are recorded and can lead to fear that what is put in writing may eventually come back in a negative manner. Participant 4 stated, “Being extra sensitive to a client’s right to privacy and confidentiality is a skill that needs to be emphasized in

a virtual environment. Be open and upfront with your client regarding what you are doing with the information, and what, if necessary will be shared with an outside party.”

Through the discussion of confidentiality with the coaches, it was reported that they create a clear understanding with the coachee of what information from each session will be shared outside the conversation. Most typically, the coaches reported that it was not the intimate details of the coaching conversation that would be shared with other individuals (such as an employer paying for the employee coaching) but rather a brief explanation of the coachees commitment to the process and willingness to actively participate and share. The coaches concluded that this conversation typically lessened the hesitancy of the coachees and opened the communication channels.

I take confidentiality very seriously as it is a representation of who I am as a coach. It is a credibility thing. When I am working with a large client who want me to work with an individual coachee I always express to them the content of the coaching sessions isn't to be shared but rather a synopsis of the relationships outcomes. I also share this with all coachees so that they understand that I am not sharing the details of our sessions, but rather the outcomes. This promotes our trust within the relationship. -Participant 4

Conclusion of Results

In this chapter, I described the results of the qualitative study on the experiences of coaches in establishing and maintaining a virtual relationship. The research question was “In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?” I also asked “How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?” The final study sample consisted of 16 participants from a variety of coaching backgrounds and professions, who were each interviewed

in depth once during a period between December 2011 and January 2012. Analysis of the 16 interviews resulted in several concepts that were grouped into four themes that focused on the research question.

According to the study participants, the practices of virtual coaching are very similar to the practices of face-to-face coaches with a few clear distinctions, which are reported by the participants as advantages. At the top of the list is the appropriate use of the private space that occurs through allowing each participant to communicate in a place of their preference. Utilizing this private space allows both participants (primarily the coach) to listen more attentively, allow longer periods of silence to promote deeper and longer periods of uninterrupted thought, take notes to ensure accuracy in interpretation, and utilize scheduled time more effectively to increase productivity throughout the duration of the coaching conversation.

A second theme of this research, differentiating the practices of virtual and face-to-face coaches, is the ability of the coach to use media effectively. A good virtual coach may simultaneously move throughout different media to add more instantaneous enhancements to the coaching sessions. Immediate access to a convenient toolkit at the coach's workstation allows the coach to inject additional data through e-mail or to access data through the internet at an opportune coaching moment without requiring follow-up at a later point.

The final sections of this research, which focused on the discussions of practices employed during general relationship building and the logistical pieces of the relationship, spoke to only subtle differences in the establishment and maintenance phases of a coaching engagement between face-to-face versus virtual modalities. In all delivery modalities, a client needs to be ready and committed; the coach needs to be a good match for the client and an expert in the field. The coach needs to know when and how to ask certain questions and must set clear

expectations and timelines; the timing of the coaching conversation plays a critical role in the virtual relationship, as a coach must recognize when a professional level of trust and rapport has been established before challenging the relationship and the coachee. The coach needs to earn the coachee's trust and ensure that confidentiality and privacy is held in the highest regard. Clear boundaries must be put in place so that both parties understand what information will be shared and with who.

A very slight distinction that exists does include the idea that virtually a coachee has access to a global list of coaches where he or she can define exactly what he or she wants in a coach and find that coach anywhere in the world. Having access to a global list of coaches allows coachee selection to be enhanced. Through the enhancement of selection, a coachee can find a coach who meets all criteria in his or her search, thus starting the relationship off on a very positive note. Coach selection is a very integral part of the engagement and ensuring the relationship is founded on a level of mutual trust and respect.

There is an emphasis on confidentiality in any coaching engagement; however, clear boundaries around written, virtual communication, need to be in place. Virtual clients need to be very certain that what they share virtually is still as private and as safe as what they would share if they were face-to-face. The study has also shown that confidentiality and timeliness are also critical elements of a relationship that need to be emphasized more so virtually than face-to-face. Along with confidentiality and timeliness, sharing similar experiences with a virtual client allows the coach to come to life and take on a personality. These practices can be seen as well in face-to-face relationships, but without the physical presence, participants feel that virtual coaches need to place additional emphasis on these skills to initially establish the relationship in order to be most productive.

It can be concluded that many of these practices are seen in all forms of delivery; however, the participants in this study stressed their usage and importance in virtual deliveries. The coaches in this study concluded that it just takes a bit more time and focus with virtual coachees to ensure the success of these distant relationships. Capitalizing on the private space and the more immediate access to resources, while taking more time upfront to establish the relationship, will be amongst the primary factors in determining the outcomes of the virtual relationship.

Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of coaches and discuss the current practices and technologies that are being utilized during the establishment and maintenance of the coaching relationship. The study did not hypothesize any anticipated findings early in the research but did remain focused on exploring answers to the research question and sub question. The research explored whether or not service delivery was different amongst face-to-face relationships versus those delivered through using technology. The overall goal and purpose of this study was to look at the current practices employed to establish and maintain the relationship in a variety of virtual modalities and explore how these may be different than if the relationship was delivered face-to-face.

Throughout the study, I aimed at investigating the experiences of coaches who are currently delivering services through an assortment of virtual media. A qualitative research approach, framed around one-on-one interviews, was used to explore the individual experiences with each participant. The research results provided a rich description of coaching practices and found how these practices differ, even if only subtly, between face-to-face and virtual interactions.

Through in-depth interviews, I was able to identify four main themes that were able to guide the study into answering the research question, “In virtual coaching, what skills are emphasized in order to establish and maintain the relationship between the coach and the coachee?” And, also explored the sub question, “How are the skills that are practiced in virtual coaching different than face-to-face coaching?” The four themes that emerged during the data collection phases of this research included:

- Utilizing private space

- Utilizing multiple modalities
- General relationship building skills
- Navigating the logistical pieces of the coaching relationship

Each of the above themes encompassed many smaller subcategories that were all considered as important aspects to the research. The first theme, utilizing the private space, had four subcategories that contributed to the overall theme. These subcategories were (a) being a sophisticated listener, (b) gauging silence, (c) taking notes, and (d) increasing productivity. The second theme, utilizing multiple modalities, also played a major role in differentiating the deliveries of face-to-face and virtual practices. This theme consisted of three subcategories: (a) immediate access to resources, (b) usage of media, and (c) transitioning between modalities and practices. The third theme, general relationship building skills, included (a) sharing similar experiences, (b) showing engagement, and (c) timing. And the final theme, navigating the logistical pieces of the relationship, included: (a) client readiness, (b) selection of a coach, (c) setting clear expectations, goals, and timelines, and (d) and addressing confidentiality and privacy.

The final discussion of this research is included in this chapter. The discussion in this chapter does not detail the four themes and subcategories as they were presented in Chapter IV, but instead looks at how these practices work together to answer the research questions. This chapter is intended to review the summary of findings, discuss interpretations, address the research limitations, and offers suggestions for future research and practice implications. The overall results obtained through this qualitative study found that virtual delivery does require a different, however rather subtle, set of practices than does face-to-face coaching.

Summary of Findings and Interpretations

When asked both directly and indirectly whether or not the participants felt that their delivery style was any different, when working face-to-face versus virtually, all respondents firmly reported that they do nothing differently. That, regardless of the delivery, they treat each engagement the same and follow the same practices, only individualizing the services somewhat based on the individual coachee's needs and preferences. However, the results of this research suggest that the practices between deliveries are different in a very particular, but subtle, manner.

This research was further able to show a connection between what the literature offers as recommendations to the actual practices coaches are employing in their current coaching relationships. In addition to showing this connection, this study added further dimensions to the current practices. This study also supported that even though the practices may only be slightly different, there are in fact alternative approaches taken when establishing and maintaining the relationship between the different deliveries.

Furthermore, not only was this study able to find and verify distinctions between the practice deliveries of face-to-face and virtual coaching, but it also found distinctions between the different deliveries (asynchronous, synchronous, visual, audio, computer mediated) within virtual coaching. Before discussing the distinctions between practices, the next section will briefly summarize the definition and delivery of virtual coaching as found within the study.

Definition and delivery of virtual coaching. Unlike some research (Clutterback & Hussain, 2009; Dywer, n.d.; McNamara, 2011) that defines virtual coaching (termed as e-coaching or cyber coaching) as coaching through computer mediated delivery, this study included telephone coaching as a component of virtual coaching. This study's exploration resulted in a large representation of the response that virtual coaching is any form of coaching

that is not delivered face-to-face; this definition is parallel to what is found in current research (Clutterback & Hussain, 2009; Dywer, n.d.; Marino, n.d). Participants in this study shared the same interpretation that telephone coaching is indeed a delivery option of virtual coaching and not its own category.

Aside from establishing a baseline definition of virtual coaching during this exploration, this study also found amongst participants that the delivery styles of coaching are not exclusive; this study found that just because a coach may be working with a client through asynchronous computer mediated delivery, it does not prohibit the same coach from also being engaged in a face-to-face relationship. Similarly, this study found that even within each individual relationship, the delivery style is not exclusive; a virtual coach can transition between asynchronous and synchronous deliveries, as well as coach the same coachee in a face-to-face meeting if so inclined.

The ability for a coach to transition between deliveries, both within the same relationship and between different coachees, could be a supporting factor in why many of the practices are standard regardless of delivery. This could be reflected through the discussions with coaches who stated that they do not really see any differences in their practices, regardless of delivery. Although many of the coaches reported not doing anything different between delivery styles, through in-depth interviewing and data analysis, this study supported that these coaches do have specific delivery practices within the preferred method of delivery.

Practices in establishing and maintaining the relationship. As standards of practice have yet to be defined, in either face-to-face or virtual deliveries, coaching delivery takes on many different presentations, often varying from one coach to another. This study first explored several areas looking to determine what practices are being implemented to initially establish and

subsequently maintain the relationship with their coachees. This study found that although delivery style and practices vary from one coach to another, there are a few practices that seem fairly standard and align with the current research and recommendations.

Practices, such as using assessments, having certain initial topics of conversation, contracting and billing, and discussing goals and objectives in early sessions, seemed to be fairly standard amongst coaches regardless of delivery. It seems that the initial steps taken to establish the relationship are fairly uniform practices across the deliveries; however, it is the smaller, more subtle differences that make the most impact in the virtual coaching relationships.

Current scholarship (Billings, 2009; Boyce et al., 2010, Boyce & Hernez-Broome, 2010; Charbonneau, 2002; Dean, 2011; Feldman, 2002; Machin, 2010; Williams & Kaye, 2011; Wysocki, 2011) offered many recommendations that coaches can employ during the establishment and maintenance phases of the coaching relationship. This research explored whether the recommended practices are being employed and, if so, to what extent. The findings of this study showed that when establishing and maintaining the relationship, most recommendations from the current research are in fact the practices used by coaches practicing in today's market.

There are some practice recommendations that are found to be employed within all deliveries; however, there are others that are more specific or common within virtual deliveries. Additionally, within the virtual deliveries there are recommendations specific to the chosen media of delivery. Even though each of the recommended practices can be employed in most coaching engagements, regardless of delivery, this research found that some practices are more common within specific deliveries. For example, having immediate access to resources can also be found in synchronous telephone coaching; however, the discussion seems more directly

related to their usage in asynchronous computer mediated communication. Similarly, being a sophisticated listener, through using active listening skills, is also a necessary practice found in face-to-face engagement; however, the importance of this practice was most commonly discussed when working through synchronous telephone communication.

For discussion purposes, this research placed each of the recommended practices within the delivery category that they were most commonly emphasized within this research; the practice categories are: (a) practices regardless of delivery, (b) practices more specific to synchronous telephone communication, and (c) practices more specific to asynchronous computer mediated communication. Table 6 below offers a visual representation of the recommended practices that were identified through current literature and supported by the results of this research. The table offers a listing of each practice that was specifically discussed within the literature as well as the interviews. Although not all practices are illustrated as such in the table, it is important to again clarify that many of these practices can be employed regardless of delivery and are not mutually exclusive to the delivery category they were placed within this discussion. This table places each practice within the category they were most emphasized within this research and how they will be discussed in this chapter.

Table 6

Visual Representation of Practices Employed Through Each Delivery

Recommended Practices	Practice Employed Regardless of Delivery	Practice more specific to synchronous telephone communication	Practice more specific to asynchronous computer mediated communication
Sharing Similar Experiences	X		
Showing Engagement	X		
Timing	X		
Client Readiness	X		
Selection of a Coach	X		
Setting clear expectations, goals, and timelines	X		
Confidentiality and Privacy	X		
Sophisticated Listener		X	
Gauging Silence		X	
Taking Notes		X	
Increased Productivity		X	
Immediate Access to Resources			X
Usage of Media			X
Transitioning between modalities			X

It is also important to note that Table 6 is not an exhaustive list of the countless practices that have at some point been employed to add depth to the coaching relationship. The recommendations emphasized in this research are merely those most commonly practiced by the participants in this study. Current literature offers many additional recommendations that were not substantially addressed throughout this study such as showing empathy (Machin, 2010), maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude (Augustijnen, 2011), being prepared for each session with a predetermined agenda (Marino, n.d.), and following up on every communication with a summarizing e-mail that reviews the session and next action steps (Marino, n.d.). Additionally, many of the recommended practices as offered by Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) were not covered specifically in this research; these practices offered, but not specifically addressed in this

research, included establishing a safe and supportive environment by developing a personal connection, identifying a trust link, following-up on all deliverables and explain reasons for any delays, addressing perceived discontent as early as noticed, reviewing unsatisfactory dialog, discussing dissimilar perceptions of shared experiences, and mirroring communication.

Many of these practices may have somewhat been addressed within a separate category, however, did not appear as a recommendation unique to itself. For example, following up on all deliverables as offered by Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) was a small discussion within the larger theme of creating clear expectations, goals, and timeliness but did not have enough support to discuss it as a concepts entirely its own. The themes, concepts, codes, and categories that this research focused on were those that were most commonly employed by the coaches in this particular study.

Category one: Practices regardless of delivery. The first category found in the research encompasses the practices necessary in any coaching relationship, regardless of delivery. Within this category, practices regardless of delivery, this research focused on the following recommendations: (a) sharing similar experiences, (b) showing engagement, (c) timing, (d) client readiness, (f) selection of a coach, (g) setting clear expectations, goals, and timelines, and (h) confidentiality and practices.

The first recommendation explored in this discussion was taken from the research of Boyce and Hernez-Broome's (2010) that referenced establishing a supportive environment through initiating brief disclosure is a common practice that should be used to establish trust within the relationship. The current study supported that a minimal level of self-disclosure was necessary, primarily in virtual coaching relationships, to develop that initial connection and serve as a means to "bring life to the voice." This study found that this form of communication brings

a connectedness to the relationship and assists in establishing the safe and supportive environment that may sometimes be difficult to establish over virtual means. Although Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) offered this as a standard recommendation, this study found that only about half of the coaches do employ this skill and the other half do not.

Secondly, regardless of delivery, showing engagement in a coaching session is another element necessary to the establishment and maintenance of the coaching relationship. As found by Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) and supported in this study, asking open-ended questions, reflecting, summarizing, and paraphrasing are key practices that can be used when a coach is trying to ensure they are in the moment. Like the previous recommendation, showing engagement is a necessary practice regardless of delivery. However, in virtual delivery, this study found that interjecting these types of acknowledgment may be more critical as they can serve as an additional means of assurance that the coach is fully engaged and not multitasking within other projects.

The next few recommendations again seem fairly standard, regardless of delivery, and were supported in both the literature and this study. First, the practice of timing was addressed; timing as it pertains to knowing when the relationship is ready to move forward and in essence, ready to be challenged. Timing is again a practice recommended regardless of delivery; however, as it can be more difficult to establish and gauge “readiness” in a virtual relationship, coaches need to allow ample time get the relationship to this point. The difference, virtually, is that when a coach is face-to-face with a client, it may be easier for them to gauge readiness by considering body language. Removing the ability to gauge body language presents a challenge to virtual coaches, which may be overcome by taking a bit more time up front with each coachee.

Additionally, this study found, which is supported by the Human Capitol Institute (2007) and Marino (n.d.), that it is not only about scheduling the initial sessions close together but also ensuring that the schedule allows ample time to let the initial conversations come to a natural conclusion rather than be forced due to time constraints; causing a forced ending to an early conversation can be detrimental and lead the client to becoming more closed off. Again, when working face-to-face, a coach can better determine what a natural conclusion may be by considering body language, where a virtual coach may need to allow more time to determine when the conversation has concluded.

According to Bluckert (2001), Boyce et al. (2010), “Coaching Goes Electric” (2006), and Marino (n.d.), determining the coachees’ readiness to participate is a key recommendation that must be explored prior to the official initiation of any coaching relationship, again regardless of the delivery. This study found, specific to virtual delivery, that in addition to determining the coachees’ readiness to participate in a coaching engagement, a virtual coach must also explore and address their readiness to conduct the engagement virtually. Adding in the technology components and numerous delivery options adds another dimension to determining coachee readiness when working virtually; these coachees must not only be willing and able to participate, but also do so in a virtual manner.

Moving on to the next recommendation, standard amongst most deliveries, is the selection of a coach. Like the match found in face-to-face relationships, this research as well as Boyce et al. (2010) and Gregory (2010) supported that virtual coachees also need to find a coach based a pre-selected set of criteria such as competence factors, commonalities, compatibilities, referrals, or previous work within the field. The added appeal of meeting this recommendation within virtual coaching, as found by Marino (n.d.) and “Coaching Goes Electric” (2006), and

within this research, is that unlike face-to-face relationships, these have the ability to connect with each other in a global manner potentially increasing the likelihood that the match is the most appropriate fit.

Establishing clear expectations, goals, timelines, and communication rules are yet again recommendations seen in all deliveries but may be more important in a virtual relationship. First, Boyce and Hernez-Broome (2010) recommended, specific to virtual delivery, that coaches establish the relationships communication rules as a guideline that can be used to increase awareness and clarify miscommunication, emotions, or misunderstandings. Any coaching relationship must also make the sessions a priority and not allow excuses to cancel sessions become acceptable; the coaches in this study pointed out that it is easier to cancel a virtual session than it is a face-to-face session, which again makes this recommendation critical in a virtual relationship. The results of this study supported that establishing these rules up front will offer an understanding of how the relationship will eventually work and will subsequently be used to promote connectedness.

The last recommendation that is common amongst deliveries is acknowledging confidentiality and privacy rules; Charbonneau (2002) found that regardless of delivery, confidentiality is an essential topic that needs be address early on in the relationship; Gyllensten and Palmer (2007) and Augustijnen (2001) also found that through establishing and following confidentiality and privacy, this practice will enhance the level of trust within the relationship. This study found that establishing and following confidentiality and privacy rules was a common practice and emphasized its criticality virtually as in some forms of virtual communication (e-mail) there is a permanent record of the communication that can be shared if these boundaries are not defined.

As shown, sharing similar experiences, showing engagement, timing, client readiness, selection of a coach, setting clear expectations, goals, and timelines, as well as confidentiality and privacy are common amongst all deliveries. Although they are quite similar, virtually these practices are slightly different as they take additional time to employ. As found, interjecting more frequent acknowledgment, allowing more time up front to establish readiness, global coach selection, establishing communication rules within deliveries, not allowing cancelations to become acceptable, and creating confidentiality and privacy boundaries around all types of communication are practices that slightly differentiate face-to-face from virtual deliveries.

Category Two: Practices more specific to synchronous telephone communication.

The practices found to be more specific to synchronous telephone communication is the second category of recommendations in this discussion. Again, it must be emphasized that the recommendations and practices are universal within deliveries; however, they are more emphasized specific to synchronous telephone communication. The practices within this category are: (a) being a sophisticated listener, (b) gauging silence, (c) taking notes, and (d) increased productivity.

Being an active listener is a practice that is found in all forms of communication, be it coaching or business in general; regardless of why the communication is taking place, listening is just as important as speaking. Virtually, specifically, audio- aided synchronous communication increases the importance of practice active listening as it removes the visual indicators that can add additional depth to what the words are saying. It is recommended (Billings, 2009; Dean, 2011; Wysocki, 2011) and supported in this research that virtual coaches rely on listening more deeply to the spoken word and listening especially for silence, speech cadence, and voice inflection to enhance the conversation in ways similar to interpreting body

language. This study addressed the importance of active listening in virtual coaching and describe this type of communication as “listening with the a third ear;” this concept was defined throughout the study as not only listening but also being totally present within the words and assuming everything (silence, speech cadence and voice inflection) has a meaning.

When discussing practices related to active listening, or listening with a “third ear,” was the discussion of silence and how it is best handled in technology based (non visual) communications, removing body language indicators that may imply that the coachee is done with his or her thought or merely pausing to redirect. According to Billings (2009) and found in this study, paying attention to silence, even if it becomes awkward, is critical to the continued maintenance of the relationship. This aspect was mentioned in research as being a form or component of active listening but emerged as a unique concept in this study. This study found that understanding silence was just as important as listening and responding to the coachee.

From this study, it can be said that these coaches use note taking to their advantage when working with their virtual coaching clients. The participants in this study supported their ability to take notes virtually as means to follow-up on specific points and use their notes to revisit, verbatim, the responses that may have an impact on the conversation. The coaches in this study reported that the practice of taking notes is most beneficial virtually and could in fact be a practice advantage that face-to-face coaches do not always have.

Another practice, as found in this study, to differentiate face-to-face from virtual coaching, was the concept that virtual coaches can be more productive as they do not have to initiate the conversation with “social awareness” as is the norm of face-to-face conversations. These virtual coaches felt that through technology, the coaching session can start the instant the parties are connected, whereas in a face-to-face session, there is the need to initiate the

conversation and wait for a natural conclusion to the “small talk” conversation before getting into the actual coaching. This study also found that the virtual coaches feel they can be more focused during the sessions through eliminating not only the social conversation but also the visual and environmental distractions presented in face-to-face relationships.

The practices that differentiate synchronous telephone communication from face-to-face delivery are the heavy reliance on active listen skills to understand more thoroughly what the coachee is not only saying but feeling; the concept of “listening with a third ear” (found in virtual delivery) as emphasizing listening, potentially with your eyes closed, to everything and assuming it has a meaning and can provide context to the conversation. Also, it was found that allowing longer period of silence, taking notes for emphasis at a later date, and removing the small talk from the conversation can set virtual delivery practices apart from those in face-to-face communications.

Category Three: Practices more specific to asynchronous computer mediated communication. The third category that emerged and was explored within this study included practices that are most prevalent in virtual, asynchronous computer mediated communication. Within this category, three concepts developed and tie into each other very closely; these concepts are: (a) immediate access to resources, (b) usage of media, and (c) transitioning between modalities. This study found that this category of recommendations can be employed to increase effectiveness in virtual coaching relationships.

The potential of having more immediate access to resources in a virtual engagement increases the fluidity between multiple modalities. As found by Feldman (2002), Marino (n.d.), and this study, virtual coaches can be better positioned to access electronic support systems such as knowledge bases and data repositories in a real time manner while in the coaching moment.

Having the ability to move between multiple deliveries within the moment can enhance the learning and subsequently the confidence in the coachee. This study found that when a coachee receives supplemental coaching material in the actual coaching session or moment, he or she was more likely to utilize the resource than if the same information was sent subsequent to the coaching session.

Parallel to this discussion was the usage of multiple media and transitioning between modalities in virtual coaching. As pointed out by Williams and Kaye (2011), the access to multiple media can be powerful, however, also complicated. As the relationship is dependent on technology for communication and connection, it is more important that not only the parties ensure their technology is operating properly but also presumably more importantly, ensuring boundaries are in place around each communication media will have a significant effect on the relationship (Feldman, 2002; Human Capitol Institute, 2007; Marino, n.d.; Williams & Kaye, 2011). As found, addressing what can be exchanged and through which media, as well as what turnaround times are expected will help ensure the relationship doesn't become distant and unfamiliar.

Within the recommendations specific to asynchronous computer mediated communication, the coaches can utilize multiple media to enhance the coaching sessions as long as clear communication boundaries have been put in place up front. Utilizing media and other resources simultaneously and smoothly can assist a virtual coach in creating a connectedness with his or her client even if they have never met. The idea of establishing virtual connectedness was supported by the lack of restrictions placed around timing in communication.

For example, when coaching through asynchronous computer mediated communication, both the coach and coachee can access the coaching relationship, at any time day or night, in the

specific moment of thought. Through asynchronous computer mediated communication neither party has consider the other's potential time zone difference, as this form of communication does not require an immediate response and does not necessitate that both parties be present during the communication. However, for this practice to be of benefit communication guidelines, timelines, and boundaries must be in place so that the communication does not get overlooked.

Limitations of Study

I acknowledged the limitations of the study as the data that was collected was through interviews with only a small population of coaches, all of who have ties to one of two coaching networks; the individuals in this study may not be a truly accurate representation of the larger coaching population as a whole. Likewise, the data that was collected focused on the experiences of this somewhat homogenous population. It may be difficult to generalize to a larger population as many of the participants will have similar experiences based simply on their connection to the same coaching networks.

Another limitation to the study was the broadness of how virtual coaching was defined. Although the results of this study supported a definition of virtual coaching being any delivery that is not face-to-face, the research could have more clearly distinguished the various modalities included in virtual coaching. For example, the research could have eliminated telephone coaching from the concept, or focused on asynchronous versus synchronous deliveries and compared the practices between face-to-face coaching and a more narrowly defined form of virtual delivery. A more narrowly defined focus may have potentially yielded different findings that would be more specific to the individual delivery options of virtual coaching.

Implications for Practice

As can be seen throughout this and other research, coaching is a relatively new and rapidly expanding industry. Studies such as this can serve as a starting point for the future movement of taking this field from its current operation to a field that is more clearly defined and outcome measured. Standardizing definitions, practices, and deliveries will be first in many potentially instrumental movements for the advancements of the field of coaching.

The current and future research could assist in developing a more standardized coach credentialing process for future coaches. Establishing uniform definitions, standards of practices, and more clear delivery style distinctions can all contribute to the future of coaching as it moves forward as a more narrowly defined field, where professional coaches are more similarly trained and more uniform in credentialing. This is not to suggest that research and practice moves towards removing all flexibility in credentialing and practice delivery but rather establish a more standardized model for coaching.

Similarly, coaching can take the practice recommendations as offered in this and other research and use these recommendations as potential training modules when establishing a standardized coaching certification or degree. Again the importance of heading towards a credentialing process will contribute to the movement of standardizing definitions, policies, and practices. Inevitably this movement can assist research, coaches, and coachees by better regulating entry to ensure the coaching engagement and service delivery is founded on a set of proven policies, practices, and deliveries.

In the interim of coaching becoming a more narrowly defined field, current and potential coaches can use this and other research as a training and development tool for their own personal skills and practices. Since credentialing in this field has no real parameters, coaches can use

these current works as a training guide to better prepare them as coaches. Learning from coaches who are actually engaged in face-to-face and/or virtual coaching engagements will be a good resource for professionals looking to advance their skills in coaching; these scholarships will at least offer an idea of the skills and practices that can contribute to both positive and negative outcomes in a coaching engagement.

Suggestions for Research

With the field becoming more highly recognized, there are areas of future research that may contribute to moving the field of coaching into a more standardized practice with proven outcomes and similarly credentialed coaches. The first area of research that would benefit the field would be the establishment of universal definitions that could be used to define coaching specific terms, including the definition of coaching itself. Developing one universal definition for each term would assist in further educating both potential coaches and coachees. For example, establishing a clear and uniform definition of virtual coaching, either one that includes or excludes telephone delivery, may provide a more clear understanding to the concept of virtual coaching.

A second research suggestion would be one that explored a similar topic as the current research but looked specifically at establishing and maintaining the relationships strictly in asynchronous computer mediated environments that completely remove synchronous audio and visual communication. As the reliance on computer mediated services becomes more heavily utilized, it would benefit the field to have a better idea of how, or even if, the relationship can be established and maintained strictly in these, asynchronous computer mediated, engagements without any audio or visual communication throughout the entirety of the engagement. Because asynchronous computer mediated delivery was explored in this study (as a component of virtual

coaching, rather than its own delivery) it can potentially serve as a starting point to research that looks at the relationships and practices specifically within asynchronous computer mediation communication.

A future study could also be expanded to include a more diverse group of coaches in order to offer a greater understanding of coaching delivery and practices over virtual means. Additionally, there may be some selection bias as the respondents in this research are all currently working as virtual coaches and are promoting virtual delivery; all participants have positive experiences working virtually. It may be interesting to find a pool of coaches who have negative experiences virtually. Through taking into consideration both positive and negative experiences, it may assist the field as it moves forward in establishing a more clearly defined practice based on the perspectives of all sides. Additionally, through giving consideration to the reasons why coaches have had negative experiences may also assist moving forward in addressing these issues and determining how they can be avoided in future relationships.

Likewise, a future study could include research from a coachee's point of view. This study could explore with coachees, who have experience in a variety of coaching deliveries, to determine from their perspective if they noticed any differentiations in delivery styles and practices throughout each media. Having input from both sides, the coach and the coachee, could again be beneficial as research moves towards defining standards of practices, definitions, and deliveries.

Conclusion

Although it seems that most practices are universal, regardless of delivery, it is clear that virtually these practices can take on different emphasis and more diverse directions. As shown in this study, as well as supported in the literature, the field of coaching is taking on an entirely

new delivery and expanding throughout all employment levels and professions. As accessibility to virtual resources, systems, and databases continues to rise one can hypothesize that the reliance on coaching will continue expanding as well.

As coaching moves forward and continues to gain recognition and popularity, research will need to expand its reach and employ studies that can effectively measure coaching as a reliable employee development strategy with proven, quantifiable results. Although through virtual delivery, coaching services have become more cost effective, organizations, businesses, and professionals wishing to invest in coaching programs will need current and future research to assist in guiding their decisions to invest financially in coaching for both individual employees and organizational initiatives.

As the reliance on virtual delivery continues to gain popularity, the focus will need to remain on the goals and objectives of each coachee and not become distracted by the method of delivery. In order for virtual coaching to continue to show proven effectiveness, continued training and development of virtual coaches needs to be in place. As technology continues to advance, virtual delivery options will too expand; ensuring that service delivery in current and future virtual media is measured and studied may lessen the potential of experiencing negative impacts on the advancement of virtual delivery as a comparable alternative to face-to-face coaching.

As the field continues to advance and entry continues to become more appealing, coaching delivery and credentialing may need to be backed by universal policies and practices to prevent entry of unqualified professionals from deeming themselves as “Professional Coaches.” In order for the field to move in a direction where we see similarly trained coaches, standards of

practices, and proven outcomes there will need to be some parameters and definitions put in place around the concepts, deliveries, and practices of coaching.

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Appendix A

Request for Participation

Hello. My name is Tara Moore and I am a student at the University of the Rockies in Colorado Springs, CO in the Organizational Leadership and Development specialization of the Doctorate of Psychology Program. I am nearing the final stages of this degree and am currently working on my final dissertation project. The focus for my project is on examining the experiences of Coaches who use virtual delivery as the primary form of communication in their coaching engagements.

I have a specific interest in this study because the advancements in technology fascinate me as I believe technology is opening the doors to possibilities that we have yet to even imagine. To me, with the right movements, the possibilities are endless when it comes to what technology can do and how it can enhance our coaching practices. Research is important to the field of coaching and research on using technology in a coaching relationship is quite scarce. Further development of virtual coaching best practices can be enhanced by original research, starting with obtaining the experiences of coaches who are presently conducting coaching primarily through distance forms of communication.

I am hoping that you can help me by participating in this study. Your participation will consist of a one on one telephonic interview which I will be using as the means to which I collect my data. Our phone interview will be focused on your individual experiences working with technology and virtual media in your coaching engagements and in particular, how you engage and maintain the relationship with your coachee/client.

I am looking for coaches who meet the following criteria:

- You have had experience in coaching through multiple deliveries of executive coaching.
- You have had at least two technology based (anything but face-to-face) coaching contracts/commitments (two clients) lasting at least two months.

If you meet the above criteria and are willing and able to participate, please reply as soon as possible and we can move forward accordingly. I am very excited about this project and will be genuinely grateful and respectful of your time. **I also openly invite you to forward my contact information and this e-mail to anyone in your own coaching networks that may be willing to participate.** It would be greatly appreciated if you could please let me know your decision regarding participation by no later than January 18 , 2012; I thank you in advance for your participation and I look forward to hearing back soon.

Sincerely,

Tara Moore

University of the Rockies, Department of Organizational Leadership and Development

E-mail: tmoore@mt.gov

Phone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Appendix B
Participant Informed Consent

Informed Consent for

An examination of the experiences of Coaches who use distance delivery as the primary form of communication in their coaching engagements.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences coaches have had throughout their coaching engagements which have primarily been delivered over virtual/technology based media. I will discuss specially the experiences these coaches have had in establishing and maintaining trust and rapport with a coachee for who they have never seen. I hope that this study will contribute to the field of Coaching and add to the knowledge specifically about technology driven delivery.

Participation: You have been asked to participate in a 30-60 minute interview. I will be focusing specifically on your experiences in virtual based coaching engagements and deliveries. With your permission, the interviews will be recorded and transcribed for use in the data analysis phase of this research. These transcriptions will be available to you upon your request.

Risk & Benefits: There are no known or anticipated risks that will be encountered because of your participation in this study. I hope that you will find benefits in participating as she believes you can use the results of this study as a tool to assist you in marketing your virtual coaching practices. The results in this study may also provide training and development ideas to participants.

Confidentiality: The responses of each participant will be kept confidential and aliases will be assigned to all participants. Communications will be solely between myself and each individual participant as an added measure to ensure continued confidentiality.

Voluntary Participation: Please understand that your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to decline answering specific questions and you may withdrawal your participation at any time in throughout the study.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them-confidentially, if you wish- to Dr. David Solly or Dr. Deb Elliott-DeSorbo, Chairpersons of the University of the Rockies Institutional Review Board, at (719) 442-0505 or through postal mail at 555 East Pikes Peak Avenue, Colorado Springs, CO 80903. Additionally you are free to contact the investigators chairperson, Dr. George Thomson at the same number with any questions you may have about this research. If you have any questions for me or would like to gather additional information regarding this research project, please contact Tara Moore, PsyD Candidate, University of the Rockies at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or tmoore@XX.XXX.

A signed copy of this consent will be given to you.

I understand the above information and have no additional questions regarding the study or my voluntary participation. By signing below I agree to participate in this research. A copy of this consent will be provided to you.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____
Tara Moore, Candidate for Doctor of Psychology

Appendix C
Demographic Questionnaire

Participant Demographics

1. Sex: ___ Male ___ Female
2. Education: _____
3. Current Profession: _____
4. Number of years you have been a Coach: _____
5. Formal Training or Certification as an Executive Coach, if yes please describe:

6. Total number of **completed**, face-to-face, coaching engagements: _____
7. Total number of **completed**, distance, coaching engagements: _____
8. Number of **current**, face-to-face, coaching engagements: _____
9. Number of **current**, distance, coaching engagements: _____
10. Average hours per week you work face-to-face with your clients: _____
11. Average hours per week you coach from a distance: _____
12. Average length of your contracts in face-to-face coaching engagements: _____
13. Average length of your contracts in each distance coaching engagements: _____
14. What virtual tools do you use as **regular/routine** parts of your coaching practices?

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

1. How do YOU define Virtual Coaching?
2. What is your preferred method of coaching delivery?
3. How do you use technology in your coaching engagements?
4. Will you discuss specific and detailed topics nonverbally/visually (e-mail, instant messaging) or do you use this form of computer mediated technology merely for simple every day communications such as appointment verification?
5. Tell me about what attracted you to the idea of using distance resources in the delivery of your coaching services.
6. Walk me through a typical first introduction with a virtual client. Do you follow a script or just say what comes naturally?
 - a. What do you do to initiate the relationship?
 - b. What do you do differently virtually that you wouldn't do if you were face-to-face?
 - c. How do you ensure a virtual client that you are a trustworthy and reliable participant in this engagement?
 - i. How is it different than if you were face-to-face?
7. It's easy to develop rapport with someone when you meet them face-to-face. A friendly handshake, the right amount of eye contact: these are the things that build connections. But exactly what do you do when you're trying to achieve rapport building over the phone?
8. What are the roadblocks you have encountered when working with clients virtual?
9. How important is developing a relationship with your clients?
 - a. Is it more important virtually or same as face-to-face?
 - b. Do you feel you must have a foundation built before you start your coaching sessions?
10. What do you feel are the most fundamental practices used to **establish** trust and rapport from a distance?
 - a. How are these different than if you were face-to-face?
11. Do you think it takes longer to establish a relationship from a distance or can it be done in the same time as if you were face-to-face?

12. What about the entire commitment? In the same amount of time can you meet the same objectives, or does one delivery require more work time than the other? Why do you think this?
13. What key practices do you follow throughout the distance relationship to **maintain** trust and rapport with your client that you may not emphasize as much if you were face-to-face?
 - a. How is maintaining a relationship different virtually then if you were face-to-face?
14. How do you let your virtual clients know you are listening and fully engaged?
 - a. Do you ask more open ended questions to solicit more detailed responses?
 - b. Do you find that you rephrase things to show your clients that you are listening (virtually)?
15. To prevent interrupting thoughts, how do you know when a virtual client has finished their statement and not just thinking?
16. Do you find that you try and match your clients communication style? For example if they are a slow talker do you respond similarly or stick to the same communication style with all clients?
17. Have you ever lost trust and/or rapport with a client through reality on forms of distance communication? How did you restore what was lost?
18. Do you think you say the clients name more virtually then if you were face-to-face to strengthen the relationship?
19. Do you communicate more or less between sessions with a virtual client?
20. When creating the relationship do you share similar experiences to connect with a client?
21. Taking out the important element of body language, how do you virtually gage clients' feelings?
22. Is there anything you would like to add or areas you would like to go into more detail?