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Coaching Executive Leaders using digital platforms: a South Africa perspective

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Business and Executive Coaching

Wits Business School

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ABSTRACT

In-person face-to-face coaching is slowly fading into the background as digital technology becomes more prominent in the way business is conducted. The advancement of digital technology was hastened by the Covid pandemic, forcing most business to adapt to a virtual space.

As early as 2018, digital coaching was listed as the thirteenth trend in the coaching industry and by 2020, this had moved up to the second place. In a space of two years, its prominence in the industry moved 11 places, which likely was accelerated by the pandemic. Given this context, the main problem is understanding digital technology's role in coaching executive leaders. The objective of this research paper was to explore coaches' adaptation to the digital world and the influence the use of digital technology was having on the overall competency requirements of the coach.

Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and Constructive Learning Theory forms the foundation of this research paper, and as the researcher was interested in the lived experiences of the research participants, an Interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was adopted. A total of eleven coaches were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the results of the transcribed interviews, resulting in several pertinent themes. The findings highlighted the speedy transition of experienced South African coaches from predominately in-person face-to-face coaching to a more hybrid coaching model with a heavier reliance on digital coaching and a preference to remain in the digital space. It also highlighted a need to revisit the competency requirements of coaches to include a digital component.

The study gives insight into the change agility of more experience coaches and their ability to adapt to digital technology in a space dominated by in-person face-to-face methodology. It adds to the body of knowledge of how these coaches have transitioned during this time and also the rapid learning they had to adapt.

KEY WORDS

Digital coaching, coaches' competencies, digital technology

DECLARATION

I, Cindy Manuel, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Business and Executive Coaching at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Name:Cindy Manuel Signature: 

Signed at **Helderkruin Roodepoort**

On the 24 day of March 2022

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to take this opportunity to dedicate this research paper to the following people:

To my husband, for believing in me and giving me the space to pursue my ambition to complete my studies.

To my three children, Simone, Matthew, and Emma. For the sacrifices you made during these past two years so I could focus on my Masters. Allowing me to work late into the night and on weekends without demanding anything from me that would distract me from the mission. I love you and could not have been blessed with more wonderful children than you.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ii

DECLARATION iii

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION 4

1.1 Purpose of the study 4

1.2 Context of the study 4

1.3 Research problem/Problem Statement and Motivation of the study 5

1.4 Research objectives 6

1.5 Significance of the study 6

1.6 Delimitations of the study 7

1.7 Definition of terms 8

1.8 Assumptions 9

1.9 Structure of the report 10

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW 11

2.1 Introduction 11

2.2 Background on virtual coaching 11

2.3 Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and Constructivist Learning Theory 12

2.4 Coaches' perceptions of Digital Coaching for Executive Leaders 16

2.4.1 EXECUTIVE COACHING 16

2.4.2 DIGITAL COACHING 17

2.4.3 PERCEPTIONS OF DIGITAL COACHING 17

2.4.4 PROPOSITION 1 18

2.5 Role of digital coaching on coaching competencies 18

2.5.1 COACHING COMPETENCIES 18

2.5.2 ADAPTING OF COACHING COMPETENCIES 20

2.5.3 PROPOSITION 2 21

2.6 Conclusion of Literature Review 21
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 22
3.1 Research approach 22
3.2 Research design 23
3.3 Population and sample 24
3.3.1 POPULATION 24
3.3.2 SAMPLE AND SAMPLING METHOD 25
3.4 The research instrument 25
3.5 Procedure for data collection 26
3.6 Data analysis and interpretation 27
3.7 Limitations of the study 28
3.8 Determining Rigour 28
3.8.1 TRUSTWORTHINESS 29
3.8.2 CREDIBILITY 30
3.8.3 DEPENDABILITY 30
3.9 Ethical considerations 30
CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS 32
4.1 Introduction 32
4.1.1 CODING AND THEMING 33
4.2 Results pertaining to Proposition 1 33
4.2.1 THEME 1: UNDERSTANDING OF COACHING 34
4.2.2 THEME 2: CAREER TRANSITION OF EXPERIENCED COACHES 35
4.2.3 THEME 3: COACHING ACCREDITATION 35
4.2.4 THEME 4: PRIMARY COACHING METHODOLOGY 36
4.2.5 THEME 5: DEFINITION OF DIGITAL COACHING 37
4.2.6 THEME 6: BENEFITS OF DIGITAL COACHING 38
4.2.7 THEME 7: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL COACHING 39
4.3 Results pertaining to proposition 2: 39
4.3.1 THEME 8: UNDERSTANDING OF COACHING COMPETENCY 40
4.3.2 THEME 9: ADDITION OF A DIGITAL COMPETENCY 40
4.4 Summary of the results/findings 41

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS 43
5.1 Introduction 43
5.2 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 1 43
5.2.1 THEME 1: UNDERSTANDING OF COACHING 43
5.2.2 THEME 5: DEFINITION OF DIGITAL COACHING 44
5.2.3 THEME 2: CAREER TRANSITION OF EXPERIENCED COACHES AND THEME 4: PRIMARY COACHING METHODOLOGY 45
5.2.4 THEME 3: COACHING ACCREDITATION 48
5.2.5 THEME 6: BENEFITS OF DIGITAL COACHING 49
5.2.6 THEME 7: CHALLENGES OF DIGITAL COACHING 51
5.3 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 2 52
5.3.1 THEME 8: UNDERSTANDING OF COACHING COMPETENCY 52
5.3.2 THEME 9: ADDITION OF DIGITAL COMPETENCY 54
5.4 Chapter Conclusion 54
CHAPTER 6. Conclusion 56
6.1 Conclusion 56
6.1.1 CONCLUSION PERTAINING TO OBJECTIVE 1 56
6.1.2 CONCLUSION PERTAINING TO OBJECTIVE 2 58
6.2 Recommendations 58
6.2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES 59
6.2.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACH INSTITUTIONS AND INDIVIDUALS CREATING COACHING PROGRAMMES 59
6.3 Suggestions for further studies 59
APPENDIX 1 - Consistency Matrix 61
References 62
APPENDIX 2 – Research Instrument 66
APPENDIX 3 – ORGANISATION PERMISSION 67
APPENDIX 4 PARTICIPANT REQUEST 70
APPENDIX 5 CONSENT FORM 72
APPENDIX 6 ETHICS CLEARANCE 74

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the study

The beginning of 2021 drastically changed the way of work, worldwide. The outbreak of the COVID pandemic forced businesses everywhere to rethink how work is done. Technology is at the forefront of the change, impacting how we interact and conduct business. Coaching, as a profession, was not exempt from this, and coaches all over have had to adapt to remain relevant in this changing world, as Kamphorst (2017) has postulated that the environment of coaching is changing as a result of the digitalisation and automation of coaching.

This qualitative research explores digital technology's role on coaches coaching executive leaders. It explores the perception coaches have towards the use of digital technology in their practices and the required competencies of coaches, and how they need to be adapted in the virtual world using various digital technologies.

1.2 Context of the study

According to the Forbes Coaches Council (2018), the delivery of coaching methods is changing, and the era of in-person coaching is slowly fading into the background as digital technology begins to take more and more prominence. The era of accessibility has arrived, and with this, comes the need for coaches to adapt their delivery methods to suit the client's needs. The South African College of Applied Psychology (2020) has listed Virtual Coaching as the number two trend for the new decade, second only to the age of accountability –the need for Coaches to be accredited against professional standards. The Forbes Coaches Council (2018) study, two years earlier, listed this trend as thirteenth.

Javan (2020) posits that Business/ Executive coaching is growing in South Africa, mainly due to the following factors:

- Changes taking place in the external business environment
- An increasing shortage of talented employees in certain industries
- The idea that we are in control of our own lives

However, over and above these key changes in our environment, businesses are beginning to see how valuable coaching is and view it as an investment (Javan, 2020). While the trends have indicated that digital coaching will increase in the next ten years, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed this phenomenon to the forefront (Forbes Coaches Council, 2018). COVID-19 has forced everyone to rethink how business is conducted, and coaching is not exempt from this. To remain relevant in this time, Javan (2020) believes that coaches now need to review their delivery methods and become more innovative in delivering their service to the coachee.

According to Burmeister (2014), the coaching profession in South Africa is rapidly growing and is on a similar trajectory as international trends. Makhurane (2017) posits that the business world has seen an increase in coaching and mentoring's growth and popularity over the past 20 years. This growth has directly influenced the education community of South Africa, with more and more coaching interventions on offer to develop leaders in the country (Makhurane, 2017). This has been reinforced by Terblanche, Jock, and Ungerer (2019), who also posit executive coaching as one of the fastest-growing industries globally.

Following the context of rising trends in coaching, this study focuses on seasoned coaches and how they are adapting to being thrust into the digital revolution quite suddenly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on utilising digital technology when coaching executive leaders which is synonymously regarded as virtual coaching; therefore, the terms virtual, and digital coaching may be used interchangeably in this study. According to Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010), when looking at digital coaching via digital platforms, they posit that while many programmes and interventions are available, that there is very little comparative studies presented on what defines good practice and academic standards to review it. Geissler, Hasenbein, Kanatouri, and Wegener (2014) also postulate that given the newness of digital coaching, there is a lack of consensus on defining it.

1.3 Research problem/Problem Statement and Motivation of the study

This study explores how coaches are adapting to the digital world and utilising technology to expand their coaching practice and enhance the coaching services they are offering. Digital coaching on digital platforms is an identified trend (The South African College of

Applied Psychology, 2020). It is known that executive leadership coaching is on the rise in South Africa and that COVID-19 has fast-tracked the arrival of digital coaching (Ciporen, 2015). This study's main problem is understanding the role digital technology has had on the delivery methods utilised in coaching executive leaders'. Reyes (2009) postulates that while research on virtual learning has grown, the coaching profession has not managed to keep up with this trend, and as a result, a gap exists in the literature on how coaches can assist organisations in addressing the challenges experienced in the digital world and also how to use the digital world more effectively. The South African College of Applied Psychology (2016) states that digital platforms' utilisation to deliver coaching is on the rise and that coaches will need to stay abreast of these changes if they want to remain relevant.

It is evident from the abovementioned literature that there is a dearth of research conducted, not only in the South African context but also in how 'coaches' transition to digital platforms using available digital technology and its impact on the competencies required to coach digitally. This research addresses the current research gap to understand better digital coaching and how coaches can adapt to digital technology as a new delivery method to enhance their coaching process.

1.4 Research objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows and are aligned with the main research problem:

a) To explore the perceptions of coaches towards "digital coaching" using digital platforms through the different available digital technologies
b) To explore the influence digital coaching has on the coaches' competence requirements.

1.5 Significance of the study

According to Boyce and Clutterbuck (2010, p. 285), "nearly 75% of distinguished practicing executive coaches indicate they are coaching in media other than face-to-face using tools ranging from e-mail to virtual simulations", and yet there is very little research published on how coaches can adapt to this platform. A further study done in 2012 by Geissler et al.

(2014) found that only 14% of coaching was done via a digital platform such as Skype or webcams. The percentage of coaches using digital platforms varies from one researcher to the next (Geissler et al., 2014), and this is primarily due to what the researchers define as digital coaching, however, for the purposes of this study, digital coaching is defined as human interaction done using a, or multiple forms of, digital technology (Hultgren, Palmer, & O'Riordan, 2016).

Ghods and Boyce (2013) postulate that while digital coaching has and will continue to open many coaches' opportunities, it is important not to ignore the challenges that come with it. The biggest challenge outlined by the The South African College of Applied Psychology (2020) is the need for coaches to be exceptionally skilled in developing and building trusting relationships over the digital platform media.

Findings from various researchers have postulated that digital coaching is not well covered and have stated that very few actual studies have examined this concept (Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010; Poepsel, 2011). R. M. Berry, Ashby, Gnilka, and Matheny (2011, p. 243) have postulated that there is “tentative evidence that distance coaching (vis a vis virtual coaching) may be as effective as face-to-face coaching"; however, they too do not address how coaches are adapting to this new method of coaching. This reinforces the researcher’s opinion that there is limited literature on digital technology's impact on the coaching profession.

As mentioned earlier, this study aims to contribute to the literature by understanding how coaches adapt to the digital world and how they utilise technology to expand their coaching practice and enhance their services. Finally, it also aims to identify whether the coaching competencies require adaptation in light of the shift from in-person face-to-face coaching to coaching via digital platforms using digital technology.

1.6 Delimitations of the study

This study focuses on coaches and how they adapt to utilising digital platforms when coaching executive leaders. Scholtz (2019) stated that coaching no longer needs to take traditional face-to-face sessions because of the business world's digitalisation. As the

literature suggests coaching is moving to a digital platform, and the purpose of this study is to focus on how experienced coaches are adapting to this digitisation, specifically in the arena of Executive Leadership coaching. As the digital world is a concept that has been on the rise over the past ten years, the study focuses on coaches who are comfortable with the traditional concept of coaching, that is, face-to-face in-person coaching sessions for Executives, and then determines how they are adapting to these changes from what they initially experienced coaching to be.

The study focuses specifically on South African coaches and South African clientele across the various provinces.

As a result, the study does not cover the following:

i. Coaches with less than ten years of Executive Leadership coaching experience – any coach with less experience will have utilised virtual coaching extensively and therefore not add value to this study.
ii. Other forms of face-to-face coaching, such as health coaching, are excluded.
iii. Virtual self-coaching and/or AI Coaching – this coaching does not involve a human coach per se, but interaction is done with a computer programme where questions are asked, and advice given on how to proceed.

1.7 Definition of terms

Term	Definition
Change Agility	"The extent to which an individual likes change, continuously explores new options and solutions and is interested in leading organisational change efforts" (Clark, 2014, p. 1).
Coach	A person who assists the coachee to achieve identified goals (Rogers, 2008).
Coachee	A person who receives assistance (training) from a coach, especially in business or office practice (Rogers, 2008).

Coaching	The process of working with individuals (coachees) to unlock their full potential, as defined by themselves. (Rogers, 2008).
Coaching Competency	The skill or ability needed to be a successful coach is outlined in the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (2018a).
Coaching Technique	“a specific interchange process between the coach and coachee used to facilitate agreed – on coaching goals” (Hernez-Broome & Boyce, 2010, p. 230).
Digital Platforms	An online business that facilitates interactions between two or more groups of people (Information Technololgy & Innovation Foundation, 2018).
Digital Technology	Is any form of technology, i.e. social media, mobile devices, video conferencing, embedded devices/or analytics, enabling businesses to improve in different areas of the business (Fitzgerald, Kruschwitz, Bonnet, & Welch, 2014).
Executive Coaching	A development intervention used by companies to build leaders capability to achieve both organisational and professional goals (Perry, 2008).
Digital Coaching	"A human-based coaching relationship that takes place solely via virtual/internet communication technologies (telephone, e-mail, live chat and video)" (Hultgren et al., 2016, p. 67),

1.8 Assumptions

The following assumptions have been made regarding this research:

- The sample of coaches selected to participate in this study have extensive in-person face-to-face coaching in Executive Leadership, equating to more than 3000 hours of coaching or over ten (10) years of coaching experience.

- The sample of coaches have a reasonable understanding of the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC) competency framework, specifically, competency clusters 8 and 9 and/or any other Competency Framework referencing the coaching relationship.
- Digital coaching includes coaching conducted via a video streaming application, telephonic support, e-mail support, and YouTube videos.

1.9 Structure of the report

This chapter deals with the research question and covers the overall study's purpose, context, and significance. It also describes the definitions used within this research paper and the assumptions and delimitations relating to the research question.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature about the field of research covered in this paper. It also covers the theoretical foundation underpinning this research process.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of the research methodology utilised to gather information and the process followed to obtain a sample of participants. There is also a discussion on the research instrument, and the researcher ensures validity and reliability within the process.

Chapter 4 addresses the findings, followed by an in-depth discussion in Chapter 5 of these findings in relation to the literature reviewed.

Finally, there is a summary of the overall research, including recommendations and suggestions for future research in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on the subjects relevant to the research topic. It explores digital technology and the digital platforms looking at virtual coaching, e-coaching, digital and distance coaching, coaching competence requirements, and leadership coaching. The chapter begins with a discussion on face-to-face in-person coaching and its evolution to digital coaching. It looks at the literature relating to this transition's competency requirements from in-person face-to-face coaching to digital coaching.

The literature on coaching, in general, is widely available, covering various branches of the coaching discipline. However, coaching using digital technology on different platforms is a fairly new branch of coaching (Ribbers & Waringa, 2015). As Reyes (2009) and Ghods and Boyce (2013) have postulated, a limited number of studies and publications focus on this line of coaching, especially regarding leadership. Clutterbuck (2020, p. 21) has also suggested in his recent works that we “lack empirical data on how coaches and mentors manage multi-media relationships”. While the literature review looks at the various concepts of digital coaching using digital technology on the different digital platforms, it lacks the coach's perspective: how the coach adapts to this transition, specifically in leadership.

2.2 Background on virtual coaching

According to Whitmore (2009), coaching has its origins in the sporting discipline. It has evolved through the writings of Timothy Gallwey, who posited that it was the internal obstacles that were the greatest barriers to performance and once overcome, would open the doorway for individuals to learn and perform naturally (Whitmore, 2009). Coaching was defined by Whitmore (2009) as the process maximizing individuals performance by unlocking their potential . This has been reinforced by Starr (2016) when she posited that a coach helped individuals to move forward and see opportunities for improvement. Interestingly, though, the definition of coaching predates these definitions and Fielden (2005) suggests it can be traced back to Socrates, who believed that individuals learned

best when they owned the process and took responsibility for the overall outcome. The golden thread of coaching is evident in this definition; the learner (coachee) owns their learning and the outcome of their development.

The coaching industry is the second-fastest growing industry after IT, valued at over Two Billion dollars (Tidal, 2019). Coaching historically has been delivered primarily through the in-person face-to-face medium (Ghods & Boyce, 2013) and usually a physical meeting at the coach's premises for several sessions over some time (Rogers, 2008). This is evolving with workplaces increasingly using digital coaching as a platform, of which currently the telephone signified as the most commonly used tool. Geissler et al. (2014) cited results from the seventh Sherpa Coaching Survey (Sherpa 2012), indicating that only 41% of coaching was being conducted in-person, 31% via telephony, 11% on e-mail and 3% on video conference facilities. Unfortunately, most of these studies look at America and Europe, with very few studies done in the South African context. According to Geissler et al. (2014), the International Coaching Federation studies have also shown an increase in telephone coaching preference in North America, but not in Europe. It is clear from this that coaching is no longer done in-person face-to-face and that coaches are evolving as technology has evolved to use other media to perform this function, but what is not clear is how coaches are acclimatising to this change in delivery methodology. Is this an easy transition or does it require a change in perspective and an adaptation of the current repertoire of competencies needed to coach executive leaders?

2.3 Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and Constructivist Learning Theory

The theoretical foundation underpinning this research is that of Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and Constructivist Learning theory. Palmer and Whybrow (2008, p. 86) and E Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck (2010) define this form of coaching as an integrative approach which "combines the use of cognitive, behavioural, imaginal and problem-solving techniques and strategies within a cognitive behavioural framework to enable coaches to achieve their realistic goals". This theory is based on the psychological theory of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), more commonly labelled ‘talking therapy’ (McLoed, 2019). The founders of this form of therapy are Albert Ellis, who developed Rational Emotive Behaviour

Therapy and Aaron T. Beck, who developed Cognitive Therapy (McLoed, 2019). This theory's basis is that how we think and feel about an experience defines how we will behave.

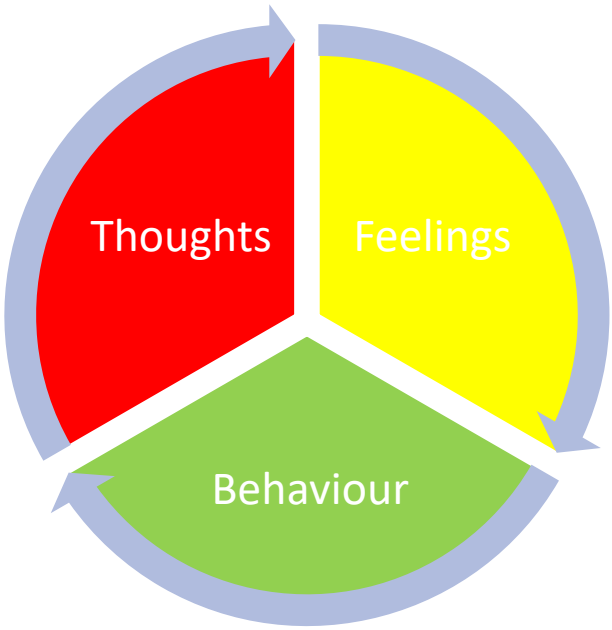

Figure 2.1: CBT Model (McLoed, 2019)

According to McLoed (2019), the CBT model depicts this cyclical nature of thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. The Constructivist Learning Theory premises that individuals' learning is based on the belief that learning is done by connecting and fitting new information together with what is already known (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Learners take experience and link it with the new experience to define new knowledge. There is a direct link here to Cognitive Behavioural Coaching as the individual is taking the experience that they have and applying this to define their behaviour in the new experience. According to Bada and Olusegun (2015), individuals, through their life experiences, will constantly be updating their mental concepts of the way they perceive the world as they encounter new experiences. Elaine Cox (2015, p. 29) posits that "adults have an abundance of prior life and work experience" that propels adults to learn. However, it has the opposite effect as well in that it could also hinder the learning experience, and it is exactly this that could be preventing coaches from progressing to digital coaching from the historical in-person face-to-face coaching mode. Cassidy (2004) postulates that the way a learner approaches the learning

will directly impact their performance, leading to the understanding that if the experience is not adding value to the learner, they will not internalise it and create new knowledge from it.

According to Minzlaff (2019), Cognitive Behavioural Theory has three core beliefs,

1. Individuals' behavioural reactions are influenced by their perceptions and/or thoughts about events
2. These thoughts can be accessed, monitored and altered (Minzlaff, 2019, p. 19)
3. Desired behaviour can be accomplished by changing individual's thoughts in reaction to events

Cognitive Behavioural coaching draws on this by proposing that the coachee must first be aware of their own thoughts and be able to identify those hindering them or their development and then correct it with more positive thoughts and behaviour (Minzlaff, 2019). A practical example of this would be an executive leader who believes that they would not progress further than their current level due to numerous failed applications for more senior roles in their current and external organisations. They have internalised these failed attempts as a direct reflection of their competence and ability. Through self-reflection and discussions with their coach, they have realised that they are limiting themselves and have become their own worst enemy because of this belief system. They have learned that their belief in themselves has started reflecting in their behaviour and the way they show up in the workplace. The leader then slowly starts changing their thought patterns to a more positive outlook and starts believing in themselves, which directly impacts their behaviour and how they show up in the workplace. This whole process is achieved through Cognitive Behavioural coaching. However, key to the success of this is the coaches' awareness of self and their thinking patterns (Minzlaff, 2019)

Another example of this type of coaching is to use the ABCDEF model developed by Palmer (2009), which he modelled on Albert Ellis's ABCDE model (1994, 1996, cited by Palmer 2009). Table 2.1 represents this ABCDEF model:

A Activation of Event	B Beliefs	C Consequences	D Disputation	E Effective new Approach	F Focus
The coach and coachee understand what the "problem" is	Here the coach assists the coachee to unpack key unhelpful beliefs	Together the coach and coachee look at the consequences	At this point the coach will dispute the unhelpful beliefs. This is done using "empirical logical and pragmatic questions" (Palmer, 2009, p. 14)	Here the coachee will identify an effective new approach to dealing with the problem	This section looks at how the coachee can apply what was learnt in this session to future events but not following the same though patterns.

Table 2.1: ABCDEF model developed by Palmer (2009)

This research addresses how coaches adapt to digital technology by using digital platforms within the coaching environment. By utilising the foundation of the Cognitive Behavioural theory and Constructivist Learning theory, the research determines whether coaches are more or less adaptable to the changing landscape of coaching through their extensive experience in the coaching arena. According to Bada and Olusegun (2015), humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences, and the research determines if coaches' previous experience and success with traditional in-person face-to-face coaching impedes or facilitates their growth in the digital world. Does their construction of new knowledge due to technology changes add to the competencies required to be an effective coach? How does adapting their original understanding of in-person face-to-face coaching to include digital technology add to their knowledge and experiences in the coaching arena?

2.4 Coaches' perceptions of Digital Coaching for Executive Leaders

According to Terblanche, Passmore, and Myburgh (2019), the last 20 years has seen significant growth in the coaching profession in North America, Europe and Africa. However, the research clearly shows that Africa's challenges allow it to deviate from what is viewed as normal in Europe even though Africa's coaching profession has its origins in European training programmes and coaching standards (Terblanche, Passmore, et al., 2019). The following is a brief description of this research paper's main concepts, namely Executive Coaching, Digital Coaching, and perceptions of Digital Coaching.

2.4.1 Executive Coaching

At the beginning of this chapter, coaching was defined as maximizing individuals potential by unlocking their potential (Whitmore, 2009). According to E Cox et al. (2010), it is a development process used to improve or increase performance, achieve goals and optimise personal effectiveness. Historically, the preferred mode of delivery has been in-person face-to-face coaching (Ghods & Boyce, 2013). Executive coaching is a new discipline that has seen growth, not only in practice, but in publications as well, and that at least 70% of organisations are using coaching as part of their development strategies where they have leadership development programmes (Bono, Purvanova, Towler, & Peterson, 2009; Hernez-Broome & Boyce, 2010). According to Ghods and Boyce (2013), there have been many definitions of executive coaching. However, for the purposes of this research, the definition is "a Socratic based future-focused dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (coachee/client), where the facilitator uses open questions, active listening, summarises and reflections which are aimed at stimulating the self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant" (Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011, p. 74). This definition's selection is based on the coach's original role as a guide and not an advisor. This is of particular importance, especially when looking at the role of digital coaching.

2.4.2 Digital Coaching

As mentioned earlier, digital coaching is a new branch of coaching (Ribbers & Waringa, 2015). However, there is very little consistency in defining it (Hernez-Broome & Boyce, 2010). For this research, digital platforms to conduct coaching are referred to as digital coaching and the term is used interchangeably with virtual coaching, e-coaching, online coaching, blended coaching, and distance coaching. The definition of digital coaching consists of three parts: the relationship between the coach and coachee, the use of digital technology, and the overall facilitation of coachee growth (Hernez-Broome & Boyce, 2010). Taking these three parts into account, digital coaching is defined as the "application of face-to-face coaching to new technology, through specific multimedia platforms and environment which allow interactivity" between the coach and coachee (Bolívar, 2001, p. 2). For the purposes of this research, all multimedia platforms were considered within the digital coaching suite. Therefore, unlike the research which focuses on a single platform, e-mail (Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010), text-based coaching (Ribbers & Waringa, 2015), telephone, and video conferencing (Geissler et al., 2014) are considered for an holistic approach. On the concept of digital coaching, Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) postulate that there is very little research on this topic and that most of the research focuses on traditional face-to-face in-person coaching. They further state that reliable data around digital coaching's efficacy is scarce (Clutterbuck & Hussain, 2010). This is reinforced by Clutterbuck (2020), who also states that there is a lack of empirical data relating to how coaches manage these relationships through digital technology. Given the lack of empirical evidence around the perceived benefits of digital coaching in comparison to the more traditional coaching, it can be assumed that coaches are not as accepting of this form of coaching even though the whole point of technology, as Clutterbuck (2020) posits, is to make things easier and add more functionality.

2.4.3 Perceptions of digital coaching

As iterated in the previous section, utilising digital technology to conduct digital coaching is a fairly new branch of coaching (Ribbers & Waringa, 2015) and is more than just conducting a coaching session via Skype, Teams or any other video conferencing facility. This research focuses on digital coaching by utilising multiple platforms to conduct the coaching

relationship. The assumption is that experienced coaches are traditionally more comfortable conducting face-to-face sessions when coaching executive leaders, especially as this coaching method's efficacy has been extensively researched. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) used the lack of cases as the basis for their writing and posited that the submission matter was not well covered at all and therefore, more in-depth research is required to understand the diversity of applications available to coaches across digital platforms and what makes for good practice in this arena. Reyes (2009) also postulates that while there is an increase in both the literature and research relating to the concepts of digital and/or virtual organisations, teams and leadership, there is still very little on coaching and how the field is adapting to meeting the challenges of the digital world and building trusting relationships using these digital platforms.

2.4.4 Proposition 1

The use of digital technology to enhance coaching of executive leaders is still in its infancy in the South African context.

2.5 Role of digital coaching on coaching competencies

Coaching is a fast-growing discipline (Ghods & Boyce, 2013), and according to Blumberg (2014), it needs to meet six characteristics, of which two is a formal university-level qualification and a standard body of knowledge. The common body of knowledge for this research is the competency requirements that normally inform the university-level qualification (Blumberg, 2014). The International Coach Federation current leads the setting and regulation of these standards (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008).

2.5.1 Coaching competencies

Coaching is showing significant growth, which may be attributed to the increased need for coaches in organisational contexts (P. Berry, 2020). As a result, the need to ensure competence in coaches is rising, and according to P. Berry (2020), coaches are evaluated around a list of prescribed competencies. However, Bachkirova and Smith (2015) have identified several limitations with this approach and P. Berry (2020) cites Garvey (2011) as

postulating that these lists of competencies are inadequate to address and deal with the complexities faced by the ever-growing coaching industry.

According to Blumberg (2014), there are currently 23 different coaching competency lists that exist, and of these 23, they deduced that only nine was empirically derived. For the purposes of this research paper, the Graduate School of Alliance for Education in Coaching Competency framework is utilised. The has developed coaching competencies to assist coaches' professional development.

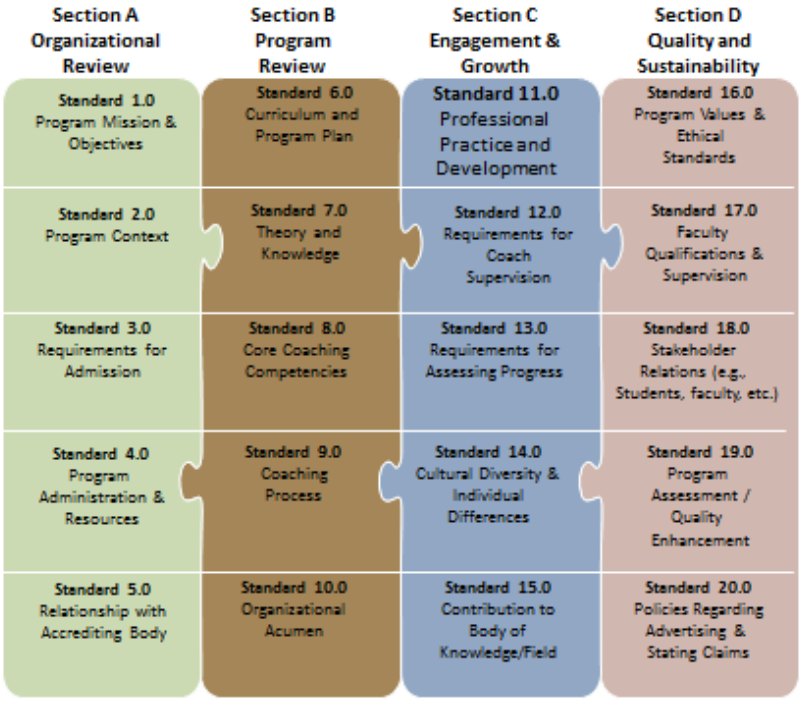

Figure 2. 2: GSAEC Academic Standards

There are 20 academic standards, defined by the Graduate School Alliance, are grouped into segments, each focusing on a particular area of coaching, grounded in both the theoretical definition of coaching and the professional practice (Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching, 2018a). The standards explicitly developed by GSAEC are primarily for degree-granting institutions. Those institutions provide programmes for coaches at a graduate level (Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching, 2018a). These coaching standards have also been developed with traditional in-person's face-to-face coaching in mind. The question therefore posed is, are the identified competencies still

relevant because of the ever-growing ever, evolving coaching profession, especially given the arguments of Bachkirova and Smith (2015) and (P. Berry, 2020),

2.5.2 Adapting of Coaching Competencies

Blumberg (2014) cited Brannik and Levine's (226) competency model when he defined a competency list as complete if it included all four elements their model. A list must have the following elements:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Abilities
- Other characteristics

The acronym used for coaching competencies is typically known as KSAO's (Blumberg, 2014). A competency list must have these four elements to measure a coach's competence effectively. This competency framework should detail the coach's knowledge, the skill they must demonstrate, what innate abilities they require, and what other characteristics are required to be an effective coach (Blumberg, 2014). However, according to P. Berry (2020, pp. 32, 33), these lists of competencies lack the following elements or competencies which are critical to addressing the complexities in coaching, they are:

- Development of Adaptive expertise
- Judgement
- Decision making

While the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (2018a) competency framework covers all four of these areas (KSAO) and can be deemed a reliable and valid list against which to determine a coach's competence, it does not accommodate the new areas that P. Berry (2020) identifies. Internationally, the International Coaching Federation has developed professional standards inclusive of 11 core competencies. However, these standards and competencies are not empirically based (Griffiths & Campbell, 2008). Given that this research is based on a South African context, the competency framework utilised

is the GSAEC framework, and it is integrated against the requirements of virtual coaching to determine if it contains competency measurements for this new and evolving branch of coaching. Historically, the GSAEC framework was developed for more traditional coaching methods, and there is an assumption that additional competencies would need to be included to ensure that all digital coaching components are considered and catered for.

2.5.3 Proposition 2

Coaching competencies need to accommodate digital coaching.

2.6 Conclusion of Literature Review

Having reviewed the available literature on coaching through digital technology, it is evident that the use of technology not only enables coaches to have a wider reach but supports the process through added flexibility (Kanatouri, 2020). However, it is still unclear how coaches adapt to these technologies and if they view these as beneficial to their coaching processes. Clutterbuck (2020) postulates that the relative maturity of the coach will determine their adaptability to the use of technology in their practices and their agility towards changing their mindset and processes.

The lack of a uniform definition of digital coaching also adds to the complexity of understanding this phenomenon's impact on experienced coaches. However, the limited research on this growing coaching discipline enabled the researcher to create a framework on which to base this research. The research has provided a window into the coach's experience with digital technology and may pave the way for more in-depth research into this growing phenomenon. The literature review has demonstrated a need for further investigations into the relationship between the coach and the various digital technologies available to enhance the coaching process.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter looks at the methodological approach and design to address the research question. Key methodological concepts: the research paradigm, the design, the population and sample, research instrumentation, data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation, and the transferability, dependability and trustworthiness of the research instrument are covered in this chapter.

3.1 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted to conduct this study. Qualitative studies are "based on the belief that people construct knowledge in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). The research strategy utilises words to collect and analyse data instead of numbers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The rationale behind choosing this approach is that qualitative studies allow the researcher to get into the detail of the phenomenon; it provides detailed descriptions and provides insight into how the participants are experiencing the phenomenon (Sofaer, 1999). Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions to get to how the participant understands or experiences an event. Pistrang and Barker (2012) also highlighted that one of the benefits of utilising qualitative research methods is that the approach allows for the investigation of personal meaning of participants towards a specific phenomenon and enables the research participant to describe in their own language what their experience is. This research methodology allows the researcher to get detailed descriptions of how participants are experiencing the phenomenon.

To fully address the research objectives, one must understand the individuals' experiences being researched. As a result, an Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was adopted. IPA as a qualitative approach enables an understanding of the lived experiences of the individuals participating in the research programme (Alase, 2017). Fundamentally, this research aims to understand how the research participants make sense of digital coaching while utilising digital technology and their experience of this phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.2 Research design

This qualitative research study aimed to explore digital technology's influence on coaches coaching executive leaders. It is about understanding their lived experience of the impact of utilising digital platforms through digital technology, which has been coined as the 4th Industrial Revolution (Plutschinski, 2017). Through the IPA approach, the researcher attempted to "grasp the texture and qualities of an experience as it is lived by an experiencing subject" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 3). Alase (2017) refers to this approach as participant-orientated, focusing on how people make sense of the world and their experiences within the world. The IPA approach enables an examination of the topic in its own terms in as far as possible, the perspective of coaches (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The approach assisted with understanding how the coaches were adapting to the new way of working as they have been thrust quite suddenly into utilising digital platforms because of the COVID pandemic. It unpacked their actual coaching experiences through the Covid-19 pandemic and helped to understand how they themselves adapted their approaches and methods. The phenomenological approach is unique in that it enabled the researcher to engage and explore the coaches' actual human experience as they were experiencing it as they were consciously expressing their experience through their narrative (Creswell, 2007). The IPA approach is best used when understanding the shared and common experience towards a specific phenomenon of several individuals' (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This study sought understanding coaches' perceptions towards digital technology and how adaptable they are towards it, and the phenomenological approach assisted in understanding this. The findings of this study may be used to identify potential research topics to understand the influence digital technology has within the digital coaching arena. According to Reid, Flowers, and Larkin (2005), one of the key elements of IPA is that it explores and captures the meanings individuals give to their experiences. But more importantly, IPA views the participant as the expert and not the researcher, so they are telling their own story and how it unfolds in their lives and the researcher goes along with them on the journey (Reid et al., 2005). This is crucial for this study as the research participants are in fact viewed already as experts in the field of coaching having all qualified as Master Coaches, having more than 3000 coaching hours. This really allows for an in-depth understanding of how the

phenomenon is impacting the research participant in a live first-hand experience through the semi-structured interview process.

Qualitative research is all about the context, and as a result, interviews were the best-suited method to establish the participant's perceptions of the digital era's influence on their coaching. To understand the coaches' perception of how the digital era has influenced their profession, the phenomenological interview was the primary method of data collection used to unpack the perception of how the digital era has influenced their profession (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These interviews allowed for in-depth data collection around the 'coaches' view, understanding, and virtual coaching experience (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

3.3 Population and sample

3.3.1 Population

The study's population group is experienced certified coaches who are Masters Certified through the Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA). The International Coaching Federation was not utilised in this study as currently there are only three coaches in South Africa accredited with this institution.

The Masters Practitioner coach through COMENSA requires a minimum of 2000 hours of coaching experience as well as the following (COMENSA, nd)

- Completion of the COMENSA Behavioural Standards Framework questionnaire with a 70% pass mark.
- Submission of a Coach Credentialling Testimonial Report and Coaching log

These coaches must all reside in South Africa and have experience in coaching Executive Leaders.

As this is a qualitative study, the research was aimed not to form a generalised opinion but rather an understanding of the coaches' experience as they have been navigating digital platforms and adapting their practices to stay abreast of changing technology.

3.3.2 Sample and sampling method

The sample was made up of experienced coaches in South Africa. A total sample size of 11 coaches was interviewed. This aligns with Polkinghorne (1989), quoted in (Creswell & Poth, 2016), who suggests that the sample population in phenomenological studies ranges between five and 25 participants. Overall, the sampling technique used here was a non-probability methodology, more specifically, quota sampling. Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, and Nigam (2013) define this type of sampling as ensuring a predetermined characteristic of the population is represented as per the researcher's requirements. In this instance, the research participants had to be accredited Master Coaches with experience of more than 10 years.

The selection of participants in this research was the Self-Selecting sampling technique. Self-Selecting enables the participants to choose to participate in the process. (Sharma, 2017). An invitation was sent to COMENSA to invite Master Coaches to participate in the research. This invitation was only circulated amongst the accredited Master Coaches in South Africa. The first request yielded eight volunteers and the second request yielded a further four more volunteers, however, the 4th volunteer withdrew due to work commitments.

Table 3: Profile of Participants (by position or context, not name)

Description of respondent type, e.g. Manager, Union representative, student	**Number to be sampled**
NO NAMES or personal identifiers	
Masters Certified Coaches	11
TOTAL number of participants	11

3.4 The research instrument

The research instrument used was a semi-structured interview with each participant. One of the biggest advantages of interviewing was that it enabled the participants to speak in

their own voice and express their thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The researcher built an holistic picture and reported on the participants' detailed views (Alshenqeeti, 2014). More importantly, interviews, especially face-to-face interviews, allowed the researcher to build rapport with participants and essentially build trust (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Interviews yield the highest response rate; however, they are labour intensive and require a much longer time to administer (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Face-to-face interviews are also costly and impractical if the sample size is large.

This phenomenological study focused on the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the semi-structured interview covered the following themes:

- Their experience of the phenomenon of digital coaching through the utilisation of digital technology
- Situations and contexts influenced the shift to using digital technology to conduct coaching
- Competency and/or skill adaptation for digital coaching

These themes were essential to understanding the experience of the identified participants as they assisted in addressing the identified propositions and added to the body of knowledge of how coaches are adapting to utilising digital technology in their coaching practice.

3.5 Procedure for data collection

This research explored the digital era's perceived influence on the coaching profession within a South African context. According to Coach Training World (2019), the coaching industry has grown by 2.8% in the United States (US) alone, and the millennial component of the population is by far the largest component, surpassing 83 million individuals. Coach Training World (2019) believes that this will directly influence the use of digital technology for coaching as it is the preferred format of this generation. Participants were identified through the COMENSA platform, and an e-mail was distributed requesting participation in the research project. The researcher contacted each willing participant through an

introductory email outlining the research process, timelines, and next steps. Each willing participant was given a participant information sheet (see appendix 4) and a consent form (see appendix 5) to complete and return to the researcher. Through this process, the researcher was able to interview 11 coaches who assisted in understanding how South African coaches perceive and adapt to digital coaching.

All participants were required to sign the consent form to participate in the process voluntarily and to give consent to allow for the recording of all the sessions. Interviews were all done face-to-face via the digital platform Zoom. Each session was recorded and then transcribed. The researcher complemented the recording with notes.

All participant information was treated confidentially to ensure their anonymity throughout the process.

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Analysis and interpretation of the data are critical to the research outcome (Flick, 2013). As mentioned earlier, this study is about understanding coaches' perception towards digital coaching through the utilisation of digital technology and how they are adapting to this new environment in whch they find themselves. Therefore, the data analysis focuses on the links and special features between the participants, what they have in common, how they differ, and understanding what is causing these commonalities and differences (Flick, 2013). Thematic analysis was utilised to organise and give meaning to the data gathered. According to Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 57), Thematic Analysis is the process of "systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning across a data set". This process enabled the researcher to identify the coaches' shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As part of data analysis and interpretation, the following six-phase approach was followed, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012)

1. Familiarisation of the data – the researcher immersing herself in the data through reading and rereading all text data and listening to the audio recordings
2. Generation of initial codes – this involves the labelling of the data

3. Searching for Themes – this phase involves looking at the codes generated and identifying areas of similarity
4. Review of Potential themes – this phase is a quality check as the researcher was reviewing the codes as well as the themes
5. Defining and Naming Themes – ensuring that the themes are unique and specific
6. Producing the report – the researcher used the analysis to write up the report.

The researcher also used the qualitative data analysis tool, Atlas.ti, to assist in the coding and theming of the data. According to Smit (2002), this tools is a powerful workbench for qualitative and a researcher's supportive tool.

3.7 Limitations of the study

The research has the following limitations:

- The Coaching industry is one of the largest growing industries globally, showing significant growth in the last 20 years (Terblanche, Passmore, et al., 2019), and South Africa is not excluded from this. However, the sample size was not necessarily representative of the coaching population.
- The study only looked at Master Practitioner level coaches and excludes level 1 (Associate) and level 2 (Professional) coaches.
- The participant list was not necessarily synonymous with the demographic of South Africa as the researcher was dependent on voluntary participation and was only looking at a specific target population of coaches

3.8 Determining Rigour

Rigour is defined by Aroni, Goeman, Stewart, Sawyer, Abramson, and Thien (1999) cited by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) as the process of determining the competence and integrity of a study. According to Morse (2015), to achieve rigour in qualitative research, the researcher would have to evaluate four elements, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and trustworthiness of the completed product. Determining rigour in

qualitative research equates to determining reliability and validity in quantitative studies (Cypress, 2017). However, Davies and Dodd (2002, p. 280) postulate that ”inherent to the conception of rigour is quantitative bias” and that it is important that when determining rigour in research, the criteria “must be appropriate to the research and the type of research methods used”. This means that the normal rules that apply to quantitative studies do not necessarily apply for qualitative studies and so when we look for consistency, it is not about replicating the same findings over time and contexts but rather that the researcher focuses on the consistency of the data, the analysis and the conclusions (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

3.8.1 Trustworthiness

In determining the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher used the steps outlined by Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 215) by asking the following questions:

- Have I influenced the participants' descriptions truly to reflect the participants' actual experience?
- Is the transcription accurate, and is it a true reflection of the actual interview?
- Were there conclusions other than those offered that could have been derived in the analysis of the transcriptions? Have I identified these alternatives?
- Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?
- Is the structural description situation-specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations?

Creswell and Poth (2016) postulate that at least two must be present to study the eight validation strategies the researcher can employ. It is the opinion of Creswell and Poth (2016, p. 209) that of the eight, the following procedures must be employed in determining the trustworthiness of the research:

- Triangulation amongst different data sources – assuming that more than one data source is collected
- Using thick, detailed descriptions when writing and

- Member checking – taking the written narrative back to the participants

3.8.2 Credibility

In qualitative studies, internal validity is credibility and answers the question "how congruent are the findings with reality" (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). In this study, the concept of bracketing will be utlised to ensure the validity of the study. Ahern (1999, p. 407) defines this as the process by which the researcher does not “allow their assumptions to shape the data collection process” and more importantly, does not “impose their own understanding and constructions on the data”. The researcher must keep a reflexive diary, note their own bias and self-fulfilling prophecies, and ensure that they do not colour or influence the data collection process. The researcher ensured this by allowing the participants to define their definitions and meanings to questions and to relate their own experiences. The researcher had to set aside her own belief and understanding when assigning meaning to the research participants' experiences to ensure an accurate description of their lived experience. The researcher refrained from providing definitions for specific concepts and insisted the research participants present their understanding of the concepts.

3.8.3 Dependability

According to Amankwaa (2016), dependability is the process of showing that the findings are consistent and repeatable. To determine the study's dependability, the researcher utilised two separate processes: using another researcher to examine the study's process and product (Amankwaa, 2016). This is typically termed peer examination (Anney, 2014). The second technique used to achieve dependability was the proceed of coding-recoding. Anney (2014) defines this process as one in which the research codes the data and then recodes again after a one- or two-week lapse in time to determine whether the results are similar.

3.9 Ethical considerations

According to Tracy (2019, p. 242), ethics in qualitative research is achieved through the consideration of the following:

a) Procedural rules and ethics
b) The specific ethics of the context we are studying – in this instance, it would be the coaching environment
c) The ethics of working quite closely and intimately with the research participants.

Universally review boards highlight what a research undertaking should do (Tracy, 2019, p. 243):

- No Harm
- Avoid Deception
- Get informed consent
- Ensure Privacy and Confidentiality.

All participants signed a consent form and were able to remove themselves from this process at any time as participation in the study was voluntary. Participants also signed a consent form to allow for the recording of all sessions. All information gleaned through the interview has been treated confidentially and stored in a safe, secure area, with only the researcher having access to the information. All participants were guaranteed anonymity, and all quotations used in the research were done in such a manner that they did not identify the participant. According to Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) *anonymity is a process of removing the names of participants to ensure that they are not identifiable by any party. To ensure anonymity this study, all participants were assigned pseudonyms in the form of “Participant 1” to “Participant 11” and were referred to as such throughout the analysis and finalisation of the data. All audio recordings have been treated confidentially and stored in a safe, secure area with only the researcher having access to these. Once completed and submitted, all information gathered during the data collection process will be destroyed.

CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 3, the researcher identified that interpretative phenomenological analysis would be utilised to conduct the analysis that would assist in answering not only the main research question of how coaches are adapting to the digital world and utilising technology to expand their coaching practice and enhancing the coaching services they are offering but also the research objectives:

c) To explore the perceptions of coaches towards "digital coaching" using digital technology platforms
d) To explore the influence of the use of digital platforms on coaching competencies.

As previously mentioned, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allows the researcher to “understand the innermost deliberation of the lived experiences of research participants” (Alase, 2017, p. 11). To this end, semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather all the necessary information to answer the two questions posed. Through these interviews, the researcher was able to fully understand the lived experience of the participants with regard to the subject being researched.

The researcher transcribed the 11 interviews. Interviews were all conducted via the Zoom platform and recorded with permission from all the research participants. The audio transcription was then uploaded into Microsoft Word 365, the online version and using the transcribe function, transcribed automatically. The researcher then cleaned the document for all unnecessary spaces and labelled the speakers as interviewer and participant with a number allocation. The researcher then listened to the audio and followed along with the typed-out transcription correcting the wording where necessary. The researcher tried to stay as true to the real recording as possible. Each transcription took approximately four to five hours to complete.

The researcher then used the process of Thematic Analysis (TA) to analyse the data of the transcribed interviews. TA focused on meaning across data (Braun & Clarke, 2012) which

enabled the research to “see and make sense of…shared meanings and experiences” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57) of the research participants.

4.1.1 Coding and Theming

As covered in chapter 3, the researcher followed the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012)

1. Familiarisation of the data – the researcher immersing herself in the data through reading and rereading all text data and listening to the audio recordings
2. Generation of initial codes – the data was labelled and re-labelled
3. Searching for Themes – looking at the various codes; this was consolidated to create potential themes
4. Review of Potential themes – a quality check was conducted, and the codes and themes were reviewed
5. Defining and Naming Themes – the final list of themes specific to the research question was confirmed
6. Producing the report – the research used the analysis to write up the report

The researcher analysed the data presented through the transcribed interviews and created codes that directly related to answering the research questions. While the interviews provided rich data, the researcher focused on the information relevant to the research questions. The researcher then developed themes from these codes directly related to the two research questions.

In this chapter, the researcher groups the themes to answer the research questions. Based on the data analysis, the following themes emerged from the data and are presented below by each proposition of the study:

4.2 Results pertaining to Proposition 1

The use of digital technology to enhance coaching of executive leaders is still in its infancy in the South African context.

The researcher proposed that the use of digital technology by experienced coaches was still at its infancy for executive leaders as using technology to coach executive leaders would go against what they know about coaching. The findings, however, contradicted this proposition, and the following themes support this:

4.2.1 Theme 1: Understanding of Coaching

All the participants interviewed in the process had a good understanding of what coaching is. The key concept in all their definitions was a process of change. the coachee was going through a process and needed to get from point A to Point B. Below are some of the direct quotes from the Participants:

> *"I would say it's really about partnering with somebody on a change journey.. and it's partnering with them, so you'll support them through the journey, but you do it through enabling them to get a really better picture of who they are and you know their reality and what needs to happen if they want to change that reality"*- Participant **1**

> *"Coaching is about taking somebody from where they are to where they want to be"* **Participant 4**

> *"So coaching is all about moving forward and it's about equipping individuals with new thinking, in order to make more informed decisions. To test their thinking out in order for them to find new possibilities and opportunities of moving forward. So it's a proactive intervention."* **Participant 7**

> *"so coaching is a it's a vibrant, dynamic, alive process. Uhm, it morphs as you continue with it. It's never dull. It's never structured"* **Participant 8**

Only one participant had a uniquely different view of coaching; she summed it up as follows:

> "*I see it as the bridge between therapy and mentorship… Coaching for me is all about, uhm, taking back your power"* **Participant 7**

As mentioned earlier, the key concept for all of the participants, as mentioned earlier, was change, and it was about the coach holding the space for the coachee, giving them a safe environment to express themselves and to navigate the change at their own pace.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Career Transition of experienced coaches

An interesting fact amongst all the participants interviewed in this research was that coaching was not their first career choice. They had all transitioned into coaching following a tenured career in their vocation of choice. The careers of these participants varied, as can be noted by the quotes below:

> "*my background has been very varied through consulting and then a lot of time spending change in transition consulting for large organisations so you know helping them bring in systems, culture, change et cetera*" **Participant 1**
>
> "*Uhm I started out as a teacher. Then I went into I did mission work. I worked for a denominational youth organisation. And I was in the general director there"* **Participant 2**
>
> "*So I'm a I'm an ex life liner so I did the personal growth course and and learned all the skills"* **Participant 3**
>
> "*I actually funny enough come from the freight and logistics industry and I used to work in imports and exports and there I became a leader, a manager and stepped into a higher position of management in mentoring:"* **Participant 4**
>
> *"I spent 25 years with a big Ad agency so I was the chairman and MD of a big agency*" **Participant 6**
>
> "*I spent 40 years in as an engineer in various senior roles in South Africa manufacturing industries*" **Participant 9**

Each participant gravitated towards coaching because of their chosen careers and felt that coaching was the natural next step to transition. All the participants felt that in their first-choice career, they were already practicing the skills they needed to be successful in coaching.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Coaching accreditation

The requirement for participation in this study was to be a Master Practitioner coach with a minimum of 2000 hours and 10 years and above of coaching experience. The majority of

the participants achieved their Master Practitioner accreditation through the RPL process, using the hours they coached through their illustrious careers as evidence. Their logs books all had more than 3000 coaching hours. Apart from four participants, most of the coaches had not participated in any formal tertiary coaching educational programmes but had participated in coaching training programmes.

> "*You know uh so I qualified in 2008 and I've so I've been coaching ever since I've got about 3000 hours*" **Participant 1**
>
> *"So I I started coaching in 2005 I so I've been going at it now I'm into my 16th year. I have I don't know my file says I've got well over 20,000 hours of coaching."* **Participant 2**
>
> *"So it has truly been a journey for me from about 2006 to now, and I have accumulated about 3200 hours of paid coaching."* **Participant 4**
>
> *"I've got 36,668 logged hours in my last final log audit."* **Participant 8**
>
> "*So my approach to this was an RPL approach. Recognition of prior learning. And also recognition of of internal coaching. So in order to achieve that 2000 hours or of coaching, I brought forward my internal coaching and and then later on my my external coaching*" **Participant 9**

4.2.4 Theme 4: Primary coaching methodology

The primary focus of this research is to determine how coaches are adapting to utilising digital platforms in their coaching businesses. So, the key to this was to understand the primary coaching method used by these coaches. Every single research participant, prior to March 2020, engaged predominately in in-person face-to-face coaching, with the percentage split sitting at an average of 90% in-person face-to-face and 10% digital. The most common answer as to why this was the way it was boiled down to habit: they were used to doing it that way and never really thought of exploring alternatives. All of the participants reported a complete swop of the methodology due to Covid, going to about 5-10% in-person face-to-face to 90-95% online. About three of the research participants were involved in telephone coaching, one was conducting a coaching relationship purely through

email, and the rest were using the popular digital platforms of Zoom, MS Teams and Google meets. Most of the research participants were also using WhatsApp video calls as well as chat messages to conduct coaching.

> "*Yeah, so initially it was very much, it was mostly 90 to 95% face-to-face coaching. There's always been an element of online because I do pro bono work in Africa had already been doing that and obviously with COVID, everything stopped that was face-to-face."* Participant 1

> *"Just we just didn't know, you know, you said how can we have a I mean when when I was before Uhm, I was forced to look for a way so Skype was my was my default, but we could also have a WhatsApp and I remember this the day we discovered that you could actually have a multi person meeting over WhatsApp. I mean it was sort of miraculous, but the technology was always there. We just didn't know"* Participant 2

> "*so it was 80% face-to-face and then there was a 20% that was telephone coaching, Skype coaching in terms of follow up"* Participant 8

4.2.5 Theme 5: Definition of Digital coaching

This research paper aims to understand how coaches are adapting to using digital platforms in their coaching practices. It is therefore important to determine what the participants defined digital coaching as. The participants predominately defined it as using digital platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Skype to conduct coaching. A handful of them included utilising other technologies such as email, telephone, YouTube videos to aid in the coaching process.

> "*so for me it is using online platforms. Uhm, uhm I don't, I communicate with my clients through the usual, you know, the zooms, the teams or Googles and all the rest of it. I do use uhm, I do use online articles. I do use YouTube type videos"* Participant 1

> *"It's about using technology and FaceTime in the digital space to connect with another person in a coaching conversation."* Participant 3

"*Digital coaching is the use of of various media, let's call it electronic media to engage with with coach, coachee with client with mentor mentee. Uh, towards predetermined objectives or goals but the predetermined objectives are never cast in stone"* Participant 5

"*the virtual is I'm meeting in the now the digital for me would be the the the means of technology, so it would be Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, face face-to-face Facebook virtual."* Participant 8

4.2.6 Theme 6: Benefits of Digital coaching

All the participants in this research highlighted various benefits in using digital platforms for coaching, the top three being,

- Reach – you can coach anyone in any geographical location, the borders have opened up.
- Time Saver – you can seamlessly move from one session to another without having to drive to different locations or wait for coachees to come to you
- Improved their business – all but one participant reported a significant increase in business.

"*I actually think a lot of clients are more open and free when they're actually online uhm In their own spaces and things, so yeah."* Participant 1

"Uhm So, well, there's, uh, there's reach. And there's effectiveness or efficiency, I suppose. So uhm, the first thing is you can coach people anywhere in the world" Participant 2

"and so for me it's about the international market and definitely an opportunity quite honestly and then that's why I'm I'm actually working on at the moment" Participant 3

"*But people are a lot more willing to do it. They're a lot more open."* Participant 10

4.2.7 Theme 7: Challenges of Digital Coaching

On the flip side, there will always be challenges associated with a new way of working. The biggest one for about 80% of the participants was when the coachees had their cameras off and they could not see them visually. Most of the participants reported this as being the single biggest struggle, talking to a black screen and not reading the coachees' expression or watching their body language. The second biggest obstacle is internet connectivity, and with a large amount of load shedding happening in South Africa, this remains a constant battle with coaches and coachees battling to sustain a stable connection. Lastly was just the fear of technology, having to navigate this new digital world, especially when it id not something you are used to, has overwhelmed a few of the participants.

> *"One of the challenges I had in the beginning was what are they doing? Are they fiddling? Are they sending emails? Are they paying attention? You know where are they 'cause if they switch the camera off,"* **Participant 6**

> *"The difference though, is, is that it I find that people don't do they do 9:00 to 10:10 to 11:11. 12 they don't do nine to ten. 10:15 to you know, so they don't allow the 15 minutes in between so it could be that I sit here the whole day. And I don't get up and move"* **Participant 10**

> "*and not having a technical technological brain and speaking in pictures much better than I do in technology has been has been an enormous leap for me, and then when they say to me but now you will coach through all these platforms. I'm going not again, I nearly died the other three times."* **Participant 11**

4.3 Results pertaining to proposition 2:

Coaching competencies need to accommodate digital coaching

The researcher proposed that those competencies would need to be adapted to accommodate digital coaching. All the participants believed that the competency framework needed to be amended to include some reference to digital coaching and/or using digital platforms. However, they agreed that the basic behavioural framework should remain in place. It was also revealed by several of the participants that COMENSA was in the process

of reviewing their competency framework to accommodate for the changes that digital technology was bringing to the coaching profession. The following are the themes relating to proposition 2.

4.3.1 Theme 8: Understanding of Coaching Competency

The participants all prescribed to the COMENSA behavioural standards framework but were familiar with the GSAEC competency framework. Initially, some of the participants felt that the current standards were sufficient; however, when given time to reflect on their experience with digital technology and the utilisation of different digital platforms, they then agreed that some form of digital competency was required.

> *"that could come into it is skills on sensory acuity. I think that that is something that could be, uh, a skill set or skill sets around sensory acuity, which is which will become important. Uhm, you know, so being aware of the environment you know"* **Participant 5**

> "*I do believe it needs to be adapted. And new ways need to be found of how we could, how we could bring some solutions to market of doing that better. Ahhh there's a gap, there's a gap"* **Participant 7**

> *"They're written as an absolute competency, and maybe that's wrong. So so yes, in hindsight they do need to be revisited with a a future focus competency approach rather than a thou shalt competency approach if that makes any sense."* **Participant 9**

4.3.2 Theme 9: Addition of a Digital Competency

All the participants agreed that some form of digital competency had to be added to the competency framework. One that specifically addresses coaches learning the available technology and how to use it in a way that benefits their coaching. They felt this was especially important as they all agreed that the party that took longer to transition to digital platforms was the coaches instead of the coachees—so having a competency to refer to this methodology would ease coaches into becoming more familiar with technology and how it could aid them in their processes and practices.

"so I think the competency with the medium the tech and being comfortable and and I'm speaking, and I know I've got lots of issues you know with this I'm not, you know, I'm also a beginner and like many other people I'm a beginner here, but I think it's important that we know how to use this medium how to drive it, how to use it, how to be comfortable with it" **Participant 6**

"that COMENSA is looking at the competencies to allow for more remote digital." **Participant 10**

"And yeah so so yes, I think it's imperative, and yes, I think upfront there should be some debriefing for people that just are not technology minded, meaning you know every time you feel out of control and it feels like you're about to break, we just want to tell you that's actually normal. So how to hold that I don't know very softly, but at the same time, it's people to experience and experiment and move on without losing things please. So yeah, it's been quite a journey, yeah." **Participant 11**

4.4 Summary of the results/findings

By interviewing the participants, the researcher identified that, except for two participants, most experienced coaches adapted quite easily to digital platforms and transitioned from in-person face-to-face coaching to a more virtual world. Most participants confessed to preferring the digital platforms once they got used to them and stated that they would remain in the digital space even when things returned to normal. Of the eleven participants, only three said they would go back to in-person face-to-face coaching. They felt that the digital environment lacked the personal touch and that the real connection with the coachee was missing over a virtual screen.

All but one participant reported an increase in coaching business post-March 2020, initially saying that there was a significant drop in their business; however, once people got used to using the technology and overcoming their initial fears, their numbers improved dramatically and that they were now having more coaching sessions in one month than they had prior to the Covid Pandemic.

The participants also noted that the individuals struggling the most with the transition to digital platforms were coaches themselves and that many of them were assisting them to transition to this platform. One participant noted that the transition was easier for coaches who “didn't have to undo the indoctrination” that formal coaching programmes instilled upon new coaches.

Overall, the participants believed that digital technology was here to stay and that what would probably be utilised in the future was a hybrid model of in-person face-to-face and the use of digital platforms to conduct coaching. It is exactly because of this belief that the participants felt that the competency framework would need to be adapted to include some form of digital competency component to ensure that coaches are adequately skilled to deal with this phenomenon.

Proposition	Themes
The use of digital coaching among executive leaders is still in its infancy.	1. Understanding of coaching 2. Career Transition of experienced coaches 3. Coaching accreditation 4. Primary coaching methodology 5. Definition of Digital Coaching 6. Benefits of Digital Coaching 7. Challenges of Digital Coaching
Coaching competencies need to accommodate digital coaching	8. Understanding of Coaching competency 9. Addition of Digital Competency

Table 4.1 Themes linked to propositions

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the findings revealed in the interviews conducted with the 11 research participants to answer the research question: what the role of digital technology has had on coaches coaching executive leaders and the second question on whether the competencies required of coaches need to be adapted for the digital world. The findings are unpacked concerning the literature review conducted in Chapter 2. The researcher compares the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the literature reviewed. The researcher analyses the data and determines both the points of congruence and contrast between what the literature is saying and what the lived experiences are of the participants. Following this analysis is the final chapter which concludes this paper and addresses recommendations for further research.

5.2 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 1

The use of digital technology to enhance coaching of executive leaders is still in its infancy in the South African context.

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Chapter 2 opens with an introduction to coaching and how digital coaching has evolved using digital platforms through the digital technology available. The following is a discussion of the themes that were derived from the data in relation to the literature. These themes are crucial in answering the question - what the role of digital technology has had on coaches coaching executive leaders.

5.2.1 Theme 1: Understanding of Coaching

This study specifically looks at the coaching of executive leaders through digital technology. The literature reviewed defined coaching as maximizing peoples performance by unlocking their potential (Whitmore, 2009). When asked, the participants defined coaching as a

process of change that was not restricted to performance. Participant 6 summed it up as “a structured conversation to help somebody deal with the challenge they’re dealing with”. All of the research participants interviewed saw coaching as an holistic approach, dealing with the whole person and not just addressing a “performance” issue but looking at the coachee in their entirety and taking them on a journey of self-discovery. Most of the literature on coaching focuses on performance, as evident in the American Management Association (2008) study on coaching. This definition is carried further when looking at executive coaching; Bono et al. (2009) summarised what executive coaching is in their survey of executive coaching practices in saying that ultimately, it is a one-on-one relationship between an executive and an external coach working on sustainable behavioural change to be effective in their careers. Most of the research participants viewed the definition of executive coaching slightly differently, defining it as a journey of aligning the executive's personal goals and objectives with that of the organisation and determining the fit. It is clear from these two definitions that what was initially viewed as executive coaching is evolving. This change in how executive coaching is viewed is reinforced by Bono et al. (2009), who state that executive coaching, as a profession, various across the triad relationship of coach, organisations and executives. The research participants carried their definition of coaching through to executive coaching by reinforcing the “wholeness” of the coachee. Coaching for performance cannot be done in isolation from the whole person. It is important to go on the whole journey with the coachee. All elements of the person make up who they are and that is part of the coaching journey, you cannot separate the personal person from the work person. These definitions of executive coaching are important to the research as they are the threads that leads up to the transition to digital coaching; it also indicates that the research participants are aligned to what the literature has defined as coaching.

5.2.2 Theme 5: Definition of Digital coaching

Bolívar (2001, p. 2) defined digital vis-a-vis virtual coaching as the “application of face-to-face coaching to new technology, through specific multimedia platforms and environments that allow interactivity”. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) reinforced this in their definition when they postulated that it was simply doing what we normally do but online. When asked to define digital coaching, all but one research participant had the same definition. Digital

coaching, according to the research participants, was conducting coaching via digital platforms, such as Zoom, MS Team, WhatsApp Video calls. A few respondents included telephone calls and emails in the definition as well. Research participant 3 summed it up nicely when they said that it was about using technology and face time to connect with coachees. One research participant had a different definition and chose to split the virtual and digital coaching up. She viewed virtual as coaching using some form of technology, that is Zoom or MS teams and digital more of the type of self-help videos or webinars done by the likes of Tony Robbins. Digital for her was not real time, whereas Virtual was. It is clear from the research participants that they align with what the literature is saying, except for one research participant. Digital is a matter of changing the method from in-person face-to-face coaching to online via Zoom, Teams, or any of the other platforms available.

5.2.3 Theme 2: Career Transition of experienced coaches and Theme 4: Primary coaching methodology

Pertinent to this research was the career transition of these experienced coaches and their primary coaching methodology. These are not first-generation coaches, that is, coaching as the first career option. These are individuals with illustrious careers in many other fields, as depicted in Chapter 4, who transitioned into coaching. The research participants come from very senior positions in their career fields and have tremendous life experiences to draw upon in their secondary career option. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the theoretical foundation underpinning this research is that of Cognitive Behavioural Coaching and Constructivist Learning theory. The coaching theory has three core beliefs, as outlined by Minzlaff (2019),

1. Individuals' behavioural reactions are influenced by their perceptions and/or thoughts about events
2. These thoughts can be accessed, monitored, and altered
3. Desired behaviour can be accomplished by changing an individual's thoughts in reaction to events

These research participants have more than 10 years of coaching experience over and above their first career choice experience; they have predominately worked in Senior

Leadership positions, managing coaching, and developing people. So, while coaching was not necessarily their first career choice, they used the coaching techniques and methodologies in their careers without realising it.

In Chapter 2, the researcher described Cognitive Behavioural theory as a cyclical process of thoughts, feelings and behaviour (McLoed, 2019). The theory's premise is that our behaviour is defined by how we think and feel about an experience. All the research participants, through self-proclamation, have based their secondary career choice on the basis that it was a continuation of what they were doing in their first career choice, that is, developing people. Coaching was a natural extension of this for them. So, in theory their successful experience in their primary career automatically would make them successful in their secondary career choice. The research participants essentially took their experience and linked it to the coaching and defined a new career for themselves, which most of them have professed to be successful.

The research participants reported that pre-March 2020 their primary coaching method was in-person face-to-face either at the client's premises, their premises, or an agreed upon meeting venue. The percentage split was around 90-95% in person and 10% digital. Digital was defined by the research participants as predominantly video calling on Skype or WhatsApp, with only three of the research participants including emails and telephone conversations in the definition. This sudden shift from in-person face-to-face has been reinforced by Braddick (2021) who states that as a result of the COVID lockdowns, there is a move towards more remote coaching sessions using video conferencing and telephonic facilities.

Interestingly, of the 11 research participants interviewed, only three used the telephone as a medium to coach prior to the lockdown period. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the telephone had been identified as the most used tool under the digital umbrella of tools, even higher than video conference facilities (Geissler et al., 2014). When asked about this preference towards in-person face-to-face coaching, the majority of the participants claimed habit, it is something they always knew and were used to and never really thought about doing it differently until they were essentially forced to do so because of the COVID lockdown period. This is supported by Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) who cites Harrington (1999), who

postulated that our preference for in-person face-to-face coaching stems from what we are used to and what we know rather than clear empirical evidence. It is clear from the research participants that they adapted to using digital technology in their coaching practices, and their everyday lived experience is aligned to that of the literature reviewed. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) posited that the most important driving force in today's economy is digital technologies, and all of the research participants reported an improvement in their coaching practices with the transition to digital.

Most of the research participants also stated that the transition to fully digital during the lockdown period was a steep learning curve for them. They had to adapt quickly to a new way of conducting their coaching sessions. This adaptation varied amongst the research participants, with most of them participating in quick crash courses on how to use video conferencing technology. Some of the research participants went as far as to assist fellow coaches in upskilling them on the technology by running workshops and getting them to co-facilitate to transfer skills. They all reported that the more they worked with the tools, the more familiar they became with them and the more comfortable they were in conducting online coaching sessions. This is aligned to Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) who posited that the efficacy of the coach using digital technology is very dependent on their skill level, and also how they adapt their existing skills and knowledge in the new environment to enhance their utilisation of the technology.

The speedy transition from in-person face-to-face coaching can be ascribed to Cognitive Behavioural learning in that the research participants linked this new experience to what they know and created new knowledge to assist them in the new environment. While some of the research participants, specifically those who were a bit older, acknowledged that the transition was a bit bumpy, once they grasped the concepts of the technology they were using, the transition to coaching via digital platforms and using technology to aid in the coaching process became easier.

Only one research participant struggled with the transition, a struggle that is still ongoing as she continues to adapt to the digital technology surrounding her. As discussed in Chapter 2, the way we think and feel about an experience defines how we will be behave, of all the participants, research Participant 11 has had many negative interactions with technology

which directly impacted how she transitioned from in-person face-to-face coaching to digital coaching. By her own admission, she has acknowledged that it has taken her longer to grasp and become comfortable with the technology and still has some level of anxiety, especially when she is having technical issues with no-one around immediately available to assist her to resolve them.

In Chapter 2, the researcher cited Cassidy (2004) who postulated that the way a learner approached the learning would directly impact their performance, leading to the understanding that if the experience does not add value to the learner, they will not internalise and create new knowledge from it. In all instances, the research participants inclusive of Participant 11, experienced the value of utilising digital technology for coaching as it enabled them to connect with their clients during a period when they were unable too, and most of them have found more value in the digital experience and have expressed a desire to continue in this manner post all the restrictions of in-person contact sessions. Research participant 11 has stated that she will continue using the digital tools available to her but given a preference, she would revert to meeting her clients in-person, this sentiment was shared by two other research participants as well.

5.2.4 Theme 3: Coaching Accreditation

As part of the study, all research participants had to be Certified Master Practitioner coaches, as per the COMENSA specification of a minimum of 2000 coaching hours and in excess of 10 years' coaching experience. As mentioned in chapter 4, the research participants achieved their accreditation through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Only a few of them did a formal qualification in coaching before embarking on a career in coaching. Becoming a coach directly impacts the transition from in-person face-to-face coaching to utilising digital technology to aid in coaching. Research participants who followed the formal coaching education programme had more to unlearn to adapt to coaching in the digital environment. As one of the research participants stated, she did not have to undo the indoctrination, which made the transition easier for her. There was not this overwhelming need to constantly be able to see the coachee and she was quite comfortable with just hearing the coachee's voice only, to continue a coaching session.

Research participant 10, who is not only a coach but also a Coach Supervisor through COMENSA, stated that the coaches she supervised who went through “Formal Coaching” development programmes placed much emphasis on “seeing” the coachee. In addition, the programmes underlined being in the same physical space of the coachee to read the non-verbal body clues, and the digital environment takes you out of the physical location of the coachee and also gives you a very small view of the entire person. She further stated that these coaches struggled the most with the transition, especially the inability to see and be in the same personal space as the coachee. This sentiment was shared by a few of the research participants who also acknowledged a struggle with this particular aspect of coaching using technology. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) also initially questioned the benefits of coaching using digital technology as they felt that it lacked the closeness and energy of in-person face-to-face coaching.

Coincidentally, it was the research participants who had participated in formal coaching education programmes who struggled the most with this aspect, those that naturally transitioned into coaching and followed a more RPL approach to accreditation placed very little emphasis on the need to “see” and “feel” the coachee’s energy in their sessions.

5.2.5 Theme 6: Benefits of Digital Coaching

The research aims to determine if a coach’s previous experience and success with traditional in-person coaching would facilitate or impede their transition to the digital world. As cited earlier, Bada and Olusegun (2015) postulate that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences and it is through this construction of new knowledge from experiencing coaching via digital platforms that will either impede their transition to embracing coaching using digital technology or enable them to embrace it as the new normal and the future of how they continue to practice coaching.

To reiterate Cassidy (2004), it must add value for learning to be meaningful. Most of the research participants commented that the transition from traditional coaching to coaching using digital platforms was a steep learning curve. They had to become accustomed to using technology that they had not heard of before while continuing to maintain a relationship with their coachees and hold the space for them to grow and develop it. The

most daunting experience for most of them was to ensure that they effectively utilised the technology without hampering the coaching discussion.

For there to be traction in the utilisation of executive leaders' digital coaching, the research participants would need to see the benefits of utilising this medium in their coaching practices. There would need to be a compelling reason for them to continue using digital technology once the restrictions had been lifted and everyday life returned to some level of normalcy.

All of the research participants agreed that the main benefits of digital coaching were reach and timesaving. Every one of the participants felt that moving over to utilising digital platforms enabled them to reach a far wider audience. They can tap into geographical areas that previously were unattainable and out of reach for them. Now with the different technologies available to them, they have clients worldwide. Most of the participants reported having clients based in Europe, America, Australia, and the rest of Africa. This is reason enough for them to continue using digital technology as it opened a world for them that with traditional coaching was not available. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) also list geographical reach as the benefit of digital coaching, postulating that technology allows coaches to reach more participants on different continents and in different time zones.

Another big benefit of coaching was the amount of time saved. Coaches reported that they were not having to spend hours going from one site to the next to conduct coaching sessions. Most of their schedules included a component for travel time which now is a thing of the past and enabled them to have more coaching sessions scheduled in a day. Both the reach and time saving benefits improved the coaches' business prospects. They have more clients now and more time to see these clients. Except three participants, all confirmed that they would continue with the digital coaching platforms and not go back to in-person face-to-face coaching unless specifically requested by a client. Hakim (2000) cites saving time as one of the benefits of digital coaching within organisations; this has been reinforced by Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010).

A few felt that their coachees were more open and engaged via the digital platforms than in a traditional coaching session. This concept is reinforced by Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010), who postulate that there is no evidence to support the theory that coachees are less

inclined to open up on digital platforms instead of in-person sessions. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) further also suggest that some people are more comfortable using technology to communicate than the traditional in-person face-to-face method.

One research participant stated that he found his coachees to be more creative and innovative than they normally were in in-person face-to-face sessions, this has been reinforced by Hakim (2000), who also lists converting abstract ideas into concrete goals as a benefit of digital coaching.

5.2.6 Theme 7: Challenges of Digital Coaching

While there are many benefits associated with digital coaching, it is not without its challenges. As mentioned in chapter 4, the biggest challenge experienced by most of the research participants was the inability to see the coachee, the struggle of talking to a little black box and not been able to read the non-verbal cues that is synonymous with coaching. According to Hakim (2000), with the initial transition to digital coaching, there is an element of distance. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) also listed this need to physically see the coachees' face as a major obstacle to transitioning to digital platforms for more experienced coaches as they believed it enabled them to read and understand the discussion more effectively. Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010) posit that many coaches were of the opinion that initial personal contact was needed to be able to establish rapport with a coachee. The struggles the research participants experienced are definitely linked to the literature reviewed.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the second biggest obstacle is internet connectivity, and with the large amount of load shedding happening in South Africa, this remains a constant battle with coaches and coachees. The fear of technology, having to navigate this new digital world, especially when it is not something you are used to has overwhelmed a few of the participants and has hindered their progress into the digital world. This has been reinforced by Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010), who cited delays in signal as a disruptor to digital coaching.

In conclusion, despite the challenges experienced coaches face, they have transitioned to using digital technology within their coaching practices. The findings contradict the

researcher's proposition. COVID has forced these experienced coaches to adapt, and they have managed to overcome their own prejudices and beliefs to make this transition work for them.

5.3 Discussion pertaining to Proposition 2

Coaching competencies needs to accommodate digital coaching

Bachkirova and Smith (2015) postulated that coaching as an industry is showing significant growth, especially in organisations and with this growth, comes the expectation of professional bodies to create good quality accreditation systems against which coaches could be measured. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the researcher mentioned that the common body of knowledge for the purposes of this study would be the competency requirements that normally inform the university-level qualification (Blumberg, 2014). Within the South African context, the competency standards used to inform university-level qualification is the Graduate School of Alliance for Education in Coaching Competency framework with specific reference made to competencies 8 and 9. The research participants were all familiar with this framework and ascribed to the COMENSA Coaching Behavioural Standards framework which is very similar to the GSAEC competency framework. The following is a discussion of the themes relating to the second proposition in relation to the literature review conducted in Chapter 2.

5.3.1 Theme 8: Understanding of Coaching Competency

All the research participants had a very good understanding of the behavioural competencies required for coaching. As mentioned in this chapter, all the research participants prescribed to the COMENSA Coaching Behavioural standards. The research participants felt that these behavioural standards were an essential foundation to coaching as they defined how a coach showed up in the coaching sessions. All the research participants focused solely on the framework's behavioural competencies, only two of the 20 academic standards defined by the Graduate School Alliance. These two areas focus on the Core Coaching Competencies and the coaching process itself. As mentioned in chapter 2, these coaching standards have also been developed with traditional in-person

face-to-face coaching in mind. In summary, the research participants understood the core coaching competency and the coaching process.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Blumberg (2014) defined a competency list as complete if it included all four elements of Brannik and Levine's (2006) competency model. A list must have the following elements:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Abilities
- Other characteristics

The behavioural competency framework incorporates all these elements; however, they are still very focused on the traditional in-person coaching scenario. As Blumberg (2014) postulated, a competency framework should essentially detail the coach's knowledge, the skill they must demonstrate, what innate abilities they require, and what other characteristics are required to be an effective coach. Research Participant 1 actually summed it up very nicely when she said that current training courses and programmes train for what is currently happening in the industry and not necessarily for the future and what the requirements will need to be. She summed up essentially what P. Berry (2020) recommended when he postulated that all the lists of competencies that exist lack three elements, namely,

- Development of adaptive expertise
- Judgement
- Decision making

One of the research participants also had an interesting understanding on the competency framework in that he felt that competencies were written as aboslutes and not inquiring competencies. This is supported by Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010, p. 38) who postulate that current programmes actually “lack preparation and forethought—working out exactly how things will work, ensuring sufficient appropriate resources and creating contingency plans”. Nadeem, Garvey, and Down (2021), citing both Ferrar (2004) and Garvey (2011),

postulate that the coaching competency frameworks that are in play are in fact, more ethical guidelines that promote professional behaviour in the coaching industry.

5.3.2 Theme 9: Addition of Digital Competency

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the research participants' initial response to the question on whether the coaching competencies need to be adapted to incorporate digital technology was sufficient for the current competency framework. However, when allowed to reflect on their own experience in the transition to digital technology and the utilisation of different digital platforms, they agreed that some form of digital competency was required. The research participants all agreed that a competency relating to proficiency in the available technology and how to use it to benefit their coaching was a requirement for all coaching programmes. Coaching as a profession should no longer upskill coaches with the traditional coaching methods in mind but ensure that they are also skilled in the different technologies available to aid in the coaching process. Most of the research participants noted that COMENSA, as an institution, was revisiting their framework to incorporate this new digital component to the coaching profession.

In conclusion, the research conducted shows that the core coaching competencies need to be adapted to include a digital competence. This competence will look specifically at the technology available to coaches and the proficiencies they need to display to be competent in this area.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, the research findings do not support the first proposition and that despite the challenges experienced coaches face, they have adapted to digital coaching and have been using it quite successfully over the past two years to conduct their coaching business.

Secondly, the research findings support the coaching competencies' adaptation and have even recommended a digital competence for coaching.

The research has identified that coaches' perceptions towards digital is positive despite the challenges and that there is a need to develop a digital competence as the use of digital platforms is on the rise and will not be going away.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusion

6.1 Conclusion

This chapter covers the conclusion of the research paper. In chapter one, the researcher stated that the aim of the paper was to explore the role of digital technology on coaches coaching executive leaders by unpacking the perception coaches have towards the use of digital technology in their practices, as well exploring whether the current competencies of coaches need to be adapted to the virtual world using various digital technologies. It starts off by summarising how this research has contributed to the understanding of the perception that coaches have towards utilising digital technology in coaching executive leaders and the perception of the competency requirements of coaches using digital technology. It then makes recommendations to coaches, and coach training institutions. Finally, the chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

6.1.1 Conclusion pertaining to objective 1

The use of digital technology to enhance coaching of executive leaders is still in its infancy in the South African context.

The research question posed at the beginning of this paper was to understand the role that digital technology has had on coaches coaching executive leaders. As mentioned in chapter one, digital coaching via digital platforms was identified as a rising trend in the coaching field (The South African College of Applied Psychology, 2020). Partnered with this is the rise of executive coaching which is seen as one of the fastest-growing interventions for manager development (Ciporen, 2015). Available research on how digital technology impacts the coach and how they can use it in their practices to assist organisations in developing their leaders and overcoming challenges is not as widely available as research on virtual learning (Reyes, 2009). There also exists a gap in how these coaches themselves are transitioning to digital platforms using digital technology.

The researcher then, through the semi-structured interview process, collected data towards determining a response to unpack the proposition of this research study.

The researcher identified seven themes relating to the first proposition

1. Understanding of coaching
2. Career Transition of experienced coaches
3. Coaching accreditation
4. Primary coaching methodology
5. Definition of Digital Coaching
6. Benefits of Digital Coaching
7. Challenges of Digital Coaching

Through these themes, the proposition was disproved in that it was found that in the last two years, digital coaching has grown amongst the research participants by more than 50%. All research participants reported a total turnaround in their business model post the initial Covid Lockdown, moving from predominately in-person face-to-face coaching to coaching via various digital platforms, including video calling, telephonic conversations, and emails. These experienced coaches have totally adapted to using technology in their practice in a short space of time, even the one who had a negative relationship with technology. She managed to overcome her fear and trepidation with using technology and is successfully running her practice on-line using different technologies as per her client requirements. Despite the gap in the literature with regards to the coaches' experience with digital technology, there was congruence in the research findings versus the literature reviewed.

In summary, the research revealed the following important points

- All research participants similarly, bar one, defined digital coaching and were aligned to the definition proposed by the literature
- All research participants reported the same benefits of digital coaching, as well as the challenges
- All research participants, bar three, reported the decision to continue coaching using digital platforms post the lifting of Covid restrictions, with one going as far as to say that she would not return to in-person coaching.

The study's research participants indicate that utilising digital technology to enhance the coaching practice is on the rise in South Africa, a phenomenon that needs further investigation.

6.1.2 Conclusion pertaining to objective 2

Coaching competencies need to accommodate digital coaching.

Part of the research question was to understand digital technology's impact on the competencies required to coach digitally. For this proposition, two themes were identified, namely

1. Understanding of Coaching competency
2. Addition of Digital Competency

All the research participants prescribed the COMENSA Behavioural Framework and were familiar with the GSAEC competency framework. They all had a similar understanding of what a Competency framework is, and all agreed that it was vitally important for coaches.

The research participants all agreed that a digital competence needed to be added to the framework to aid new coaches to adapt to digital technology. They felt that this was lacking in current coaching programmes and that it was vitally important to start including it as this was the way of the future.

This is the one area on which the literature is relatively silent. There is no research available on developing coaching competencies for utilising digital technology. However, this is something that is already being looked by COMENSA and is currently in development; perhaps they will lead the way for others to follow.

6.2 Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for coaches and coach training institutions, inclusive of those involved in designing coaching programmes.

6.2.1 Recommendations for coaches

This research paper focuses on coaches and how they are adapting to utilising digital platforms through the various digital technologies available to them. Utilising digital technology is the way of the future and coaches must equip themselves with the knowledge and understanding of the different platforms available to them. Investing in a good fibre connection and quality earphones or speakers is critical to their success. Given the landscape of South Africa/or power outages experienced/or power outages experienced daily, having a large amount of loadshedding, having an alternative power source is also a good investment. Ensuring access to more than one video conferencing platform is also essential and knowing how to operate them effectively will enhance the coaching experience and enable the coach to focus on coaching and not on navigating the system before them. This will reduce the technology anxiety experienced by coaches, especially first-time users.

6.2.2 Recommendations for coach institutions and individuals creating coaching programmes

As mentioned earlier, digital is the way of the future and it is essential that the creators of coaching programmes accommodate this. All new programmes and previously developed ones should cater for digital technology. They should equip coaches with the skills necessary to navigate these platforms and arm them with the competencies necessary to succeed in the digital world. Coaching programmes should be inclusive of all coaching methods and not predominately focused on in-person face-to-face coaching. A more hybrid model should be adapted to equip coaches to deal with the real-world environment.

6.3 Suggestions for further studies

This research paper focused on the perception coaches have towards the use of digital technology in their practices and the required competencies of coaches, and how they need to be adapted in the virtual world using various digital technologies within the South Africa context. Eleven Master Coaches were interviewed, and they provided some information on the role digital technology played in their practices, as well as the impact it has had on them. The following areas for future research are recommended:

- A larger sample of coaches without the delimitations of coaching hours and experience
- Exploring the different methods available and their efficacy in coaching
- Exploring the experience from the coachees' perspective
- Exploring how coaching programmes, both formal and informal, are being adapted to incorporate digital technology

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APPENDIX 1 - Consistency Matrix

Objectives	**Literature Review**	**Propositions**	**Research questions**	**Source of data**	**Type of data**	**Analysis**
To explore the influence **digital coaching** has on the coaches' competence requirements.	Ghods and Boyce (2013) E Cox et al. (2010) Clutterbuck and Hussain (2010)	Coaching competencies needs to accommodate for digital coaching	How (why) does digital coaching influence coaching competence	Interviews	Qualitative	Thematic
To explore the perceptions of coaches towards "**digital coaching**" using digital platforms through the different available **digital technologies**	Brannik and ' 'Levine's (2006) Blumberg (2014)	The use of digital coaching among the executive leaders is still at its infancy.	How does **digital technology** influence the progress towards **digital coaching**	Interviews	Qualitative	Thematic

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APPENDIX 2 – Research Instrument

Interview Questions

The interview is a semi-structured interview, and the following questions must be asked.

1. What is your understanding of coaching?
   probe: definition of coaching
2. What is your definition of executive coaching?
   probe: definition of executive coaching
3. In your view, how is business coaching different from executive coaching?
   Probe: reason for this?
4. What is your primary method of conducting coaching?
   probe: What is this based on?
5. What do you understand by the term digital coaching?
   - Probe if they have implemented it and the methods used?
6. Explore why this avenue has not been pursued.
7. What in your opinion are the benefits of virtual coaching?
8. How has the digital revolution impacted your coaching practice?
9. Looking at the current coaching competencies as defined by the Graduate School of Alliance for Education in Coaching and considering the move towards virtual coaching from the more traditional coaching methodology, what in your opinion should be included on this list to accommodate for virtual coaching

APPENDIX 3 – ORGANISATION PERMISSION



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits Business School
2 St David's Place, Parktown
Johannesburg, 2193, South Africa
PO Box 98, WITS, 2050

Website: www.wbs.ac.za

COMENSA
Tel:010 443 5081
Email : administrator@COMENSA.org.za

01 May 2021

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Permission to conduct research at COMENSA.

My name is Cindy Manuel.

I am studying for a Master in Management in Business and Executive Coaching at the Wits Business School, at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am seeking permission to do research at COMENSA.

I am conducting research on how coaches are adapting to the digital world and how they are utilising technology to expand their coaching practice and enhance the coaching services they are offering. This study aims to contribute to the literature by understanding how coaches are adapting to the digital world and how they are utilising technology to

expand their coaching practice and enhance the coaching services they are offering. It will also help contribute to the coaching competencies body of knowledge and the coaching theory by identifying those competencies critical in coaching virtually. It also attempts to identify the areas in shifting from in-person coaching to virtual coaching and finally identifies the support structures required.

I will invite individuals from your organisation to participate in this study. The target audience is specifically coaches with more than 2000 coaching hours and are certified as Master Practitioners. If they agree, they will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview of approximately sixty (60) minutes. Interviews will be conducted during office hours of 8:00am to 17:00 unless the participant requests an alternative time. All interviews will be both audio and video recorded.

Participants will be asked to give their written or verbal consent before the research begins. Their responses will be treated confidentially, and identities (their names and the name of the organisation) will be anonymous unless otherwise expressly indicated. Individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

The results will be communicated in a research report which will be available online through the university library's website.

The research participants will not be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way. They will be reassured that they can withdraw their permission at any time during this project without any penalty. There are no foreseeable risks in participating in this study. The participants will not be paid for this study.

All research data will be stored electronically on a computer which is password protected and preserved for three years after which it will be destroyed.

I therefore request permission in writing to conduct my research at your organisation. The permission letter should be on your organisation's headed paper, signed and dated, and specifically referring to me by name and the title of my study.

Please let me know if you require any further information. I look forward to your response as soon as is convenient.

Yours sincerely,

Cindy Manuel

Cindy-Lou Manuel
083 556 3044
2409794@students.wits.ac.za

Ayanda Magida
0829071104
ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX 4 PARTICIPANT REQUEST

Participant Information Sheet

University of the Witwatersrand,

Wits Business School,

2 St David's Place, Parktown

Johannesburg, 2193, South Africa

PO Box 98, WITS, 2050

Website: www.wbs.ac.za

Good day

My name is Cindy Manuel, and I am a Master student studying a Master In Management in Business and Executive Coaching at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, and I am investigating *Coaching Executive Leaders using Digital Platforms: a South African Perspective* under the supervision of Ayanda Magida. The aim of this research project is to explore the perception coaches have towards digital platforms and the required competencies of coaches need to have using these platforms for coaching.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview to discuss this phenomenon. This activity will involve just you and me and will take around sixty (60) minutes. With your permission, I would also like to record the interview using a digital device.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project, you will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you

do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume another time.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. The data collected from this research project will be stored on my computer which is password and will be kept for three (3) years. With your permission, the data collected from this research project may be used by other researchers. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,
Cindy Manuel

Researcher: Cindy-Lou Manuel
083 556 3044
2409794@students.wits.ac.za
Supervisor: Ayanda Magida
0829071104
ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX 5 CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Title of project: Coaching Executive Leaders using digital platforms: A South African Perspective

Name of researcher: Cindy Manuel

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous	YES	NO
I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be an audio and video recorded	YES	NO
I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.	YES	NO

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

…… (signature)

…… (name of person seeking consent)

…… (date)

APPENDIX 6 ETHICS CLEARANCE

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number: WBS/BE2409794/687
This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

This certificate is only valid if accompanied by formal permission from the relevant stakeholder(s).

Project title	Coaching executive leaders using digital platforms: a South African perspective
Investigator / Researcher	Mrs Cindy-Lou Manuel
Nature of Project	MM (Business & Executive Coaching)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed confidentialty.
Issue Date of Certificate	2021-05-07
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project report
Chairperson	Prof Anthony Stacey ☎ +27 11 717 3587 +27 82 880 4531 anthony.stacey@wits.ac.za

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Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

10 May 2021
Date: