



Work

Who Needs A Career Coach?

Tara Weiss, 11.09.07, 5:40 AM ET

Has it really come to this?

People who can't achieve their personal goals call a life coach. Gym-goers unable to use the treadmill call a personal trainer. And, in the professional world, employees who feel stuck call a career coach.

These are things our friends used to help us with for free. Not to mention a mentor or a therapist that's covered by your health insurance.

But apparently all of that wasn't enough since the number of career coaches has exploded.

It's hard to measure the industry's growth because until this year numbers weren't tracked, but there is anecdotal evidence. About 400 to 500 new members join the International Coach Federation--the career coach trade group--every month, according to its president, Kay Cannon. The federation's first survey, released in February, shows there are about 30,000 career coaches worldwide. Together, they generate close to \$1.5 billion in revenue, with the U.S. market accounting for approximately half of that.

So just who are career coaches, and why are they qualified to advise you on your professional life?

Many aren't. "Anyone can hang a sign on themselves and say, 'I'm a coach,'" says Robert Hicks, a career coach and psychologist who directs a certificate program in the field at the University of Texas at Dallas.

Until recently, there were no university-level courses offered in coaching. Now Texas has one, as do Georgetown and Columbia. All three programs are accredited by the International Coach Federation, which also has a certificate program. ICF's program is rigorous and requires several years of study and practice before students receive the highest level of certification.

But all of this is voluntary. There is no test to pass or license one needs in order to practice. Many coaches operate their business from home. "There is nobody that holds the marketplace to a standard," says Cannon. That's likely why there are so many coaches. Plus, it's lucrative. The least expensive coach charges around \$100 per hour, but the cost can often go much higher.

It's hard to pin down exactly what a career coach does. Some of them don't even like the title--they prefer executive coach or leadership coach. "Coaches facilitate self-directed change," says Hicks. Another coach, Susan Whitcomb, describes it this way: "It's a partnership that helps the client be brilliant and magnificent and see possibilities and break through places of being stuck that they never dreamed possible."

Huh?

"Yes, it can sound very woo-woo out there and pollyannaish," says Whitcomb, who runs her practice out of her California home. She and other coaches stress that they differ from psychologists because they are future oriented, whereas therapists deal more with the past. Their clientele varies, too. Some coaches work for corporations that want certain employees to develop leadership skills. Others work with individuals who don't know how to deal with office politics, can't find the right job or were recently fired.

One of Whitcomb's clients, Ann Coleman, said Whitcomb helped her get out of a professional rut and into the job of her dreams. Coleman was previously a nurse and an information technology professional. She also has a doctorate in education. She applied for jobs near her Houston home for five years but couldn't get a foot in the door.

Whitcomb posed several questions: What motivates you? Why do you work? What is your purpose in life? They were tough questions that made Coleman think about what she is capable of by writing down her answers.

From there, Whitcomb addressed what Coleman calls her tendency to be too aggressive in conversation. Coleman helped her develop a "softer touch" when talking to certain audiences. Next, she asked Coleman to describe her dream job: a management position that also uses her nursing, IT and education backgrounds.

When a job encompassing all of that came up, Whitcomb coached her through the interview process. They discussed typical interview questions as well as how Coleman should market herself, and they designed a presentation showing the committee that she could do the work and would bring much to the position.

When she received the offer, Whitcomb coached Coleman on how to negotiate her salary.

"Friends are good and they have your best interest at heart," says Coleman. "But I think a coach, because they can compare how you present yourself to other people, they have a database of information that you don't have as a person seeking a job."

Coaching has been around for at least a decade, but it's in demand now more than ever. That's likely a sign of the times. With globalization and so much technology at our fingertips, the workforce is rarely off the clock. There is increased competition, and the push to do more with fewer resources is greater than ever.

"Our orientation toward achievement is higher than ever," says Chris Wahl, executive director of Georgetown's Leadership Coaching Certificate Program. As a result, people lose track of how much they're working and how little they value themselves and their families. But it's more than that. Unemployment is at a low level, 4.7%, and demand for talent is high. That means employees have options. Career coaches often advise them on which is the right career or position.

Some might wonder why employees pay someone to help figure that out.

Wahl's response: "Even though it looks like a no-brainer, it's very difficult for people to change their behavior. That's part of where we come in. It's hard to convey how much this work has to do with helping clients see their world in a new way. It's challenging them on who they really are."