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FRESH STARTS; Coaches Wanted In the Game Of Life

By EVE TAHMINCIOGLU

NOTHING quite fit Shawn Driscoll's schedule, or her passion, until she became a life coach. Her job is to help people set and achieve goals in their careers and their personal lives.

"I've always been good at advising people and coming up with strategies, so life coaching leveraged my natural talent, and it gave me more flexibility than a corporate job," said Ms. Driscoll, who lives near Detroit and has two young children. A former consultant for Ernst & Young, she became a life coach in 2004.

Life coaches are like personal trainers for the psyche, and their ranks are growing. Many Americans want to go "from good to great," and they're looking to life coaches to get them there, said Carol Kauffman, assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School, and co-founder and director of Harvard's Coaching and Positive Psychology Initiative.

Many coaches, like Ms. Driscoll, are accredited by a coaching organization. But no degrees or credentials are required to begin working as a life coach. There is also no federal or state oversight of the industry.

Robert Klein, a Westport, Conn., psychotherapist and past president of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, said that coaching tends to stress adaptive and coping skills, whereas psychotherapy tends to focus on issues like anxiety and depression.

"There are potential problems when someone comes in for life coaching and they actually have some serious, diagnosable mental or emotional problems and the person is not trained to recognize it or treat it," he said. "I think it's something we should keep our eyes on because in life coaching there is no licenser, no state board of professional accreditation. Anyone can call themselves a life coach."

The industry has worked to improve credentialing, but at this point coaches' participation is all voluntary. The International Coach Federation, based in Lexington, Ky., is among the groups that offer various levels of credentials, along with a code of ethics.

Ms. Driscoll took coaching courses through Coach U, a school based in Andover, Kan., that is accredited by the federation. The coaching program cost about \$4,000 and was conducted via telecast. It included 132 hours of training and took her about two and a half years to complete.

Through the federation, she also received certification that required 60 hours of training; 250 hours spent coaching clients; and an oral exam with a federation assessor, among other requirements. To keep her certification, she said, she will have to keep accumulating training hours and remain an active coach.

It's all been worth it, she said, because "it's something that's powerful and purposeful."

According to a study commissioned by the International Coach Federation, there were more than 15,000 personal and business coaches in the United States in 2006. Kay Cannon, the federation's past president, said that her group has about 13,000 members, up from 3,240 in 2000. (These include both life coaches and those with more of a corporate focus.)

The federation's study, performed by PricewaterhouseCoopers, surveyed 5,415 coaches, mostly in the United States. Fifty-eight percent said they worked part time and earned an average of \$26,214 a year. Those who worked full time reported an average salary of \$83,608.

Ms. Driscoll says she earns about \$70,000 a year working Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. She has 10 to 12 clients at any given time. Her fee is \$450 a month, which covers three hours of private coaching sessions, either over the phone or in person, and unlimited e-mail communication. She also offers group coaching sessions at a community center.

One of Ms. Driscoll's former clients, Gina DeLapa, signed up for three 45-minute sessions of life coaching in 2004 when she was having trouble adjusting to her move back to Michigan from California. "She gave me permission to shine," said Ms. DeLapa, who runs an office etiquette firm in Ada, Mich. "Shawn asked crucial questions. She said, 'It seems as though you have extremely high standards on how you treat other people, but you're willing to accept a lot less.' She would make insights like that."

Fresh Starts is a monthly column about emerging jobs and job trends.