

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Executive coaching evolves

As industry grows, more coaches seeking certification, focusing on niches

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The executive coaching business isn't what it used to be. It's bigger. These days, the number of fulltime business coaches is growing exponentially, and those coaches are being called upon by executives and their corporate employers to help retain young, entry-level employees, prepare high-potential leaders and other business challenges in between.

The industry also has an increased level of professionalism, with more and more associations pushing for standard skills and a growing number of universities offering new coaching certification programs.

"When I went through the coaching programs, there were only a couple of accredited programs in existence, but now there are 150," said Judy Office, a business coach for the past seven years whose Inner Summit coaching business is based in Blue Ash. "This is now much more of a serious profession, and it has taken a lot of time and a lot of people's efforts to build the knowledge base and to build the understanding in the marketplace."

Office said there was little understanding about what the industry was when she started as a coach. But now more businesses are able to distinguish between coaching and training, or even coaching and therapy, she said.

"Coaching works from the premise that someone is healthy, and they're productive already. It helps them to look at where their goals are and where they want to go," she said.

"Coaching doesn't necessarily offer advice or expertise. It questions someone to find their own insights or gain their own wisdom."

Even so, more business coaches are focusing on particular niches, said Todd Uterstaedt, president and CEO of executive coaching firm Baker & Daboll LLC. That's partly because they have to distinguish themselves from the many other coaches in the business, he said.

"My colleague has a thriving business for attorneys. She used to be head of human resources with a large law firm with a presence here in Cincinnati. I do a lot with defense contractors, because I have a military background, as well as with senior leaders," said Uterstaedt, a coach since 1998. "My other colleague, she does a lot of work with CPAs because of experience she has."

The industry remains unregulated, which means anyone can throw up a shingle and call themselves executive coaches.

But the number of people seeking training and certification is growing, too.

The International Coach Federation, based in Lexington, has more than 11,000 members from 82 countries. The organization offers credentials based on training and experience, and more than 2,200 people hold an ICF credential. Other providers offer training and credentials, too, with some organizations focused solely on business coaching.

Those in the industry expect that executive coaching will continue to become more standardized.

"It's here to stay, the concept of coaching," said Pamela Richarde, immediate past president of the ICF whose Innervision Enterprises is based in Southern California. "Literally thousands of corporations across the planet are using coaching to develop their leaders and to create greater productivity and margins."

Not that it's been easy. Like every other business, the industry had to weather the economic downturn after the terror attacks of 9/11. But some coaches found that the attacks actually resulted in more business for them, not less.

"A different market emerged here in the U.S.," Richarde said. "Even though we had the economic downturn, we had a need arise in people for clarity in their life direction. Fifty percent of 9/11 was it got people to pay attention and be more conscious of their life. Both things are good for the profession of coaching."

Plus, fewer companies have the hierarchies in place these days that they did years ago, Uterstaedt said. So grooming a promising young leader isn't as easy as moving that person up a rung or two on the corporate ladder because the ladder doesn't have as many rungs. Some firms are turning to coaches to help with that instead, he said.

And even companies that have cut training budgets see the long-term value in coaching key employees, Office said.

"They see it as more of a long-term sustainable approach to development," she said.