



ICC Academy New Zealand
White paper series
Issue 2

The value and limitations of

Virtual coaching & AI in coaching

Great to have you here!

Welcome to the second paper in this three-part series, from the New Zealand branch of the International Coaching Community.

These papers focus on the challenges and opportunities of coaching in the modern world.

- The first paper, which you can download on the ICC Academy website, looked at how coaching approaches can be used to support organisational change and transformation.
- This second paper will explore the value and limitations of virtual coaching and AI tools in coaching.
- The third paper will look at coaching for equity and inclusion, including best practices to coach neurodiverse clients.

Thanks for reading – we hope you find this an insightful read.

The team at ICC Academy New Zealand.

Introduction

To live in the modern world is to experience rapid, technology-driven change.

If we even step back a short way, to the 1990s, it's clear how much our lives have been transformed by the internet, the smartphone, and more recently, by generative AI.

A brief walk down memory lane

- 
- 1990 - first web browser launched
 - 1992 - first text messages sent
 - 1994 - first phone that could send email (and fax!) was launched
 - 1995 - first online Amazon store opened, shipping to 45 countries after just months
 - 2001 - first internet-enabled mobile phone hit the market
 - 2007 - first iPhone launched, with affordable internet, cueing smartphone revolution
 - 2022 - first public access to ChatGPT, a generative AI tool

These transformations have been driven by ever-increasing computer power, as processors become faster and more capable. In fact, Moore's Law posited that the number of transistors on a microchip would double every two years, at minimal cost, which would represent a doubling in computing power every two years. The law has largely held true since the 1960s – and because a microchip only has so much space, scientists are now printing transistors that are *scarcely bigger than atoms* (Financial Times, 2024). This means that a single microchip can hold *billions* of transistors and contain *almost 500 kilometres of wiring* (ibid). It's mind-boggling stuff.

But if we return to the human scale – what does all of this technology-driven change mean for coaches?

What is the value of virtual coaching and AI tools, for coaches and their clients?

What are the limitations we rub up against, and how might those be managed?

We answer those questions, in this white paper.

The paper is structured in two parts. First, we will look at the more established technology of virtual coaching, and explore the strengths and limitations of this approach compared with traditional face-to-facing coaching. Then we will delve into the topic of AI, including how AI tools may be used in coaching, and the value and limitations of the technology.

This paper was developed with the help of some expert interviewees, including:

- **Flynn Coleman**, Author of 'A Human Algorithm: How Artificial Intelligence Is Redefining Who We Are.'
- **Chris Loynes**, Subject-matter expert on machine learning and Large Language Models.
- **Raechel Ford**, Executive Coach and Regional Manager for ICC Australasia and Southeast Asia.
- **Emma Kirkman**, Consultant, Facilitator & Ways of Working Coach.
- **Suzanne Cross**, Executive and Team Coach, and Experience Design Specialist.

VIRTUAL COACHING

A quick primer on virtual coaching

We suspect you're familiar with virtual coaching by now, in the wake of the Covid pandemic that led most white-collar professionals to work from home.

But to be clear, virtual coaching refers to coaching an individual or a team in an online forum, for instance via an online meeting platform such as Zoom, Teams or Google Meet.

Virtual coaching sessions may be supplemented with other tools – including online collaborative whiteboards such as Mural and Miro, which allow people to jot down ideas, organise thoughts, draw diagrams, track progress through a multi-step process, and more.

What is the value of virtual coaching?

Virtual coaching has a range of benefits, when compared with traditional face-to-face sessions.

More accessible

There are no geographical barriers to virtual coaching – because the parties involved simply need to log onto their computer. It's far simpler to connect to people all around the country, and the world.

Lower cost

In-person coaching sessions have associated costs – including travel, venue, food/catering, and potentially accommodation. These costs can become prohibitive in the context of team coaching, if you are bringing people in a distributed team together for a multi-day coaching session. Virtual coaching avoids all associated costs.

More efficient use of time

Virtual coaching sessions are easier to plan and reschedule, because there is no buffer for travel time on either side of the session. But even *in the room*, virtual coaching with teams is more time efficient – a finding we did not expect. As Emma Kirkman, Consultant, Facilitator & Ways of Working Coach, explained, "Time compresses inside virtual containers. I feel like I can get a hell of a lot more done in an online session than I can in-person, these days. And I inherently know to schedule less time for a virtual versus in-person session."

Why is this? The online setting may make it harder for people to break into side-discussions and collegial banter, so the 'relational' focus of the session is dialled down while the 'task' focus is dialled up.

Kirkman agrees that "You'd plan a team coaching session differently, if it were in person. You'd give more time for breakout discussions, for comfort breaks, and you'd have more focus on relationship over task."

Virtual can be more visual

Virtual coaching sessions can be powerful when they include the use of virtual, visual whiteboards. These whiteboards can capture:

- Point-in-time discussions – such as brainstorming, goal setting grids, or options analysis (in team coaching).
- Journeys over time – for instance, clarifying a team's vision, values and ways of working together; or clarifying an individual client's big-picture goals, interim goals, resources and next steps.

The online whiteboard keeps key information in one place, making it easy to refer back to.

In team coaching – easier to toggle from group to individual activities

Team coaching sessions often include a mix of group and individual work – for instance, individual brainstorming followed by group discussion, theming and prioritisation. Emma Kirkman explained that this toggling process is simpler in a virtual environment, as you can

create the conditions for individual focus – for instance by muting everyone’s microphones and setting a visible timer which shows how long the task will take. In person, toggling between group and individual work is slower, as there is more chatter and distraction – a topic we’ll return to shortly.

For now though, let’s talk through the limitations of virtual coaching.

What are the limitations of virtual coaching and how can these be managed?

To coach virtually is to switch the ‘delivery mode’ from a face-to-face channel, to an online channel. While this switch has many benefits, it can also have limitations that need to be managed or designed around.

Risk of diminished connection

Effective coaching begins with connection, and with a sense of rapport between the client and coach. It is typically easier to forge these connections when you are *in the room* with someone, rather than observing them through a screen.

As Suzanne Cross, Executive and Team Coach, and Experience Design Specialist, notes “There’s just something about being in the room with people. . . In my experience, you can build that rapport and trust a little more easily face to face, than virtually.” Raechel Ford, Executive Coach and ICC Regional Manager agrees that “You can lose the depth of connection [when you are online]. I still believe the face-to-face gives us the non-verbal cues, the body language, the energy in the room.”

As a coach, how can you mitigate the risk of less-solid connections, in a virtual context?

- **Choose the right channel for the job.** For individual coaching, you will ideally meet with your client for the intake meeting, and when discussing any particularly sensitive topics.

For team coaching, there is again value in an in-person kick-off, especially if the team is newly formed and engaging in *whakawhanaungatanga* – fostering personal connections and understanding between team members. Fractious topics are also best dealt with face to face, as you will need to ‘read’ the energy and state of each team member.

- **With 1-1 clients – don’t skip the back story.** With individual clients, be sure to spend time understanding their history, or the key experiences that have shaped them. Our childhoods, family dynamics, early life and work experiences all significantly shape who we are – and when you know your client better, you can connect and reconnect with them more readily, in virtual coaching sessions.
- **With teams – intentionally foster trust and connection.** If you are coaching a team online, we recommend that you:
 - **Have a ‘cameras on’ norm.** Emma Kirkman recommends setting the expectation that cameras will be on in virtual sessions, because this is critical for connection. If need be, help people to set up their cameras so they are making direct eye contact with the screen, rather than looking to the side at a monitor.

“If your team is having trouble with camaraderie, or trust, or just miscommunication issues, the number one thing that you can do to help that is to turn the video on.”
(Experian, 2020)

- **Warm up and consider ‘connection codes.’** At the beginning of the session, consider asking an icebreaker question that will genuinely help the team to get to know each other. Or perhaps use a common ‘code’ to make it easier for people to share how they are going – like a 1-5 rating or a colour-coding system. These icebreakers serve a dual purpose –

– they help people to reconnect, and they help individual participants to clear their mind and focus on the coaching session ahead.

- **Create safe spaces.** There is an inverse correlation between the number of people in a team or group, and people’s willingness to open up. In other words, the larger the group, the more reticent people become. Ideally the team you are coaching will have around 6 – 8 members, and if so, you can run icebreaker or connection sessions with the whole group. Once you have more than 8 people, consider splitting into breakout rooms with 4 people per room, to foster open sharing and trust building.

Risk of friction from digital tools

Online whiteboards like Mural and Miro can be hugely helpful, but they can also disrupt the flow of a coaching session if clients are unfamiliar with them. People may experience uncomfortable cognitive overload as they grapple with the tech, and miss the substantive work of the coaching session.

How to get around this?

- **With 1-1 clients – consider who scribes.** In individual sessions, either the coachee or the coach could take notes, because you are only capturing input from one person. If the scribing process will get in the way of the deep work, then it may be best for the coach to take notes. Similarly, if the coachee is au fait with technology, then they may wish to take their own notes, as Suzanne Cross observes. “I still fundamentally think it’s better for them [to scribe], because they’ll be capturing things in their language, and capturing what is most important for them.”
- **With teams – build capability up front.** Emma Kirkman highlights the importance of prep work when using online tools in team coaching. Before a session, ensure everyone has access to the tool, and the ability to do the basics. Coaches may need to send out a short training resource, for instance a Word doc, YouTube video or self-recorded video,

stepping through simple instructions. Or coaches may need to run a short troubleshooting session before the team event, to make sure all members are up and running.

Risk of distraction and low engagement

When it comes to virtual coaching, one-to-one sessions still require a high level of input and focus from the coachee, so there isn’t too much risk of distraction and low engagement.

However, in a team coaching context, team members may become distracted by email, internal chat or other project work, and they may attempt to multi-task whilst in the coaching session. This undermines the depth and focus of the session, and the team’s ability to make progress.

How can team coaches minimise distraction and drive up engagement?

- **Set norms that promote focus.** As noted earlier, people’s cameras should be on as this fosters connection and makes it easier to tell if somebody is multi-tasking and distracted. We also recommend that all email, phone and other ‘push’ notifications be turned off, unless they are critically time sensitive.
- **Design for active engagement.** People will disengage in a coaching session if nothing is required of them – for instance, if the team leader is giving a lengthy update, or if two people are rehashing an unresolved issue and taking up all the airspace.

Team coaches need to actively design sessions to promote engagement from all. Emma Kirkman recommends using breakout rooms so that there are “fewer places to hide,” and incorporating active elements such as polls, group brainstorming on post-it notes and so forth. Some authors also recommend giving the team prework, because this has been shown to increase active engagement in a learning and development setting (Guided Insights, 2024).

- **Observe and address individual behaviour.**

As a Team Coach, you'll want to pay close attention to people's body language and contributions.

- **With body language** – are they making eye contact? Leaning in – which shows interest? Expanding their body – for instance with their arms behind their head – which shows a level of comfort and power, or closing up with their arms folded and shoulders hunched – which shows discomfort?
- **With their behaviour** – Emma Kirkman asks herself questions like, is everybody contributing to the team chat, or to plenary discussions? If you have group documents or online whiteboards, is everybody logging in to engage with the documents between sessions, or are only a few people engaged in this way?

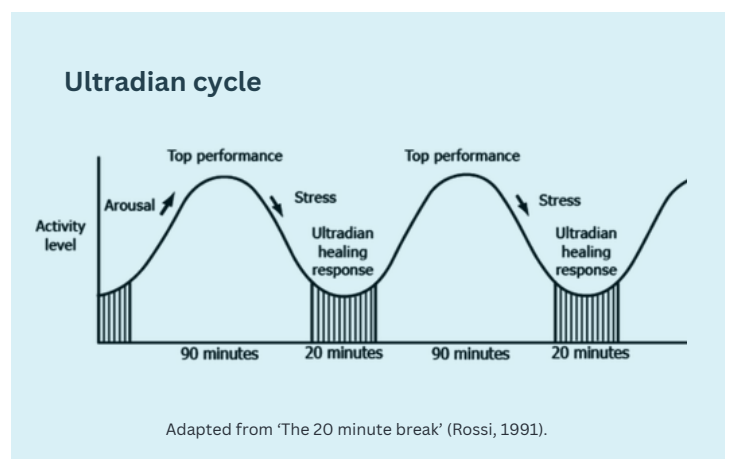
After observing people's behaviour, reach out to any individuals who seem disengaged or closed off to the coaching process. There may be value in a 1-1 discussion with the team member/s, to explore their current state and how you might tweak the coaching sessions, to foster greater engagement from all.

Risk of online meeting fatigue

We all know that a day of back-to-back online meetings is exhausting. In part this is physical, linked to eye strain and too much sitting. But meeting fatigue may also be exacerbated by the 'time compression' we mentioned earlier, ie the fact that online meetings can be more task-focused and intense, and therefore more tiring. In addition, some studies have shown that online meetings are more tiring for women, in part because the self-view screen operates like a mirror, and women find this self-focus to be relatively distracting and negative (Fauville et al, 2021).

As a coach you can minimise online meeting fatigue in these ways:

- **Understand and work with 'ultradian cycles.'** The human body is governed by different cycles, including the 'ultradian cycle' of arousal, high performance, stress, and recovery. According to Neuroscientist Dr Andrew Huberman and others, we can engage in deep work for up to 90 minutes at a time, before we need to take a break and recover (Huberman Lab, 2022; Blue Zones, nd). Given this, we recommend that individual coaching sessions be capped at 90 minutes, and that team coaching sessions involve a substantive break every 90 minutes or so.



- **Be prescriptive about breaks.** When there is a scheduled break in a long-form team coaching session, try to insist that team members go outside, get some natural light, look into the distance to reduce eye strain, and perhaps get some movement in, like a short walk. Discourage people from using the break-time to check and respond to emails – but if you know this will happen, then give the team enough time to get urgent work done and to recover from the session.
- **Minimise the 'self-view' screen.** If it's tiring for people, particularly women, to observe themselves on screen all day, see if you can tweak the display feature for your online meeting tool, and minimise or turn off the self-view screen.

Challenge with 'tangible' activities in virtual settings

Some coaching activities are quite tangible or visceral, by nature. For instance, in the ICC Academy we use the 'Window Walk' activity to help people set big, audacious long-term goals. Coachees traditionally look out a window in a large room, then envision and describe their lives in say, 10 years. Then they 'step back' through the room, looking out a different window or from a different vantage point, to describe what they'd be doing in say, year 9, 6 and 3, to get ready for that future. Or as a team coach, for instance, you may have an interactive exercise that visually demonstrates how a hold-up in one part of the team has a knock-on effect on others in the team.

How can you translate these 'tangible' activities, into a virtual setting?

- **Identify the intent, and design from there.** Rather than asking yourself 'How do I shift this real-world activity into a virtual setting?', ask 'What are we trying to achieve with this activity, and how can that *intent* be carried over to a virtual setting?'

Suzanne Cross asked herself this, when doing a Window Walk with a client in a virtual meeting room. She still wanted the client to be in a 'visioning' mindset, and to have a wide visual field – so she asked him to go into his back garden and to 'step back' through the physical space, when describing his life in different time periods. Suzanne scribed the key content onto Mural, and the client didn't look at the online whiteboard until he'd finished describing the future state.

- **Be brave enough to call it, if an activity is lost in translation.** Like we said earlier, you need to choose the right channel for the job. In some instances, you'll have your heart set on an activity that works splendidly in an in-person session – like building a prototype, or role-playing a customer experience, but it just doesn't translate to a virtual session. If the activity is mission-critical, then you could seek to run an in-person gathering. But if it's not mission critical, then don't force it – instead, dig into your toolkit and find another activity that works well online.

In summary – balance the benefits

When compared with face-to-face coaching, virtual coaching sessions are easier to attend, lower cost, and they make more efficient use of time. It's easier to visualise discussions using online whiteboards, and it's faster to switch between group and individual work, in the context of team coaching.

On the flipside, virtual coaching sessions have some constraints and limitations which need to be designed around. Connections can be harder to forge, and the use of digital tools can overwhelm some coachees and make it harder for them to engage with the substantive discussion. People may be distracted and disengaged in a virtual setting, they may experience online meeting fatigue, and some activities don't land so well online. However, none of these issues are deal-breakers, and with forethought and clear intentions, virtual coaching can be just as powerful as in-person sessions, and more convenient.

For coaches, the key take-home message is to be aware of the pros and cons of different delivery modes, and to be intentional when designing your sessions, to maximise the level of engagement and impact.

"Virtual coaching doesn't have limitations per se, you just need more upfront design and intention."

(Emma Kirkman, Consultant, Facilitator & Ways of Working Coach)

Let's now move on to AI in coaching.

AI IN COACHING

A quick primer on AI

Artificial Intelligence or AI is everywhere, but it's useful to pause and define what the term actually means. In a general sense, AI refers to "the ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings" (Britannica, 2024), including "cognitive tasks like learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy" (IBM, 2024a).

Those definitions should make it clear *just how broad* the applications of AI are. Flynn Coleman, Author of 'A Human Algorithm: How Artificial Intelligence Is Redefining Who We Are,' notes that there are well-known tools like ChatGPT, along with algorithms that sit behind social media and Netflix, industry-specific applications, for instance in aviation or education or coaching, and much much more.

Perhaps the best-known tool at present is ChatGPT, which is an example of Machine Learning, and more specifically, a Large Language Model. Chris Loynes, a subject matter expert, explains that these tools are high-tech algorithms that first ingest a large amount of training data – for instance, text or imagery – and then detect patterns and features in the data. The tool then uses what it has seen before, to answer new queries from users. As Chris explains, "In the recent age of ChatGPT, Large Language Models simply predict the next word, based on the highest probability of what it's seen before."

So what does all of this mean, for coaches?

How are people using AI in coaching?

Because AI developments are proceeding at such pace, it's a challenge to pick a moment in time, and to say 'This is how coaches are using AI.' Nevertheless, from our interviews with coaches and from our online research, we have identified five current uses for AI in coaching.

5 uses for AI in coaching:

- AI Researcher
- AI Scribe
- AI Virtual Assistant
- AI Co-coach
- AI Full Coach

These uses can be thought of as a spectrum, as shown on the following page. As you move down the page, the level of agency given to the AI increases, and so does the length of the interaction.

We'll now describe each 'role' in more detail.

AI researcher

AI can serve as a very capable research assistant – trawling online literature and summarising key points in an accessible way. While desk-based research isn't a core element of coaching, coaches may like to prepare for sessions by reading up on certain topics – for instance, how to help an individual client to transition from team member to team leader, or how to guide a team through conflict. The research could influence the questions that the coach asks, or the activities they conduct.

AI scribe

AI tools excel at synthesis – so they can be used to summarise coaching discussions, both with individuals and with teams. Emma Kirkman says tools like Julius AI can also summarise and visualise data, for instance to show positive and negative sentiments during a team discussion.

AI virtual assistant

AI can serve as a virtual assistant for coaches who run their own practice – for instance by developing coaching prompts, drafting emails, preparing a high-level business plan or marketing plan, conducting market research, and so forth.

AI co-coach & AI full coach

See page after next.

Uses of AI in coaching

Low AI agency
One-off interaction



AI RESEARCHER

Example) Analysing existing data from online sources

Value) Faster upskilling and preparation for coaching sessions



AI SCRIBE

Eg) Synthesising new data from coaching sessions

Value) Faster synthesis of notes



VIRTUAL ASSISTANT (in a coaching business)

Eg) Drafting emails; developing marketing plan; conducting market research

Value) Save time and money on administrative specialists



CO-COACH

Eg) Setting goals/targets with client, sending reminders, tracking progress

Value)

- Some potential for transformation
- High-touch accountability
- Anonymity
- Accessible, scalable, cost-effective



FULL AI COACH

Eg) Running coaching conversation, asking questions, providing answers and advice

Value)

- Greater potential for transformation
- High-touch accountability
- Anonymity
- Accessible, scalable, cost-effective

Higher AI agency
Longer-term interaction

AI co-coach

One emerging use of AI is as a 'co coach,' with AI playing a supportive role for clients who are wishing to achieve a certain outcome. For instance:

- Summit AI basically serves as an accountability buddy. Clients first choose the personality of their coach, then work with the coach to set a goal and a timeframe to achieve it. The coach develops a game plan, and sends the client a text message each day with a small task for the client to achieve, in service of their larger goal. The tool visually tracks people's progress, and clients can even 'call' their coach and have an interactive conversation (Flanagan, 2023; Summit Intelligence, 2024).
- The Selfpause AI coach primarily helps clients to build a positive outlook. The tool sends users a positive affirmation each day, and offers longer-form affirmations and meditation sessions.

AI full coach

Finally, highly interactive AI could (arguably) serve as a full-service coach. For instance, Rocky AI can help clients to set a big-picture vision for their lives, and then to identify a smaller number of concrete goals that sit beneath, before getting into the more day-to-day 'tasks and tracking' side that is common with other tools. Rocky AI also asks clients deep, reflective coaching questions, with the aim of improving self-awareness and fostering a growth mindset.

What is the value of AI in coaching?

AI tools have a range of benefits for coaches, and people running a coaching business.

Faster upskilling and preparation – before a session

AI tools can help coaches to rapidly upskill on any topics that are relevant to their client, or to upskill on general competencies involved in coaching. AI can also help coaches to prepare for client sessions – for instance, Emma Kirkman says she uses ChatGPT to generate icebreaker ideas and prompts for team coaching sessions, particularly if she knows the personas of who will be in the room, and can 'feed' this into the tool.

Less time on synthesis – after a session

Coaches really value AI's ability to summarise inputs – for instance, to distil a 1-hour coaching session into a half-page of key notes and themes. These summaries are even more useful after a lengthy team session. Raechel Ford observes that summarising team discussions, "Used to take a day's worth of time – it seemed a ridiculous amount of time to just summarise." Emma Kirkman agrees that "Work that used to take days, now takes hours."

Coaches save money on specialists

When used as a Virtual Assistant, AI could potentially save coaches from spending on specialist services, like strategists, marketing, market research or website design.

Clients enjoy higher-touch accountability

Human coaches could feasibly 'partner' with an AI co-coach, such as Summit AI, and offer clients a high-touch form of accountability to help them reach their goals.

Raechel Ford sees great value in this, for clients and coaches alike. She observes that it can be frustrating and challenging when a client sets a goal, but then "they fall off the wagon," because

“there wasn’t a daily check-in, there wasn’t something that nudged the person to stay on track. And for myself, I don’t want to be a coach who has to nudge somebody every day – that’s not what we should be, as coaches. I think the coach does the transformation, and the AI can do the transactions,” or the more daily accountability. Raechel believes that this combination, of the human coach and the AI accountability, will mean clients are “far more likely to achieve what they’re setting out to accomplish.”

Clients may enjoy the anonymity

Some clients may feel uncomfortable sharing certain thoughts, feelings and experiences with a human coach – fearing judgment or that ‘word will get out’ about what they have shared. Of course, at the ICC Academy we are bound by a code of ethics, and we know the importance of protecting client information. Nevertheless, clients may feel more anonymous and therefore willing to share, when speaking with an AI interface.

Coaching services could become more accessible, scalable and cost-effective

An AI co-coach or full coach can be accessed any time, from anywhere, in a way that a human coach cannot. This accessibility could be very attractive to coaching clients. In addition, AI coaching is imminently scalable – meaning that organisations could offer AI coaching to all staff, and this may have a smaller associated price-tag than a human-led coaching service of the same scale. As Suzanne Cross pithily puts it,

“AI coaching is always available, it's potentially less expensive, and it's more scalable.”

(Suzanne Cross, Executive and Team Coach, and Experience Design Specialist)

At this point, AI support services and AI coaching are both sounding quite attractive. But to present a balanced view – what are the limitations and watch-outs?

What are the limitations of AI in coaching, and how can these be managed?

Like any technology, AI has potential downsides which need to be managed – and because AI tools are evolving at pace, many of the challenges are ‘live issues’ that haven’t yet been resolved. Here are the key limitations that we’ve noted, from our expert interviews and from the literature.

With AI research: Risk of ‘garbage in, garbage out’

We all know that you can’t believe everything you read on the internet – and the sentiment holds when it comes to research conducted using AI tools. As Flynn Coleman observes, these tools “don’t necessarily always tell the truth, they can only work with the information that they have,” so if there is low-quality content feeding into the algorithm, then low-quality content will be generated.

As a coach, you’ll probably make greatest use of a Large Language Model, like ChatGPT, for research purposes. These tools sometimes ‘hallucinate,’ and produce content that is factually inaccurate. At one end of the spectrum there are basic factual errors, like an incorrect answer in a pub quiz. For instance, the AI may say that the capital of France is Stockholm, not Paris. At the other end of the spectrum you have harmful misinformation, or completely fabricated information (Glover, 2024). The challenge for users is that these hallucinations may sound legitimate, when they’re actually false.

How can you get around these issues, and use research tools like ChatGPT with peace of mind?

The tech companies themselves play a key role in reducing hallucinations. Two key strategies include training their AI algorithms on large,

credible data sets (IBM, 2024b), because quality inputs help to generate quality outputs; and allowing users to adjust the 'temperature' of the content they receive, for instance by asking for a more conservative or a more creative response (Glover, 2024).

But as an end user, there are also changes you can make.

- **Use tools that ingest high-quality content**, such as Perplexity AI which includes citations that you can refer back to.
- **Instruct the AI tool to only include credible sources** – for instance, "Tell me how to build trust in teams, using only academic sources from Google scholar," or "Tell me about trends in individual coaching, using national newspapers as an input."
- **Always sense-check the research outputs** of AI, and determine whether what you are reading sounds credible, or not.

With AI scribing: Risk of misinterpretation

If you are using AI to summarise your coaching notes, there is a risk that the summaries don't accurately reflect the conversation and the nuances that were shared. The fix here is simple:

- **Sense-check the summary.** As Raechel Ford notes, you don't want to become over-reliant on the AI, and as Emma Kirkman observes, "there is still a place for the human – to validate that the synthesis is accurate, and that nuances have been captured."

With AI scribing and coaching: Risk of privacy violations

It is not clear what happens with information that users share with an AI tool – whether that means a coach is feeding in summary notes, or a client is sharing directly with the AI. Flynn Coleman explains that "The information we give it, what type of protections we have – the short answer is, not very many. The industry isn't very well regulated, it's very wild west, and the laws that bind AI are in their infancy – at best." Suzanne Cross also reflected on this:

"What happens to the information that I share with an AI coach? Is it stored? Is it going to be used in some way or form that I haven't consented to? Is it, and am I, going to be safe?"

(Suzanne Cross, Executive and Team Coach, and Experience Design Specialist)

"The laws that bind AI are in their infancy – at best."

(Flynn Coleman, Author 'A Human Algorithm: How Artificial Intelligence Is Redefining Who We Are')

While we wait for privacy laws to be strengthened, AI users can also take steps to protect themselves:

- **Be open with your clients.** In the interests of transparency, we recommend that you tell your client if you intend to use an AI tool to summarise coaching discussions. The data shared with the AI belongs to your client, and they have a right to know what is being done with that data.
- **Anonymise input data.** If you feed coaching notes into an AI tool, anonymise the input by taking out people's names, company names, and any other confidential information. If you have a client who is choosing to work with an AI co-coach, they may wish to use a pseudonym instead of their real name.
- **Consider paid services.** As a general rule, paid AI services have more stringent data security and privacy rules than unpaid services (EBM Insurance & Risk, 2024; Power Platformer, 2024). If you intend to use AI regularly, a paid subscription will help to minimise privacy risks and protect you and your clients.

From this point on, we'll be describing some of the most fundamental limitations of AI when used as a coach. Many of these limitations do not have associated 'fixes' or mitigation strategies – at least, not yet.

With AI coaching: Loss of human connection, trust and empathy

A powerful coaching relationship begins with a sense of connection and trust between coach and coachee. The client wants to be known, understood and valued. They want their coach to hold them in unconditional positive regard, to believe that they can make change, to celebrate successes, and to empathise during challenges and setbacks.

To state the obvious, a human cannot forge a human-to-human connection with an AI tool. A tool can produce words that sound empathetic, but there is no person behind those words. The coaches we spoke to all highlighted the value in this human connection, which is lost with AI coaching.

“I think in terms of cons – it's that rapport, empathy, emotional connection, psychological safety. I wonder, would you feel like you could build that with some kind of AI coach?” (Suzanne Cross, Executive and Team Coach, and Experience Design Specialist)

“One of the reasons people go [to coaching] is for that personal human experience, and that connective tissue, advice, expertise and individual guidance.” (Flynn Coleman, Author of ‘A Human Algorithm: How Artificial Intelligence Is Redefining Who We Are’)

“I think AI can provide suggestions or summaries, but it still lacks that emotional intelligence, that empathy, that nuance that makes coaching truly effective.

Coaching, at its very heart, is about a human connection”

(Raechel Ford, Executive Coach and Regional Manager ICC Australasia & Southeast Asia.)

In a similar vein, AI coaches are not currently equipped to read people’s body language, which humans are innately wired to sense and respond to, within a coaching conversation. Suzanne Cross spoke of the power of gut instinct, and nuance, and intuiting a disconnect between the words used and the facial expressions or body language of a client.

AI tools are better at absorbing words than they are at ingesting *the wider context around those words*, which means at this point, human coaches should be much better than bots at reading and responding to body language. The caveat here is – human coaches need to be paying close attention to their clients, and AI bots *are* being trained in how to read body language (Stockholm University, 2023). Almost ironically, the intent is that these body-language bots could serve as advisors to therapists offering online sessions, for instance, helping to identify when the client and therapist have out-of-sync body language, tracking the client’s emotional development over time, and analysing client sentiments (e.g. about their work, or their parents), using language and body language as input data (ibid).

For now, at least, most clients are likely to forge a stronger connection with a human coach, and this is the pre-condition for powerful transformation.

With AI coaching: Less deep discovery

Powerful coaching begins with deep discovery work. The coach and client engage in rich discussion to uncover what really matters to the client, how they got to this position in their lives, what has worked for them but no longer serves, what they want to pursue and what they are willing to give up, what tools or resources they already have available, and so forth. As Raechel Ford explains, coaches help clients to step back, and see the system that they live in.

This discovery stage usually *precedes* any powerful action, but AI coaches don’t appear to spend a large amount of time on deep discovery. They are more tactical than transformational, tending to act as a mentor that gives answers, rather than a coach who asks powerful questions, and helps clients to form their own answers, and come to their own realisations about what they want to change. As Flynn Coleman observes, “It’s not just about the end product, it’s how you get there, right? And a lot of what you do in coaching is not just the destination – but the learning and growing and evolving along the way.”

With AI coaching: Less innovative sense-making

After the discovery process, human coaches tend to develop new sense-making frameworks or tools, to help clients to organise their thinking and gain new insight. As Suzanne Cross notes, this is an innately creative process, and draws on the coach's previous experiences in coaching and in other domains – for instance consulting, or project management, or teaching.

Those moments of innovative sense-making are both highly individual to the coach, and often, the most transformative part of the coaching process. But at present, AI tools do not appear to offer these novel, bespoke sense-making tools to clients – because they are probability models designed to produce the word that typically comes next.

This is good news for human coaches, who should continue to offer clients their unique tools and perspectives. As Raechel Ford explains, “Sixty percent of the time that I’m working with my clients, I say, I wonder if we unpack it this way? And either a chart comes to mind, or a wheel, a staircase, a house-based model. Or I get them to paint, or I get them to draw. And that, to me, is the transformational part of it.” Or as Emma Kirkman puts it:

“No one's ever going to replace your personal thought leadership, or that special ‘zhuzh’ that you bring your practice”

(Emma Kirkman, Consultant, Facilitator & Ways of Working Coach)

With AI coaching: Less potential for transformation

We suspect that AI coaching, in its current form, will not lead to the kind of powerful transformations that can be achieved with a human coach. Because there is a diminished sense of connection and trust; because there's less deep discovery; because there's less innovative sense making.

AI tools are based on machine learning, and they excel at summaries and synthesis and providing standard advice. But coachees don't want shallow questions and standard advice. They want powerful questions, deep reflection, and the sense of peace that comes from wrestling with an issue, finding a solution that works for them, in their specific context, and then moving forward.

Which brings us to our final question.

Will human coaches be replaced by AI?

There is a lot of fear around AI, and concerns that AI will put many people out of work. However, we do not believe that human coaches will be sidelined by AI coaches in the near future.

That's not to say that human coaches should be complacent. We should continue to build deep trust with clients, supporting them to achieve the kind of radical transformations and improvements in quality of life that could not be achieved with an AI coach, alone.

Here at the ICC Academy, we expect that coaches will increasingly use AI to prepare for coaching sessions, to debrief, and to complete administrative tasks within a coaching practice. Coaches may also ‘partner’ with AI tools, for instance, to provide clients with high-frequency accountability that will help them to achieve their goals. But we believe the human coach is here to stay.

And would our human coaches use an AI coach? Suzanne Cross says, “I'm interested in understanding the experience of using an AI coach; however, right now, probably not. There's just something about human-to-human connection.” Raechel Ford says, “Yes – because I'm intrigued and curious about the experience. I'd like to stand as a thought spokesperson for it – to learn from it, and understand its power and effectiveness.” Emma Kirkman, an early adopter “with a weakness for shiny new tech,” concludes that she'd use an AI coach “to ask questions, yes, but if I was wanting genuine insight and wise counsel, no.”

Conclusion

Whether you are an early adopter or more hesitant, technology is already changing the landscape of coaching. In this paper we've discussed virtual coaching and AI in coaching, both of which have significant upsides, along with risks or limitations that need to be appropriately managed.

At the ICC Academy, we're in favour of 'nuanced adoption' of these new technologies.

Our guiding question is always – how might we get the most out of these tools, so that we can stand in greater service to the coaching community, and to the clients that we all serve?

Because as our experts all noted – these tools have real power. They can help coaches to spend less time on tedious tasks, and more time, in Flynn Coleman's words, "getting to the grit and meat and heart of coaching." Technology could essentially free us up to be more effective human coaches, and to support even more powerful transformations. It's not a foregone conclusion, but it's definitely a pathway available to us.

Virtual coaching

Benefits

- **More accessible**
- **Lower cost**
- **More efficient use of time**
- **Virtual can be more visual**
- **In team coaching – easier to toggle from group to individual activities**

Limitations & mitigations

Risk of diminished connection

- Choose right channel for the job
- With 1-1 clients – don't skip the back story
- With teams – intentionally foster trust and connection, eg with a cameras-on norm, with warm ups and shortcuts to enable deep sharing

Risk of distraction and low engagement

- Set norms that promote focus
- Design for active engagement
- Observe and address individual behaviour

Risk of online meeting fatigue

- Understand and work with 'ultradian cycles'
- Be prescriptive about breaks
- Minimise the 'self-view' screen

Challenge with 'tangible' activities, online

- Identify the intent, and design from there
- Be brave enough to call it, if an activity is lost in translation

AI in coaching

Benefits

- **Faster upskilling ad prep – before a session**
- **Less time on synthesis – after a session**
- **Coaches save money on specialists**
- **Clients enjoy higher-touch accountability**
- **Clients may enjoy the anonymity**
- **Coaching services could become more accessible, scalable and cost-effective**

Limitations & mitigations

With AI research: Risk of 'garbage in, garbage out'

- Use tools that ingest high-quality content
- Instruct AI to only include credible sources
- Always sense-check the research outputs

With AI scribing: Risk of misinterpretation

- Sense-check the summary

With AI scribing and coaching: Risk of privacy violations

- Be open with your clients if sharing data with AI
- Anonymise input data
- Consider paid services

With AI coaching:

- **Loss of human connection, trust and empathy**
- **Less deep discovery**
- **Less innovative sense-making**
- **Less potential for transformation**
- No key mitigation strategies, as of now

References

- Blue Zones (nd). Use the Science of Ultradian Rhythms To Boost Productivity, Energy, and Willpower. Retrieved from <https://www.bluezones.com/2020/06/how-taking-breaks-can-increase-productivity-boost-energy-levels-and-help-you-show-up-in-your-life/>
- Britannica (2024). Artificial Intelligence. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence>
- EBM Insurance & Risk (2024). AI & data protection. Retrieved from <https://www.ebminsurace.com.au/resources/news/ai-and-data-protection/>
- Experian (2020, April 6). How to Reduce Multitasking & Disengagement in Virtual Meetings w/ Lisette Sutherland [video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JVvrCWI-rU>
- Fauville, G., Luo, M., Muller Queiroz, A. C., Bailenson, J. N., & Hancock, J. (2021). Nonverbal mechanisms predict zoom fatigue and explain why women experience higher levels than men. Available at SSRN 3820035.
- Financial Times (2024, February 27). Inside the miracle of modern chip manufacturing. Retrieved from <https://ig.ft.com/microchips/>
- Flanagan, J. (2023, November 28). An AI Life Coach Pulled Me Out of Depression. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@jorryn.flanagan/an-ai-life-coach-pulled-me-out-of-depression-a8841cdf8cab>
- Glover, E. (2024, March 14). What Are AI Hallucinations? Generative AI models give misleading information sometimes. Here's why. Built In. Retrieved from <https://builtin.com/artificial-intelligence/ai-hallucination>
- Guided Insights (2024). Want Virtual Learners to Stay Engaged? Insist They Multitask, and Other Big Tips. Retrieved from <https://www.guidedinsights.com>
- Huberman Lab (2022). The Ideal Length of Time for Focused Work [video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HINgMMTzPE>
- IBM (2024a). What is artificial intelligence (AI)? Retrieved from <https://www.ibm.com/topics/artificial-intelligence>
- IBM (2024b). What are AI hallucinations? Retrieved from <https://www.ibm.com/topics/ai-hallucinations>
- Power Platformer (2024, September 10). How Secure Is Your Data When You Use AI? Retrieved from <https://powerplatformer.com/how-secure-is-your-data-when-you-use-ai/>
- Stockholm University (2023, July 12). The AI that will be able to read your emotions. Retrieved from <https://www.su.se/english/news/the-ai-that-will-be-able-to-read-your-emotions-1.663476>
- Summit Intelligence (2024). Summit: Reach Your Peak. Retrieved from <https://www.summit.im/>

About the ICC Academy

The International Coaching Community is one of the largest professional organizations for coaches in the world, with more than 15,000 coaches certified in 78 countries.

In New Zealand, the ICC offers three key programs:

- **Foundation Coach Training Program** – which helps participants to develop fundamental coaching skills that can be applied within organisations or in the personal sphere.
- **Team Coaching Certification** – where the focus is helping teams to improve engagement, performance and morale, at a systemic level.
- **Advanced Executive Coaching Certification** – which focuses on coaching executives to develop their authentic leadership, so they can be their best and effectively develop other leaders.

ICC Academy New Zealand

Email: info@iccademy.co.nz

Website: iccademy.co.nz

Phone: 021 448 329