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# Research on Experiences with and Perceptions of Professional Coaching

PREPARED FOR:  
The International Coaching  
Federation, Atlantic Chapter



Atlantic  
*Charter Chapter*

CPHR / CRHA  
Atlantic      Atlantique



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## Letter of Acknowledgement

The intent of this market research was to identify Atlantic Canadian organizations' perceptions around the value of coaching in Atlantic Canada.

**ICF Atlantic** thanks its members who connected us with participating organizations to partake in this market study. We would also like to acknowledge the study participants for taking the time to provide your candid feedback.

Thank you to our partner **CPHR Atlantic** in planning and engaging CPHR members to invite participation in this study. We appreciate the support obtained from our Atlantic human resources partners.

- CPHR Nova Scotia (Nick Beynon, CEO)
- CPHR New Brunswick (Luc Page, Executive Director)
- CPHR PEI (Kelly Drummond, Chair Board of Directors)
- CPHR Newfoundland & Labrador (Leroy Murphy, President)

If you have any questions about coaching or ICF Atlantic, please do not hesitate to email [icfatlantic@gmail.com](mailto:icfatlantic@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

### **ICF Atlantic Board Members**

Susan Power, President

Brian Duggan, Past President

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Gail Boone, Director of Communications

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## Executive Summary

In an ever-evolving world, it is more important than ever that businesses and individuals invest in their professional success in order to adapt and thrive. Engaging in professional business coaching is one way that those in the working world have harnessed their own unique strengths and the strengths of others to maximize their potential. The International Coaching Federation aims to advance the coaching profession, set high ethical standards, and ensure opportunity and standardization of accreditation.

[The Atlantic Chapter of the International Coaching Federation \(ICF\)](#), in partnership with [CPHR \(Chartered Professionals in Human Resources\) Atlantic](#), hired MQO Research (MQO) to conduct research in order to **shed light on perceptions around professional coaching and client experiences in Atlantic Canada** specifically. Resulting from this research, MQO developed recommendations and suggestions for enhancing awareness and delivery of coaching services in this region.

Primary research was conducted to address this objective. A total of n=12 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who have used coaching, either as a client of a coach or as a sponsor of a coaching program. All four Atlantic Canadian provinces and a wide variety of industries and sectors were represented in the interview sample.

**Participants discussed their experiences with coaching, which were very positive and with which they were very satisfied.** Coaching allowed participants to manage change and transition in their organization; create a sustainable coaching culture; deal with individual challenges and questions around leadership; and empowered clients to improve upon themselves, directly and indirectly impacting their business's bottom line. While some barriers were identified to accessing or utilizing coaching services, including cost, time constraints, and concerns around diversity of experience, **participants agreed coaching services were a valuable investment into one's own success and the success of their organization.**

Participants also identified that coaching can be set apart from similar professions in its unique orientation to the client, one that is supportive and empowering and allows for the client to achieve their goals using their own strengths. Credentials were thought to be an important part of coaching and most agreed this should be the standard for coaching, though some participants felt that experience and track record may be just as important as formal accreditation when it comes to hiring criteria for coaches. While responses varied around how much one would be willing to pay for coaching, it was agreed that **it is a worthwhile investment for an individual or organization to make in themselves for these professional consulting services.**

Overall, based on the results of the research, MQO suggests the following three recommendations for ICF Atlantic to continue to embody their mission to advance coaching in the region: continue to raise awareness of coaching in ways that could leverage the importance previous client experiences or testimonials; encourage individuals from a wide range of professional backgrounds and lived experiences to pursue accreditation and a professional coaching practice; and continue to encourage an open dialogue with clients or prospective clients about the nature of the coaching relationship, techniques involved, and what clients may want to get out of their experience.

## Background

In an ever-evolving world, it is more important than ever that businesses and individuals invest in their professional success in order to adapt and thrive. Engaging in professional business coaching is one way those in the working world have harnessed their own unique strengths and the strengths of others to maximize their potential.

Established in 1995, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) is dedicated to advancing the coaching profession by setting high ethical standards, providing independent accreditation, and building a worldwide network of credentialed coaches. ICF's global membership comprises over 35,000 trained personal and business coaches located in over 140 countries and territories.<sup>1</sup>

The Atlantic chapter of ICF represents professional coaches in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador, who connect with clients in the region to deliver outstanding services and tangible results. ICF Atlantic's vision is to lead the advancement of the coaching profession, and for coaching to be the norm in Atlantic Canada. Part of the realization of this mission occurs through community engagement and strategic initiatives to raise awareness of coaching.<sup>2</sup>

## Research Objective

ICF Atlantic sought to gain an understanding of the Atlantic Canadian perspective in the realm of professional coaching. To that end, MQO Research (MQO) was engaged to conduct primary research in order to shed light on perceptions around professional coaching and client experiences in Atlantic Canada specifically.

In addition, MQO Research developed recommendations and suggestions for enhancing awareness and delivery of coaching services in Atlantic Canada.

## Methodology

To address the above objective, MQO Research conducted primary research with clients of coaching programs or services regarding their experiences and perceptions of coaching, as well as any topics around how to enhance coaching services overall.

Contacts meeting the study's inclusion criteria were provided to MQO by ICF Atlantic, with the support of CPHR Atlantic. Potential interviewees were contacted via email and/or by phone, inviting them to participate in the research. Those who agreed to participate in an interview were asked to provide a date/time that was convenient for them, and a member of the MQO research team would then contact the participant and conduct the interview. While notes and recordings of each interview were taken for reporting purposes, all interviewees were ensured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses (that is, their specific responses would not be shared, and results would only be reported in aggregate).

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<sup>1</sup> The International Coaching Federation, *2020 ICF Global Coaching Study Final Report*

<sup>2</sup> ICFA Vision & Mission: 2020 to 2022:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f478f8bcabf143a2b58d7f9/t/5f872736732ab26ee19f1806/1602692919752/ICFA+Vision+Diagram+for+Website.pdf>

Interviews were conducted via telephone between March 3<sup>rd</sup> and April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The interviews ranged between 21 and 32 minutes in length. The guide used for these interviews, developed in collaboration with and approved by ICF Atlantic, is included in Appendix A. Because interviews followed a semi-structured approach, other topics which emerged as part of the organic interview process were also explored in addition to the given questions and probes. Following completion of the interviews, thematic analysis of the data was conducted.

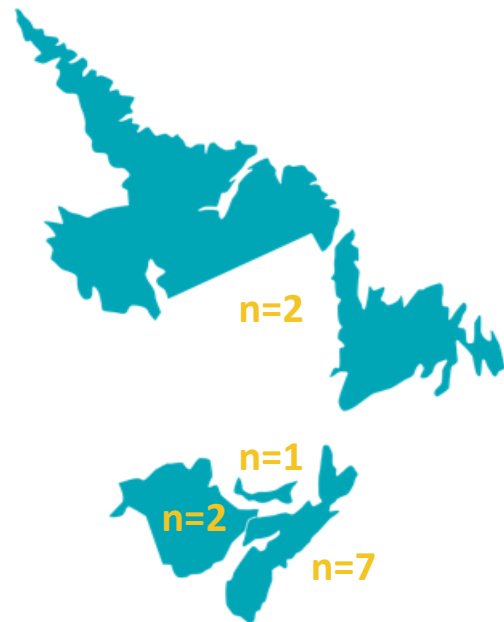
## Participant Profile

MQO Research conducted a total of 12 in-depth interviews with individuals who had used professional coaching services, either as a client of a coach themselves and/or as the sponsor of a coaching program within their organization. MQO sought representation from all four Atlantic Canadian provinces, with n=7 participants from Nova Scotia; n=2 from New Brunswick; n=2 from Newfoundland and Labrador; and n=1 from Prince Edward Island.

Participants represented a wide variety of industries and sectors, including:

- Finance and Insurance
- Public Health
- Chambers of Commerce
- Manufacturing
- Consulting
- Media and Publishing
- Non-Profit
- Public Services
- Federal Government

Organizations also varied in size, ranging from medium-sized, regional businesses to organizations spanning the national and international level.



## Detailed Results

The following section outlines the findings of the primary research and thematic analysis of experiences with and perceptions of coaching services among clients of coaches and/or sponsors of coaching programs. This section begins with an analysis of engagement and experiences with coaching, followed by participant's overall perspectives on coaching as a profession, what it entails, and what role coaching can play in the professional world.

### Engagement with Coaching

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their experience with coaching, including how they connected with their coach or coaches, what motivated them to engage a coach, what goals they set or what they hoped to achieve, and what the coaching relationship looked like with respect to how frequently they met with the coach.

#### Initial Contact

Participants were asked to first discuss how they initially contacted a coach/coaches for themselves or their organization. Responses varied: some participants mentioned formal procurement processes and infrastructure around leadership development options for bringing coaching programs into their organizations, while others noted having interest on a personal level in engaging a coach and searching the internet to find possible options for them. The ICF website was mentioned in one instance as a resource; when coaching services were suggested as an option for their development, ICF was offered as a means of locating a suitable coach to then contact and initiate services.

For several participants, bringing in coaching services came about due to personal connections, either already having an association with an existing coach, or a member of the organisation having some prior experience or knowledge of coaching, recommending the adoption of services to meet specific coaching needs.

#### Goal Setting and Structure of Coaching

One major topic of conversation centered around what goals were set for the outcome of the coaching relationship and what interviewees hoped to achieve.

For group-level coaching and coaching programs, many of the set goals identified by participants could be linked to broader themes of creating a coaching culture within the organization and to strengthening senior-level leadership to be able to benefit the organization's overall functioning. Moving away from more "siloeed" styles of leadership and changing the way senior leaders thought about their team and their direct reports was critical to this approach. One participant mentioned wanting to create better "people leaders," facilitating the creation of stronger relationships between management and direct reports and giving management the skills to maintain these relationships, whether that involved having difficult conversations, dealing with conflict, or course correction. In other cases, this meant improving the dynamics between members of senior leadership, allowing them to work effectively together.

In many contexts, the catalyst for bringing a coach in to deliver a coaching program to a management team was major organizational change and the desire to help leadership adapt to this change, or otherwise to facilitate existing initiatives; in other cases, it was the desire to create this change internally through coaching.



Those who used individual coaching noted their desire to improve, usually precipitated by transition into a leadership role, or to foster a relationship with a coach where they could have the support to become the best leader they could be. These participants wanted to be able to bounce ideas off of someone who could help them problem-solve, identify blind spots in thinking, or understand themselves and their circumstances in a way that would help them achieve their goals and the goals of their organizations or business.

The structure around how often participants met with their coaches and what programming looked like varied based on the circumstances of the coaching delivered and the intended outcomes of the coaching. While some aimed to create a long-term relationship with their coach, meeting less frequently but over a longer period of time, others followed a more structured program involving weekly or bi-weekly meetings over a set period (whether that be a few months or up to a year), or a set number of hourly meetings to discuss specific goals.

## Experiences with Coaching

Participants discussed their overall experiences with coaching, including their satisfaction with the process and outcome and what they achieved. In addition, any challenges they experienced, as well as any barriers individuals might face in working with a coach, were explored.

### Overall Appraisal

Participant's satisfaction with coaching was, in general, very high, and their experiences were very positive. Participants agreed that the coaching was valuable to them, and they reaped significant benefit from having used coaching.

On an organizational level, coaching helped facilitate the major organizational transitions that participants identified as being the impetus for coaching. Coaching helped to break barriers, strengthen teams, and empowered leadership to be able to carry lessons learned into their engagement with the entire organization. In terms of adapting to organizational change, participants noted how their leadership was better able to adapt to either the new roles they occupied, or the new priorities of their organization.

On an individual level, coaching helped participants change their own perspectives on what it means to be a leader or how to understand the personalities of others to bring out the best in those on their teams. Participants appreciated having a trustworthy, experienced coach with whom to share their struggles in a safe space.

One major theme that arose when discussing overall appraisal of their experience with coaching was the professionalism a coach

**Participants agreed that the coaching was valuable to them, and they reaped significant benefit from having used coaching.**



brought to the process and the helpfulness of their perspectives on issues of leadership and career growth. The specific tools, strategies, and methods of engagement were seen as key to facilitating a successful program and helping participants identify areas for growth.

## Wider Impact

***“[I] won’t be able to draw a direct tie [to bottom line], ‘because of this, this happened,’ but I think, because of the coaching, indirectly, it makes you a better leader and strengthens your ability to be effective in the workplace.”***

Participants were also asked to explore how coaching impacted their organization, both in terms of results as well as specifically the bottom line of their business or organization. While some hesitated to make a direct link to revenue resulting from coaching, they nonetheless felt that improved leadership had major impacts on the functioning, and therefore prosperity, of their organization. Sponsors of coaching programs pointed out that they noticed tangible, positive outcomes of having leadership go through a coaching program, in particular noticing how management listened to their team and engaged in more follow-up with their employees, among other improved leadership competencies. Other results included improved engagement among employees and increased satisfaction resulting from strengthened leadership. Others did feel comfortable agreeing that coaching positively impacted the revenue of their business.

The theme of creating a coaching culture also featured in these discussions, especially as they related to long-term impact of coaching. By creating a more sustained culture of coaching within leadership, participants felt that this helped maintain the momentum of initial coaching programming to lead to the creation of new patterns and standards for the organization. One participant noted that previous attempts to bring coaching into their organization had not been successful because, after the programming concluded, the concepts and ideas “had nowhere to go” without a receptive coaching culture being in place.

Eleven of the 12 participants agreed that they would recommend working with a coach to their peers or colleagues; the one person who did not give a clear response felt that it would largely depend on one’s needs and what they were hoping to achieve.

**11/12 would recommend working with a coach**



When asked who could benefit from coaching services, many said either “anyone” or “everyone.” Elaborating further on this, participants spoke about the clear benefits to working with a coach, benefits which would be applicable to anyone: increased self-reflection, identifying one’s strengths and weaknesses, and having the help of a skilled professional to help meet ones’ goals.

Other participants said anyone who is either entering into a new leadership role, or at a transition point in their career, could benefit from working with a coach. If an individual has certain goals, or wants to improve their work, they could achieve these objectives with the help of a coach. Working with a coach need not only be, as one person put it, “when you’ve done something bad;” there may be the perception that coaching need only be brought in for course-correction, or, in extreme cases, reprimanding. However, participants emphasized that it would be important to work with a coach even if, and especially if, one’s professional life is quite positive.

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## Challenges and Barriers

Participants discussed areas of their experience that may not have worked as well for them, and any potential barriers to working with a coach that they could think of.

While most were very satisfied with their coaching services and therefore could not think of any challenges they faced, those who did have challenges cited style of coaching as not always being the best fit for their needs. Whether it be in the topic or delivery of a coaching program, or working with an individual coach, some participants noted that the style of the individual coach did not always meet their expectations or what they wanted to get out of their experience. Challenges were also identified with coaching potentially not being as effective without the coach having the proper background or organizational context to understand what that client or clients may need.

In terms of identified barriers to coaching, cost was the major factor. Many felt that coaching services may be cost prohibitive for individuals outside of senior leadership, individuals who are seeking coaching independent of their organization, or within organizations that may not invest as much in leadership or career training. For the latter, there may be the desire to hire more coaches or implement more coaching, but budget restrictions may make this difficult.

Other barriers included time considerations, as many may feel they do not have time in their schedules to undergo a coaching program or work with a coach, and scheduling issues for organizing larger coaching training for groups. In addition, one participant noted that a potential barrier may be a lack of perceived diversity among coaches; individuals with diverse perspectives may be seeking a coach who shares their lived experience and may better understand what they are going through.

## Advice for Prospective Coaching Clients

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give to someone who was interested in working with a coach, from their experience.

***“I think it’s really important to continuously reflect on your own performance and to use the services of someone skilled at giving feedback and facilitating that reflection process... I think that without having an actual, designated coach, it’s easy to let that go by the wayside.”***

Ensuring the coach is a good fit for the client was thought as a crucial component of the process, both in coaching technique and organizational context as well as in convenience and in the ability to provide a safe, private space to work with the client. Having the opportunity to talk through expectations of the coaching relationship and what it would entail, as well as having a mutual understanding of what techniques would be required for the type of content to be delivered, was thought to be very helpful in this regard. One participant felt that the coaching style of their coach did not necessarily align with the content and requirements of the training at hand, and they may have benefitted from a different approach; therefore, open communication about what the programming may look like would be one way to mitigate this mismatch. It was recommended to give the coaching relationship ample time to see how well it works, but not being afraid to try someone new if it is not a good fit for the client.

Mindset was thought to be a major component of success in a coaching relationship. Participants felt that one really needed to be “ready” to work with a coach and have potentially uncomfortable conversations in order to experience true growth. Being open to exploration, making time, and putting in the effort to accomplish one’s goals are crucial keys to success. As one participant noted, coaching programming can be seen as a very useful investment in the success of leadership and organization overall.

***“Our overall experience [with coaching] was amazing. I think that was something that was identified as needed [for our organization], [and] they’re the experts in their field.”***

## Perspectives on the Coaching Profession

Interviewees were also asked for their perspectives on coaching as a profession, including what defines coaching compared to other professions, and what role credentials play in hiring and in overall standardization.

### Defining Features of Coaching

To interviewees, coaching involves a number of elements specific to the professional world, performance, and supporting individuals or groups in their development and achieving their goals through specific techniques, theories, and processes.

Highlighted below are a selection of comments from participants on what coaching entails.

### From your perspective, what does coaching typically involve?

*“A series of interventions with an experienced individual, professional or otherwise, where their intent is to help someone accelerate growth in a particular area or in general over a period of time.”*

*“Defining a coachee profile and defining needs; identify areas for focus.”*

*“Goal setting, accountability, and follow-through.”*

*“The coach is someone who helps whoever they are coaching to develop skills, to identify gaps or barriers, and to help remove those barriers, to pave the way for them to do their jobs better or perform at a higher level.”*

*“Coaching is having the [coach] asking the right questions so that someone can come to conclusions on their own, which direction to take, and which actions to take.”*

To participants, coaching is set apart from similar professions such as counselling or mentoring in a number of key ways. While mentoring may involve similar professional backgrounds to the mentee, or otherwise advising the mentee on what actions the mentor has taken to be successful in their experience, many identified coaches as being able to provide an external perspective, backed with specific training and strategies to employ, to help their clients with their goals. As one participant put it, coaching involves “the ability to partner with and walk alongside the coachee with no judgement, no bias, and allowing them the space to unravel their own thoughts and be in that space and see how that feels, see what comes up for them.”

Participants identified that the coaching relationship is different than in counselling or mentoring in the sense that the orientation to the client is different: it is present- or future-focused, involves guiding rather than necessarily prescriptions of behaviour, and is focused on helping the client be the best they can be based on what their unique strengths are and client empowerment. One participant described coaching as “an enabler of success.”


### Credentials and Value

When asked whether certification was part of the hiring criteria for coaches, either for their organization or for themselves as an individual client, responses were mixed. Many participants said they were not aware at the outset whether or not the coach they hired was certified or had credentials, and that it was not something they considered. In some organizational contexts, wherein the procurement process is shaped around cost quotations and other factors, credentials did not necessarily play a role in the decision-making around bringing a coach in to the workplace.

However, when asked if certification or credentials should be the standard, the majority (nine of 12) believed it should be, and considered it important to the profession. It was thought that credentials set a standard for coaching that the individual meets certain expectations of their profession. One participant pointed out that coaches are often trusted with very private information from clients in a space that can be very vulnerable, and it is very important that there are certain ethics and codes of conduct coaches must follow, for which credentials or certification may be an indicator within their practice.

**9/12 felt  
credentials  
should be the  
standard for  
coaches**





Among those who did not feel credentials were absolutely necessary, other qualifications and professional experience would play just as large of a role in assessing the competency of the coach as accreditation would. Track record and especially referral would be important in one's consideration of a coach: if a coach were referred or recommended to a specific client, this was thought to hold more weight for some than professional designation alone. Notably, one participant said they had been looking for more available information on a coach's experience, qualification, and background when searching for a coach, and did not feel they were able to find enough in their search. It would also be important for the prospective coach to have sufficient background in the industry or sector in which the client works to approach a coaching relationship with proper context.

Many participants could not comment on how much they would pay for coaching services as these costs had been processed by their organization, in cases where coaching programs had been brought in. However, most agreed that, as a profession, coaching fees should be reflective of the skilled nature of the position and they would be comfortable paying typical rates for professional consulting services. This ranged anywhere from \$50 to \$300 per hour or \$2,500 overall, depending on the level of experience, for individual coaching; and up to \$10,000 for a coaching program. Many saw paying for professional coaching services as a worthwhile investment in light of associated costs, but came back to cost being a potential barrier for those outside of senior leadership or of limited means.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

The following conclusions were drawn from a detailed analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted for this research.

Overall, **individuals who have had experiences with professional coaches appraised these experiences very highly.** They reaped considerable benefit from having worked with a coach or having brought a coaching program into their organization. Although a few individuals identified some challenges or elements that were not as effective for their personal needs, nearly all were nonetheless satisfied and found value in working with a coach.

A major benefit of working with a coach in an organizational context is facilitating a *coaching culture*, a change which many participants identified as being beneficial for the functioning of their organization as a whole. Working with a coach can help implement necessary changes, or help reinforce existing change, to maintain momentum of this culture after coaching programming has concluded.

Coaching was seen as a skilled profession. The professional qualifications and techniques used by a coach were highly valued, and the majority of participants felt that credentials and other advanced training should be the standard for coaches.

Finally, although cost was commonly identified as a barrier to coaching services, participants agreed that it is a valuable investment and that the value of coaching services should not be undersold.

In consideration of these conclusions and the preceding research, the following recommendations have been developed for ICF Atlantic to continue to embody their mission to advance coaching in the region:

1. **Continue to raise awareness of coaching, both in terms of its benefits as well as in accreditation, availability, and long-term impacts of fostering organizational change.** Because referrals and information about the coach's background were deemed especially important by interviewees, this could take the form of testimonials from past or current coaching clients to provide first-hand accounts of how coaching has made a difference in their lives. This could also involve connecting prospective clients with past clients to answer questions or offering pro bono coaching or free trials to individuals or businesses.
2. **Encourage individuals from a wide range of professional backgrounds and lived experiences to pursue accreditation and a professional coaching practice.** Some participants identified that a lack of diversity may be a barrier to individuals seeking a coach; having a broader range of perspectives represented in ICF Atlantic and coaching as a profession may be one way to help reach more clients.
3. **Continue to encourage an open dialogue with clients or prospective clients about the nature of the coaching relationship, techniques involved, and what clients may want to get out of their experience.** Most participants understood that coaching can be tailored to the needs of the client or clients, and those who had challenges may have benefitted from more discussion around expectations and what they felt would work for them. This can be part of messaging around coaching or published information geared toward prospective clients.

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

*Note: assure confidentiality and obtain permission before recording interview.*

### *Confirm Eligibility*

1. Before we begin, I would like to confirm whether your experience of coaching was as a client of a coach or as the sponsor of the coaching program?

### *Participant Background*

2. To start, why don't you tell me a little bit about your business and its operations?

*If not already covered, probe:*

*What sector do you operate in?*


*How big is your business?*

3. How did you find or connect with your coach or coaches for your organization?
4. What motivated you to engage a coach?
  - a. What were you hoping to achieve? What goals did you set?
  - b. How often did you or your coaching participants meet with their coach? How regularly were you in contact with the coach?

### *Experience with Coaching*

*Next, I'd like to discuss your experiences with coaching.*

5. Can you describe what your overall experience was like working with your coach?
  - a. If you had to categorize the type of coaching you or your organizational participants received, what would you call it? (*listen for different types of business-related coaching such as conflict resolution, leadership coaching, communications, health and wellness, etc.*)
  - b. Did you find they helped you achieve the expected goals? What did you achieve?
  - c. Do you feel coaching impacted your bottom line or the revenue of your business?
  - d. Did you find it useful? Why/why not?
  - e. Were there any aspects that didn't work for you or were not as helpful?
6. How satisfied were you with your experience?
  - a. Would you recommend working with a coach to your peers or colleagues? Why/why not?
  - b. Who do you think could benefit from coaching services?

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- c. Do you think there are any aspects of the process that could be improved? *Probe: What about in terms of the way the process is structured?*
  7. Do you think there are any barriers for someone interested in working with a coach? What would they be?
  8. If someone you knew was about to start working with a coach, what advice would you give them, from your experience?

#### *Perspectives on the Coaching Profession*

*This next set of questions relates to your awareness of and perspectives on coaching as a profession.*

9. From your perspective, what does coaching typically involve?
  - a. What are the differences between coaching and mentoring or counselling?
  - b. What do you think sets coaching apart from other, similar professions?
  - c. Do you think business coaching is more one-on-one, or would it also involve groups? What do you think it should be?
10. Is certification a part of your hiring criteria for coaches? Do you think this should be the standard for coaches?
11. What would you be willing to pay for coaching services? *If necessary: Why is that?*

#### *Conclusion*

12. Do you have any final thoughts on your overall experience and your perspective on coaching before we conclude the interview?

**Thank you for participating in this interview! Your participation is greatly appreciated.**