

Schutte, Flip

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Business coaching: A hen with ducklings

**Author:**Flip Schutte¹ **Affiliation:**¹Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Flip Schutte,
schuttef@gibs.co.za**Dates:**

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Background: Globally, business coaching is an unregulated industry that is not yet considered a profession. In South Africa, two of the regulatory bodies, namely Coaches and Mentors of South Africa and the Institute of Management Consultants and Master Coaches of South Africa, were recognised as professional non-statutory bodies in 2015.

Aim: The purpose of this study is to inquire into how business coaching is currently being practised in South Africa from a practitioner's perspective.

Setting: At this key point in the maturation process of business coaching, it is important to understand the present state of the industry in order to direct it towards its aim of becoming a profession.

Method: A questionnaire was designed specifically for this research. It included all aspects associated with the coaching practice. Questionnaires were presented to all members of the professional body for coaches and mentors in South Africa.

Results: The findings are in line with the results of similar studies conducted elsewhere in the world. They revealed that business coaching is a young industry that attracts practitioners from different backgrounds. The recommendations of these studies support the notion that business coaching must move towards professionalisation. The information acquired through this research can contribute to the development of a score sheet for the industry in South Africa, as well as a progression plan to direct the industry towards professionalisation.

Conclusion: The article provides information regarding the current state of business coaching in South Africa and links it with international tendencies. It shows that South Africa is on par with the development of the industry globally.

Introduction

In 2004 the *Harvard Business Review* called business coaching in the USA an untamed terrain, a chaotic frontier, unexplored like the Wild West of yesteryear, fraught with risk but also immensely promising (Sherman & Freas, 2004). One may well ask: What does this industry look like in 2018 in South Africa? Has the South African business environment been able to tame and systemise the industry and has it lived up to its reputed promising start?

Business coaching is seemingly still the trend of the moment. It is becoming one of the fastest growing interventions in the professional development of managers (Baron, Morin, & Morin, 2010; Blackman, 2006; Bluckert, 2004; Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008). The growth in the coaching industry is a global phenomenon. In 2002 there were an estimated 10 000 business coaches in the USA and by 2007 there were more than 50 000. In the UK there were about 1500 business coaches in 1999 and by 2005 there were more than 8200 coaches (Joo, 2005). According to Maritz (2013) there are approximately 44 000 business coaches operating worldwide at the moment and South Africa ranks seventh in the top 10 countries with the highest number of coaches. The webpage of Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA, 2015) states that they currently have 1312 members who are practitioners and coaching service providers, but in fact there are many more coaches in the country who are not affiliated with any regulatory body.

This growth in the industry can be attributed to the fact that business coaching is not delivered by human resource development professionals (Hamlin et al. 2008). The growth may also be ascribed to the premise that it is a remedial practice and also functions as a leadership development tool to drive innovation and sustainable growth (Bozer, Sarros, & Santora, 2013). If it continues to develop at its current rate, it will make an even more significant difference by influencing the competence and performance of individuals, managerial leaders, teams and organisations (Stout-Rostron, 2012).

The coaching industry and the practices associated with it are not free of risk. One serious concern is the fact that many coaches do not have coach-specific training (Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

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Individuals from all industries, such as attorneys, sport coaches, engineers, athletes, teachers, priests and psychologists, flock to coaching and call themselves business coaches. They often claim that they have the necessary competencies and proven approaches to address organisational needs for leadership and management development (Brooks & Wright, 2007; Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998; Joo, 2005). With regard to the lack of training, some business coaches report that they are unsure about the exact nature of their practice (for example, how to sell their product and how to position it in the market). Others are not sure about how to define the industry in terms of its nature and have difficulty in explaining the benefit of business coaching compared to other available consulting services (Clegg, Rhodes, Kornberger, & Stilin, 2005). A further risk in the development of business coaching as a profession is that in South Africa, but also internationally, there is no legal obligation for coaches to register or belong to a regulatory body (Stout-Rostron, 2012). Belonging to a regulatory body is typical of most professions (Van Rensburg, Basson, & Carrim, 2011). Business coaching used to be an unregulated industry with no licensing or official regulating authority (Brotman et al. 1998). In South Africa COMENSA was recognised as a professional non-statutory body by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) on 20 May 2015. And on 30 June 2015, the Institute of Management Consultants and Master Coaches of South Africa (IMCSA) was also recognised as a non-statutory body with two professional designations by SAQA. Coaching is thus at the moment a self-regulated industry in South Africa, with three professional designations, but business coaching is not one of the professional designations as such.

The key focus of this article is to report on the state of the South African business coaching industry and the characteristics of practitioners currently operating in the industry. In the study on which this article is based, a convenient sample of the current practitioners of business coaching in South Africa were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their affiliation, qualifications, practice and level of knowledge. The ultimate aim is to feed information back into the industry on the level of professionalism as a baseline, and contribute to the development of a score sheet for the industry in South Africa in order to direct business coaching towards professionalisation.

In this article the background to the problem is briefly sketched. Next, the methodology used for the research is discussed and the results are presented. The article concludes with an interpretation of the findings, a discussion of the implications and the limitations of the research, and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

The modern concept of business coaching originated in the world of sport. Business coaching practitioners, however, profess to be in a distinct and unique emerging profession,

differentiating itself from sport, teaching, training, counselling and mentoring. Within this context business coaching can be defined as an intervention aiming to result in better-performing individuals and organisations through a dynamic relationship between a coach and a client (Stout-Rostron, 2012).

The business coaching industry is typified by self-styled consultants who come from very different professional backgrounds and who regard themselves as coaches (Hamlin et al. 2008). Because of the increase in demand, individuals from a wide array of backgrounds have added coaching to their repertoire of services (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). According to Maritz, Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2013) everyone is doing it, but everyone does it differently. This wide variety of backgrounds and the associated plethora of models and approaches mean that business coaches are practising in vastly different ways. An intervention by a coach will thus not only be tailored by the needs and interests of the client, but also by the background, theoretical orientation, interests and skills of the coach (De Haan & Burger, 2005). The diversity of backgrounds further means that the coaching industry and academia draw a wide range of methodological approaches and educational disciplines into this field (Grant, 2006).

Business coaching as a field of research and study is thus intellectually indebted to a number of other disciplines (Joo, 2005). There are some scholars who argue that, because of their particular training, psychologists are the most qualified to conduct business coaching, while others argue that the best person for the job is one with a background in business and management (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). There is, however, little consensus on this matter. What is undisputed is that practised business coaching is an eclectic blend of concepts and methods borrowed from adult education, management training, industrial and organisational psychology, and generic consultation skills (Blackman, 2006).

Business coaching globally is in a state of flux (De Haan, Duckworth, Birch, & Jones, 2013), particularly as it is an unregulated and fragmented (Myburgh, 2014) field with no entry barriers (Grant, 2006). Anyone can label himself or herself a coach. According to Myburgh (2014) the unregulated environment of business coaching, especially in South Africa, exposes the public to coaching behaviour that may be incompetent and unethical.

Given that a central requirement for a profession is to have clear barriers to entry (Van Rensburg et al. 2011), coaching should be considered an industry and not yet a profession (Grant, 2006). In early 2013 the newly elected executive committee of COMENSA instated a programme to rectify this situation. They decided to register COMENSA with government as a self-regulated professional body. This happened in 2015. From then onwards, COMENSA launched a strategy for the development of local standards, credentialing and continuing professional development

based on international benchmarking (Myburgh, 2014). However, COMENSA is only one of the bodies in South Africa and not all business coaches belong to COMENSA or for that matter to any other regulatory body.

Business coaching is one of those areas where practice is way ahead of theory. While coaching has become an established practice and industry, it is still ill-defined with a small body of exclusive professional knowledge and no tradition and background of training, formal education, and continuous and in-depth academic research (Joo, 2005). In South Africa, business institutes such as the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business, the University of Stellenbosch Business School, Tshwane University of Technology, the Gordon Institute for Business Science and Henley Business School offer business coaching training (Maritz, 2013). A Google search of business coaching training institutions in South Africa done by Maritz in 2013 revealed that many organisations that are not registered with any governing body deliver a wide range of courses at foundation, intermediate and practitioner level from 2 days to 18 months in length. Industry standards and quality are thus undefined and dependent on a myriad of coaching training institutions, of which only one, the University of Stellenbosch, is registered with and quality assured, by the *National Qualifications Act* according to Myburgh (2014). There are currently 41 coaching training institutions in South Africa alone registered with COMENSA (Maritz, 2013). The result is thus a mixed bag of approaches, methodologies and philosophies that are not necessarily grounded in evidence-based practice. The industry is therefore characterised by market confusion and an influx of untrained or poorly trained practitioners. Because of the historical diversity of approach and lack of commonly agreed coaching competencies and standards, there is also no agreed core curriculum to train coaches at present (Bluckert, 2004). There needs to be a significant investment in personnel and course development in order to produce a truly professional business coaching curriculum (Grant & Cavanagh, 2004).

Some research has been conducted on coaches as practitioners. International surveys conducted on the demographic background of business coaches have revealed that most coaches are between 40 and 60 years of age, with an average of 24 years of work experience. Their qualifications vary between none and a PhD (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Most coaches do not have a background in behavioural sciences and most commercialised coaching courses and training programmes offered in the market are short courses with little or no theoretical grounding, offering only a model of coaching that can be practised and applied (Grant, 2006). The model or system that they suggest bears little or no reference to the broader knowledge base (Cunningham, 2014).

Relatively little is known about business coaches, their practices and methods (Brooks & Wright, 2007), and only a few scholarly articles on the practice of business coaching in South Africa could be located (see Maritz, 2013; Maritz, Poggenpoel, & Myburgh, 2009; O'Flaherty & Everson, 2005). The study that informed this article sought to address this

shortfall by reporting the results of a survey on the characteristics of those practising business coaching in South Africa, as well as how they go about doing so. This study is an important first step in understanding the development and extent of coaching as an industry, and practitioners as professional service providers in South Africa. The ultimate aim of the research was to feed the information back into the coaching industry and by doing that to contribute towards the professionalisation of the industry.

Method

In this research a cross-sectional survey design was used because data were collected at a specific time by means of a survey that had been specifically designed for this study. The mixed-method approach was followed. The questionnaire consisted of quantitative questions to create numbers, as well as qualitative open-ended questions. The research was explorative as not a lot of scientifically collected data are available about the state of business coaching in South Africa.

The unit of analysis for this research was business coaches. All 1312 coaches affiliated with COMENSA (a South African organisation for coaches and mentors) were targeted. Members from COMENSA were targeted because COMENSA is the largest regulatory body in South Africa. They were invited to respond to the survey. The invitation letters as well as the questionnaires were emailed through the COMENSA communication system to all 1312 coaches affiliated with them. A total of 148 coaches completed the survey and mailed it back. This represents an 11.2% response rate.

The questions in the survey draw on characteristics of a typical profession and were designed to gather the information to establish the current state of the business coaching industry in South Africa. Open-ended questions were mostly used as the domain is largely unknown and such questions may generate rich information. The questionnaire was divided into five broad areas of interest: demographics, coaching professionalism, body of knowledge, business coaching qualifications and coaching practice. The questionnaire consisted of 10 multiple-option and 19 open-ended questions. The questionnaire was pretested by a selected interest group of nine coaches to assure that every question was understandable and to make sure that all areas of interest were covered. After recommendations were taken into account, the questionnaire was handed in at the chairperson of COMENSA's research committee for distribution through their channels.

To best accommodate the exploratory nature of the approach, a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to analyse the data. The qualitative data were scrutinised to identify themes in the text. The responses were dissected to ensure that the data had been captured correctly (Fouché & Schurink, 2013). The quantitative analysis involved numbers and were counted. The analysis of the data consisted of sorting, examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising the information (Cilliers, 2005).

Findings

The questionnaire consisted of five different aspects of the coaching industry, namely demographics, coaching professionalism, body of knowledge, business coaching qualifications and coaching practice.

Demographics

Of the 148 participants who returned the questionnaires, 69 were male and 79 were female. The ages of the coaches who participated varied between 38 and 66 with an average of 56 years of age. Of the respondents, 40% were older than 60 and another 40% were between 50 and 60.

To gauge the level of the respondents' experience, the following question was asked:

'How long have you been a coach?' The answers varied between 6 months and 18 years, with an average of 9 years; 27% of respondents had been coaches for longer than 10 years and 36% had been coaches for less than 5 years.

Coaching professionalism

Belonging to a professional body is typical of true professions. All 148 respondents belonged to COMENSA, which is not surprising as the questionnaire was distributed to COMENSA members only. Respondents were also asked about affiliations to other coaching organisations. Seven coaches also belonged to the International Coaching Community (ICF), one belonged to the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), and one to the International Association of Coaching (IAC).

Adherence to ethical standards and being signatory to such standards also typify true professionalism. From the 148 COMENSA members, 81% were signatories to the code of ethics of their affiliation body.

Quality assurance and oversight, both elements of a profession, were also assessed. The question 'How are your services as a coach evaluated?' elicited the following responses: 13% indicated that their services were not formally evaluated; 63% indicated they got evaluated through customer evaluation questionnaires; 45% of respondents indicated that they were evaluated by their regulatory body and 54% by a supervisor or peer.

Body of knowledge

A sound academic knowledge base typifies professions. Several questions on this matter were posed.

The first question in this section related to the concept of business coaching. In an attempt to gain an understanding of the way in which business coaches define coaching, respondents were asked to indicate the concepts that best describe business coaching the way they practise it.

Respondents were asked to contrast aspects of their practice. The way they responded to these aspects are listed below, in order of frequency:

- one-on-one relationship – 90%, compared to defining it also as a group activity – 47%
- to change behaviour – 86%, rather than to change an attitude – 81%
- to achieve personal goals – 81%, more so than organisational goals – 76%
- to achieve desired outcomes – 77%, rather than just setting targets – 52%
- regular contact – 77%, in comparison with once-off interventions – 23%
- paid for by the company – 72%, in contrast with individuals paying for themselves – 52%.

To gain information on the dominant theoretical paradigm that guides coaches, the respondents were asked to indicate which coaching model they used in their approach. The number one answer by 63% of participants was that they used their own model. Second was positive psychology by 59% of respondents and in the third instance, 40% of coaches indicated that they used the narrative approach.

In their answers to the question 'Which book(s) and author(s) on the topic of business coaching are your favourite(s)?' eight respondents indicated that they had read the book *Business Coaching: Wisdom and Practice* by Stout-Rostron and three had read *Rethink* by Natalie Cunningham. Other books mentioned at least once were the following:

- *Mastering Mentoring and Coaching* by Merlevede and Bridoux
- *Coaching – Evoking Excellence in Others* by O'Flaherty
- *Coaching with Backbone and Heart* by O'Neill
- *Somatic Coaching* by Heckler
- *Behavioural Coaching* by Skiffington and Zeus
- *The Complete Handbook of Coaching* by Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck
- *The Psychology of Executive Coaching* – by Peltier
- *Time to Think* by Klein
- *Coaching for Performance* by Whitmore
- *Psychology in the Work Context* by Bergh and Theron
- *Leadership and Team Coaching* by Hawkins
- *Transitions* by Bridges

This may suggest that there are no seminal works in the field or standard textbooks that could be used by these practitioners.

Professions are also associated with continuous professional development (CPD). Perusal of academic papers might reflect such development. On the question 'Approximately how many academic articles on business coaching did you read during the past twelve months?' the average answer was 15. This number seems bold, given the number of books read. Maybe some respondents didn't read the word 'academic' in the question.

Professions are typified by an increase in the body of knowledge, and this happens through research and the

dissemination of research results. Eighteen per cent of respondents indicated that they possessed the operational knowledge of research methodologies needed to do scientific research on business coaching. Not one of the respondents, however, had published any articles in academic journals. Practitioners affiliated to COMENSA and who responded to the research questionnaire therefore did not contribute to the formal academic advancement of the industry.

Business coaching qualifications

This section of the questionnaire concerned questions about the qualifications of the coaches. In answer to the question regarding all post-school qualifications, all 148 coaches indicated that they had received some sort of post-school qualification. Two participants (1.3%) indicated that they had doctorate degrees, 9 (6.0%) had master's degrees, 32 (21.6%) had honours degrees, 36% of the respondents had bachelor's degrees and 85% had diplomas and certificates. It seems that business coaches in general are relatively well educated. Respondents ticked more than one block in this section. A coach, for example, can have a diploma, an honours, master's and doctorate and therefore has ticked four blocks.

When asked to indicate at which level they had formal post-school qualifications directly linked to business coaching, 27% of the respondents indicated that they had a certificate, 36% had diplomas and eight (5.4%) respondents held a master's degree in coaching. The respondents were also questioned about their non-formal education in coaching. The majority of the participants (93% or 62%) indicated that they had undergone between one and five sessions of coaching-specific training. The rest of the respondents (55% or 37%) had not undergone any coaching-specific training.

The respondents were also probed regarding their business experience. This question was deemed necessary as many argue that it is business experience that qualifies a person to be a coach. The working experience of coaches in before entering the business coaching industry varied between 10 and 40 years with an average of 24.8 years. This is evidence of the actual work experience of the respondents. As a job title may reflect on experience, respondents were asked what their job title was before they became a coach. This was done to assess the hypothesis that business leaders become business coaches. The following job titles were indicated: CEO (18% or 12%), manager (24% or 16%), consultant (15% or 10%), managing director (11% or 7%), sales manager (9% or 6%) and area manager (8% or 5%). The coaches indicated at which level they had worked before taking up coaching as a job. The following were reported: self-employed, 36%; professional, 22%; senior management, 18%; middle management, 9%; and top management, 36%.

Linked to the premise that coaches need business experience to do coaching, they were asked about the link between their experience and their practice. Most of them, namely 86%, indicated that they practised their skills across industries and not only within the industry of their experience, with only

13% of the respondents coaching only in the industry of their experience. This percentage of respondents thus applied their skills in the environment where they had worked before.

Business coaching practice

A question was posed to ascertain the type of work coaches are involved in. The first part had a multiple-choice format. Regarding the question, 'What type of services do you offer?' 81% indicated that they did business coaching, 77% that they did executive coaching, 54% offered life coaching and 36% did career coaching. The question also had an open-ended part, namely 'Other'. Other services offered were leadership development (11%), wellness coaching (2%), health coaching (2%), retirement coaching (2%), transformational coaching (3%) and relational coaching (2%). These types of coaching were self-styled.

It was considered interesting to probe the use of questionnaires as tools of practice. Regarding the question about a formally standardised psychometric test that coaches might be using, only 9% indicated that they were using a standardised psychometric test. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents indicated that they used more popular tests and 40% replied that they were not using any tests in their practice.

The length of time spent on coaching sessions varied. With regard to individual sessions, 9% of the respondents indicated that a coaching session lasted less than an hour while 86% indicated that an average coaching session was between 1 and 2 hours. For groups the respondents indicated that sessions lasted on average between 2 and 3 hours. Ninety-four per cent indicated that group sessions lasted up to 3 hours while 4% indicated that the duration of a group session was longer than 3 hours. The coaching was done either face-to-face (92%) or sometimes in groups (20%). It could even take place telephonically (9%) or online (2%).

The viability of coaching as a career depends on many factors, including the number of clients served, fee charged and the marketing of services. With regard to the number of clients coaches serve, the participants indicated that they had provided services to between 4 and 100 clients in the past 12 months. Groups were less frequently serviced. The average fee per hour varied between R550 and R1850, with an average of R1034 per hour for individuals and an average of R1707 for groups. All coaches indicated that they marketed their services mainly through word of mouth. Moreover, 31% indicated that they also did prospecting, whereas 9% reported doing cold calls and 9% said that they were using networking opportunities in addition to word of mouth. Only 4.5% of respondents were using webpages or email campaigns to market their services.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to report on the current state of business coaching in South Africa and to give feedback to the industry that may be helpful to its development as a

profession. The data collected by means of questionnaires were presented in the 'Findings' section of the article, and in this section the data are interpreted, analysed and discussed.

The biographical data of the COMENSA coaches who completed the questionnaire revealed that there were more female than male business coaches, and most of them were in their fifties and sixties. The coaches who completed the questionnaires had been in the industry for an average of 9 years. All the respondents were affiliated to one regulatory body, namely COMENSA. This body is the largest of its kind in the country.

The response rate was 11.2%, which means that only 148 of the 1312 members completed the questionnaires. A larger response rate might have been obtained if the respondents had the opportunity to remain anonymous with an online survey, but the chairperson of the research committee of COMENSA indicated that the normal procedure was that the questionnaires must be distributed through COMENSA's members mailing system.

With regard to professionalism, it is encouraging to note that almost all the respondents had signed the ethical code of COMENSA. It was also encouraging to find that some practitioners were affiliated to multiple regulatory bodies. With regard to formal oversight and control, customer evaluations seemed predominant, followed by peer evaluations and evaluations from the regulatory body.

Given the solicited data, it seems that business coaching in South Africa is a one-on-one relationship with a view to changing behaviour and attitudes towards achieving personal goals and desired outcomes through regular contact with the client. An additional finding is that the organisation normally pays for this intervention.

The findings of the research showed that during interventions most coaches use a model of coaching that they have developed for themselves. It is a normal phenomenon that coaches adopt a model that they are comfortable with and that is delivering the outcomes they and their clients contracted for. This is in line with what Myburgh (2014) stated, namely that the diversity of coaching backgrounds and training brought also a diversity of coaching models to the industry.

The fact that business coaching is still a young and growing industry is also mirrored in the academic environment regarding business coaching. Business coaches read academic articles and industry-specific textbooks, but they are not academically active and they do not produce many published peer-reviewed articles yet. Joo (2005) stated as well that most coaches do not have any formal academic training in coaching. Feldman and Lankau (2005) also confirmed that the qualification of coaches varies between none and a PhD.

Business coaches come to the industry from different backgrounds and, according to the research statistics, each

one brings an average of 24 years of experience to the coaching occupation. They are, however, not hesitant to coach across industries. It may rightly be asked if it is industry-specific or business process experience that is needed for coaches to be successful. The fact that people enter the coaching industry from different backgrounds is an international trend also confirmed by Feldman and Lankau (2005), Blackman (2006), Hamlin et al. (2008) and Maritz et al. (2013).

The participants indicated that they did not specialise in one type of coaching in their practice and most coaches offered a variety of services ranging from executive and business coaching to life and career coaching. From the statistics it seems that most coaches did not have a practice that made it financially viable to do coaching only, because on average the coaches had seen 22 clients each in the past year at a charge of R1034 per hour. Though this premise was not tested by the questionnaire, the researchers assume that coaches were doing coaching part-time or that they added other services such as corporate training and facilitation to their list of services to make their practices financially viable.

The results of this investigation conducted on the South African business coaching industry are thus in line with international results and studies that were conducted elsewhere in the world. The literature review that is discussed above supports these findings as indicated in the preceding discussion.

Conclusion

This article started with the question of whether the past decade or so has been enough to tame and systemise the industry and whether business coaching has lived up to its promising start. In this final section of the article an attempt is made to answer the question.

The findings show that the coaching industry in South Africa is in line with international development of the industry. From a practitioner's perspective, business coaching is a young development within the coaching industry that attracts practitioners from different backgrounds. Business coaches offer a variety of services through diverse models and techniques. There is thus no consistency or homogeneity in the delivery of service. From a theoretical perspective, business coaching is currently used as an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of one-on-one and group interventions aimed at improving performance in the workplace.

The recommendation derived from the research is that, for business coaching as an industry to become a profession, an obligatory membership to a regulatory or professional body ought to be introduced. This will safeguard the industry and protect the client. A score sheet for the industry in South Africa can be developed as well as a progression plan to direct business coaching towards professionalisation.

The limitation of this study was the fact that only coaches already affiliated to a professional association were invited

to participate in the completion of the questionnaires. Only coaches from one body participated, and all the other coaches from possible other bodies, as well as coaches who were not affiliated with any regulatory body, were not part of this research project.

Further research also needs to be conducted on how to prepare business coaching as one designation for professionalisation within the coaching industry and how to move it towards this goal.

Based on the outcome of the research on which this article is based, one can conclude that in 2018 business coaching in South Africa might not be compared to the American Wild West but rather to an umbrella to which people from different backgrounds flock. Notwithstanding all the challenges that need to be overcome, it is still an immensely promising industry.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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