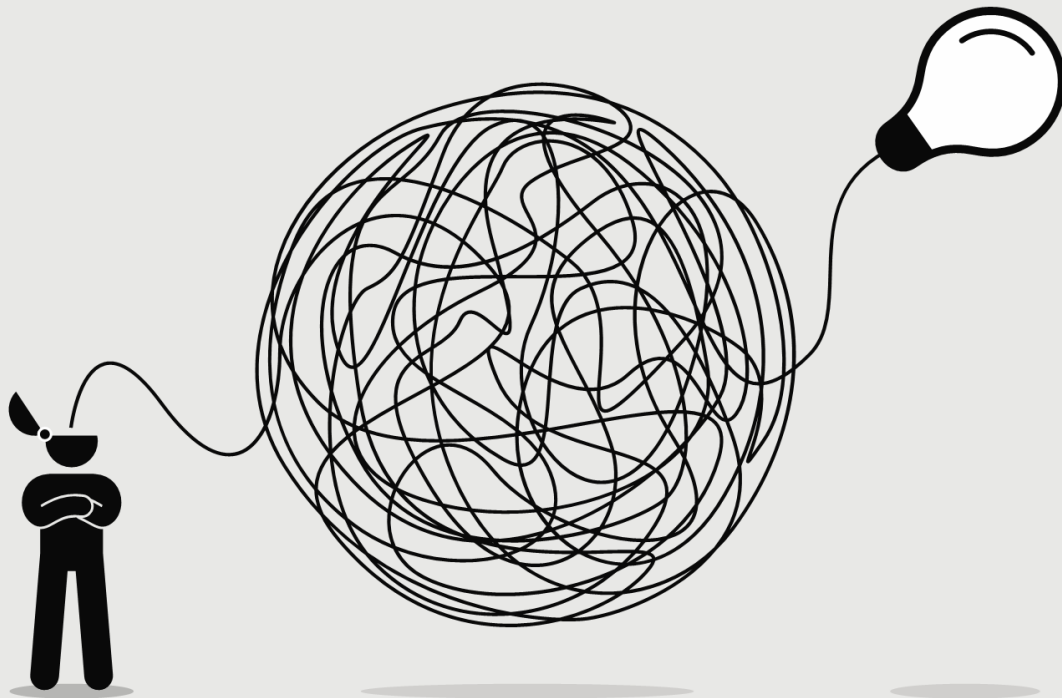




## SPECIAL IOC FEATURE

Institute of Coaching  
McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Affiliate



### Understanding the Executive Coaching Literature

*With coaching science in mind, every coach can answer these 3 questions:*

*Does coaching work? How and why does it work? What is the wider impact of coaching?*

These are core questions that clients and organizations consider when making the decision to invest in coaching. Every coach can answer these questions with confidence by understanding the strengths and limitations of the coaching literature. This feature summarizes the most recent (2018) review of the strengths and limitations of the literature on (external) executive coaching outcomes. This is a feature you will want to refer back to

often. (We will soon feature the literature on health and wellness coaching.)

## An Ambitious Scope

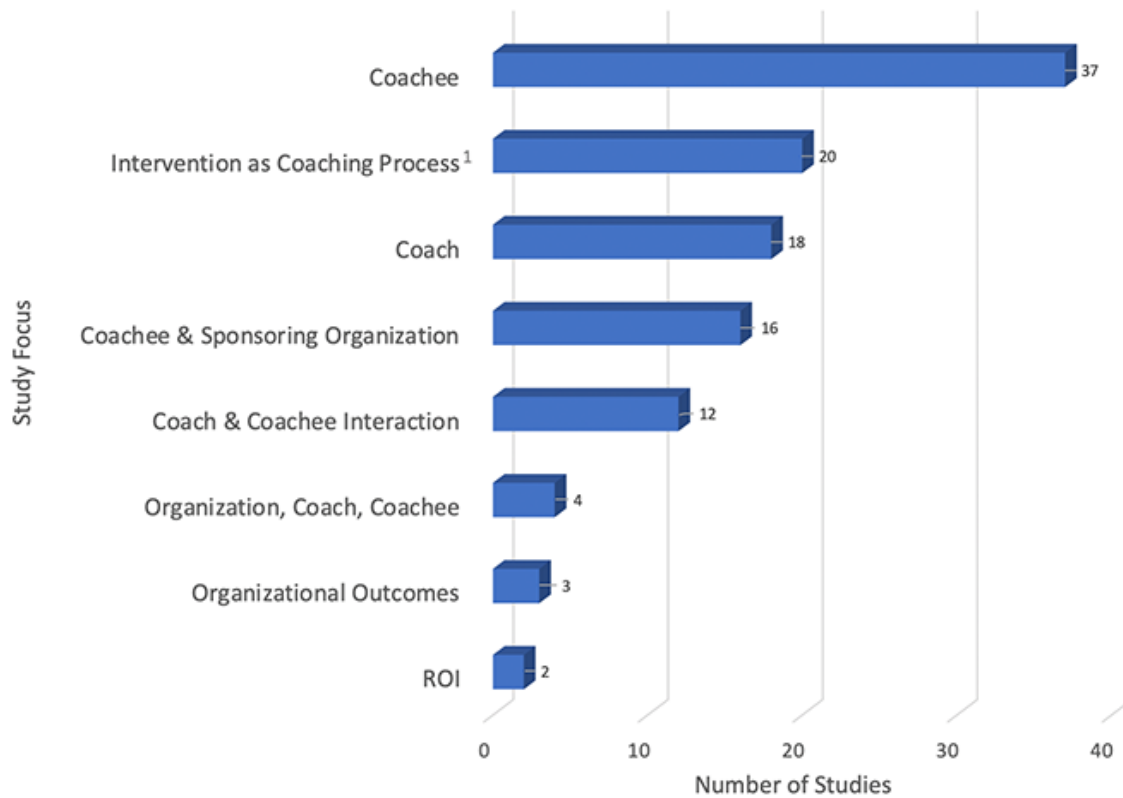
In their article, “**A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most?**” Andromachi Athanasopoulou and Sue Dopson deliver an ambitious “interpretation meta-synthesis” of the what, how and why of executive coaching outcomes in the literature. The authors tackled a scope broader than previous reviews based on quantitative studies which focus on individual coachee outcomes to address the question – ***does coaching work*** (the destination). They added qualitative studies which are able to explore ***how and why coaching works*** (the journey) as well as addressing the impact of the social and environmental context of coaching such as organization, stakeholder, and coachee characteristics.

The authors note: “***The purpose of this review is not to quantify the effectiveness of executive coaching but to shed light on weaknesses in research designs and discuss the need for a more context-sensitive research approach.***”

## Characteristics of the Coaching Research Literature

110 peer-reviewed executive coaching outcomes studies (as of 2016) published in 37 journals were identified for the meta-synthesis. The authors describe the breadth of research focus areas and, as shown below in Exhibit 1, there is a dearth of studies with a research focus on macro-level outcomes like overall ROI and organizational outcomes.

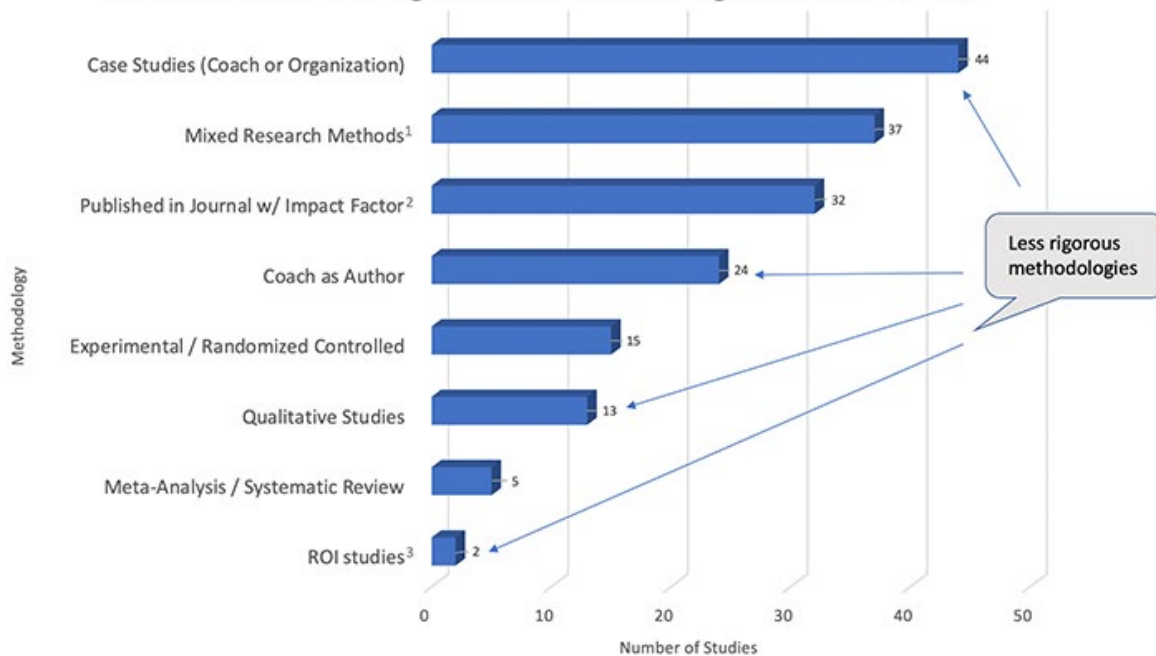
## Exhibit 1: Focus Areas of Coaching Research Studies



1. E.g. Cognitive behavioral, solution-focused, positive psychology/strengths based approaches are the most common

The authors shed light on research designs as well. As shown below in Exhibit 2, the literature is visibly skewed toward methodologies that are less rigorous, including case studies, qualitative studies, ROI studies without robust methods, and studies with the coach as author. Case studies comprise the largest portion of studies; though insightful, they're not typically generalizable and do not elucidate patterns. Furthermore, studies are often authored by the coach delivering the intervention studied, which does not allow for sufficient research independence and objectivity. Despite these skews, a sizable and growing portion of coaching studies are more rigorous. These include articles published in high impact peer-reviewed journals, meta-analyses/systematic reviews, and most importantly, randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—the gold standard for establishing causality between intervention and outcome.

## Exhibit 2: Methodologies Used in Coaching Research Studies



1. E.g. combinations of surveys, qualitative interviews, tracking of pre/post coaching assessments. 2. A measure of the frequency with which the average article in a journal has been cited in a particular year. 3. Methodology considered invalid as the ROI calculation isn't robust

## Limitations in the Literature

Over half the studies of executive coaching outcomes do not consider contextual dimensions in their analysis or discussion of outcomes. These contextual dimensions include characteristics of organizations and coaches, relationships, power differentials, organizational culture, phase, structure, support, etc. More evidence is needed on how such features of the coaching environment are related to outcomes. Thankfully, recent studies are increasingly analyzing the impact of such contextual factors.

Additional limitations in the literature include:

1. **Initial Conversations and Contracting Stage:** No focus on how the contracting stage between coach and sponsoring organization can affect coaching outcomes
2. **Comparative Effectiveness Research:** No comparison of how coaching interventions differ in effectiveness (e.g. cognitive-behavioral, solution-focused positive psychology/strengths, GROW)
3. **Long Term Effects and Sustainability:** Lack of tracking sustainability of outcomes over months and years following the intervention
4. **Flaws in Research Design:** Bias in research design and overstatement of the impact of coaching on coachees as there are few controlled studies

## Assessing Coaching Outcomes and Impact

The authors summarize executive coaching outcomes in 11 categories from 84/110 studies, excluding the ROI studies and studies where the coach is the author. Outcomes considered were at the level of the coachee, the organization, and the coach. The authors also name categories of factors affecting these outcomes, including at the level of intervention, organization, coachee, coach, and the relationship among coaching stakeholders.

Download the [article](#) (available to IOC members) to find Table 2 with the outcomes list along with coaching pitfalls, and Table 3 which lists 23 factors affecting outcomes along with areas for more research.

### Recommendations and Lessons for Coaches:

1. **Context Matters:** Seek an in-depth understanding of the organizational context and its impact on coaching outcomes.
2. **Understand Sources of Demands and Constraints:** Discern whether the organizational demands on the coachee are contextual or self-determined.
3. **Assess Coach/Organization Alignment:** Appreciate how the coach's view of leadership aligns with the views on leadership of the coachee and organization.
4. **Balance Mastery and Achievement Goals:** Help the coachee distinguish between skills mastery and achievement goals and find an optimal balance.
5. **Integrate Interventions:** Seek integration of coaching and leadership development interventions, rather than comparisons.

## Gratitude for a Monumental Effort

Let's all take a moment to express our sincere gratitude to Andromachi Athanasopoulou and Sue Dopson, and all of the coaching researchers on whose shoulders we stand. This community of researchers is boldly tackling the scientific complexity that allows all of us to coach more confidently with science in mind.

Margaret Moore  
IOC Co-Founder, Co-Director

Om Lala  
IOC Senior Advisor

Athanasopoulou, A., & Dopson, S. (2018). A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 70-88. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.11.004 (available for IOC Members)

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