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The Independent Coaching Practice

A category read of executive and business coaching, with utilization economics, four scenarios, and leading indicators to 2028

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About this report

Every substantive claim in this report carries an evidence classification and, where applicable, a numbered source. Facts are separated from vendor claims, third-party estimates, the author's assessments, and untested hypotheses. Forward-looking sections use scenarios with observable tripwires rather than point forecasts. Stated assumptions are listed before the analysis begins.

Scope and evidentiary standard

This assessment covers professional coaching sold to working adults for career, leadership, and business outcomes. That includes executive coaching, business coaching, and the adjacent mastermind and group program formats. It excludes therapy, sports coaching, and academic tutoring. The unit of interest is the independent practice, meaning one to five people selling directly to a buyer rather than supplying hours through an enterprise procurement process.

Published sizing for this category cannot be taken at face value. The sources consulted here place the market anywhere from roughly one billion dollars to roughly one hundred and thirteen billion. That is close to two orders of magnitude, and the spread exists because each source draws the category boundary somewhere different while none of the commercial firms publishes where it drew it. The only figure with a documented methodology comes from the profession's own certifying body, derived from a survey in which four out of five respondents were its own members.

Every substantive claim below carries a label naming what kind of evidence stands behind it. The distance between a FACT and a THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE is the most useful information on any given page, and it is deliberately visible rather than smoothed over.

Label	Definition	How to treat it
FACT	Verifiable in the cited primary source: a filing, press release, official documentation, or standards body announcement.	Reliable as stated. Check the source if the exact wording matters.
VENDOR CLAIM	Reported by a vendor about its own business or product. Self-measured and not audited by any third party.	The vendor said it. Directionally useful, not a measurement. Definitions of the metric are usually undisclosed.
THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE	A research firm forecast or survey result. Methodology is proprietary and generally not reproducible.	Use for direction and order of magnitude only. Do not build a model on it.

Label	Definition	How to treat it
ASSESSMENT	The author's reasoned judgment from the cited evidence. Falsifiable, and the reasoning is shown so it can be argued with.	This is analysis, not reporting. Disagree with it where your evidence differs.
HYPOTHESIS	A proposition offered for testing. Not currently supported by sufficient evidence to assert.	Treat as a research question, not a conclusion. Each one names what would confirm or refute it.
SCENARIO	A structured future state with a stated subjective probability. The probability is the author's judgment, not a calculated figure.	Use the leading indicators attached to each, not the probability. The indicators are observable; the probability is not.

Assumptions this analysis rests on

Four premises are assumed rather than demonstrated. Each is stated with the conclusions that fail if it turns out to be wrong.

First, that the International Coaching Federation's survey population is directionally representative of practitioner economics despite being self-selected and 80 percent drawn from its own membership. If credentialed members earn materially more than the uncredentialed majority, every revenue figure here is too generous and the pressure on the independent tier is worse than described, not better.

Second, that the reported mean hourly fee and mean annual revenue can be divided against each other to estimate billable hours. This assumes both means come from a similar respondent base and that package and group pricing does not badly distort the hourly figure. If a large share of revenue arrives through formats priced well above the stated hourly rate, the utilization estimate in this report is too low.

Third, that the enterprise platform tier and the independent tier compete for at least some of the same buyers. If platform coaching only reaches employees who would never have engaged a private coach, the substitution argument underneath Scenarios A and C is wrong and the independent outlook improves.

Fourth, that corporate training spend is a usable proxy for organizational appetite for coaching. If coaching budgets sit outside learning and development, in executive or HR business partner lines, the per-head spending decline described later does not reach the senior end of the market.

Executive summary

The headline story about coaching is growth: more practitioners, more revenue, six consecutive editions of a study saying so. The arithmetic underneath that story is less encouraging for anyone operating a practice of one. Supply is expanding at roughly the same rate as revenue, which leaves earnings per practitioner flat in nominal terms and negative once inflation is applied. The constraint on an independent practice is not what it charges per hour. It is how few of its working hours are billable.

FINDING 1 The category is three markets sharing one name.

ASSESSMENT Enterprise platform coaching sold through procurement, independent practice sold on relationship, and coach education sold by coaches to other coaches are distinct businesses with different buyers, different price mechanics, and different competitive dynamics. Published sizing aggregates them, which is the primary reason the numbers disagree so violently. [1] [8]

FINDING 2 Published sizing spans nearly two orders of magnitude.

FACT Sources consulted for this report variously size the category at $1.2 billion, $1.98 billion, $5.34 billion, $12 billion, and $112.98 billion. These are not refinements of one another. They are measurements of different things presented under similar names. [1] [5] [7] [8] [9]

FINDING 3 Revenue per practitioner is flat nominally and falling in real terms.

ASSESSMENT Across three editions of the certifying body's own study, estimated revenue divided by estimated practitioners moves from roughly $40,100 to $41,800 to $43,400. That is about 8 percent nominal growth over six years, against US consumer price inflation of roughly 25 percent across the same span. [1] [3] [4]

FINDING 4 Utilization, not price, is the binding constraint.

ASSESSMENT The reported mean fee of $234 per hour and mean annual revenue of $49,283 imply about 211 billable hours a year, roughly four per week, against 11.6 hours per week spent working as a coach. Approximately one hour in three converts to revenue. Raising the rate does not fix that ratio. [1]

FINDING 5 The funded tier has stopped raising equity and started shipping AI.

FACT BetterUp's last priced round closed in October 2021. CoachHub's last equity round closed in June 2022, and its December 2024 raise was a debt facility rather than a priced round. Both companies brought AI coaching products to general availability during 2025 and 2026. [10] [14] [15] [16]

FINDING 6 The only leadership-population trial found effects for human coaching alone.

FACT A 2026 randomized controlled experiment with 114 senior managers compared accredited human coaches against automated AI coaches and found mid-to-high effect sizes in the human arm and no comparable effect in the AI arm. It contradicts an earlier trial in a student population that had found parity. [17] [18]

FINDING 7 The most repeated statistic in this category has no locatable primary source.

ASSESSMENT The claim that 82 percent of coaching businesses fail within two years is attributed to the certifying body across dozens of pages. It does not appear in the study editions reviewed for this report. Every source repeating it sells training to coaches. [22] [23]

FINDING 8 Enterprise buyers are spending more in aggregate and less per head.

> **THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE** United States training spend rose from $98 billion to $102.8 billion between 2024 and 2025 while per-employee spend fell from $1,207 in 2022 to $954 in 2025 and formal learning hours declined for a fifth consecutive year. The money is moving toward scaled delivery. [20] [21]

The category is three markets

ASSESSMENT Treating coaching as one market is the error that produces every downstream disagreement about its size. Three businesses operate under the name, and they share almost nothing except the word.

ASSESSMENT The first is enterprise platform coaching. A funded vendor holds the customer relationship with a large employer, contracts a roster of coaches as suppliers, and sells seats or programs at a per-employee price. Procurement decides. The coach is a unit of delivery capacity with a rate card, and the buyer is a learning and development or human resources function with a budget line and a renewal cycle. [10] [14]

ASSESSMENT The second is the independent practice. A named individual sells directly to another individual or to a small business owner, usually without a procurement process, frequently without a formal contract cycle, and almost always on the strength of an existing relationship or referral. Price is set by the practitioner and accepted or rejected by one person. [1]

ASSESSMENT The third is coach education: training programs, credentialing, and business-of-coaching instruction sold by coaches to other coaches and to people who want to become coaches. This market is structurally different from the first two because its customer is its own supply. It grows when entry looks attractive, which means it grows fastest exactly when the practitioner market is getting more crowded. [1]

ASSESSMENT The third market is the one that generates most of the visible marketing in the category, and its incentives explain most of the unreliable statistics. A firm selling coach training benefits from a large, fast-growing market number and from a high stated failure rate, because the first justifies entry and the second justifies buying help. Both claims serve the seller. [22] [23]

FACT The certifying body reports that 60 percent of coaches also provide training, 57 percent consulting, 55 percent facilitation, and 49 percent mentoring. Most practitioners are not running a pure coaching business, which further complicates any attempt to size coaching as a discrete category. [1]

Sizing, and why to discount it

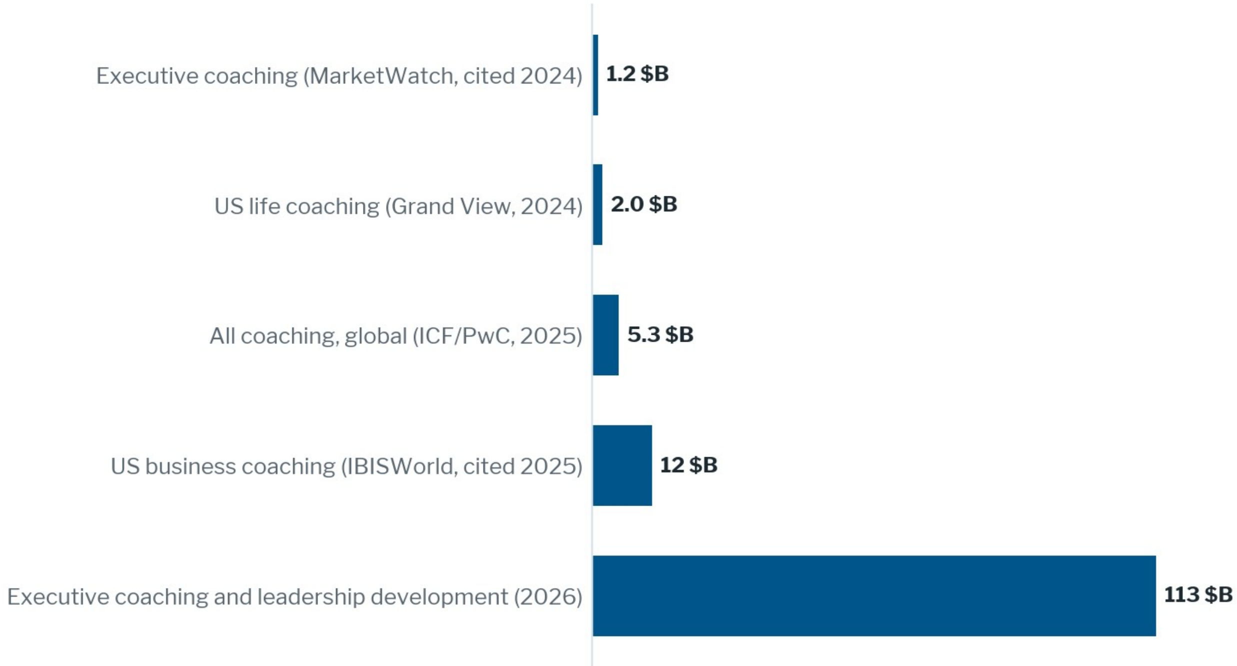
FACT The certifying body, working with PricewaterhouseCoopers, estimates global coaching revenue at $5.340 billion and 122,974 coach practitioners, of whom 110,492 are active. The survey ran from 28 February to 23 April 2025 and produced 10,035 valid responses, of which 8,068, or 80 percent, came from the body's own members. [1]

ASSESSMENT This is the best available figure and it should still be discounted. Estimating the global population of an unlicensed profession from a survey administered by the certifying body to a sample that is four-fifths its own membership will systematically over-represent credentialed, committed, full-time practitioners. The people who trained, never got traction, and quietly stopped are the hardest respondents to reach and the most consequential for anyone assessing the odds of building a practice. [1]

FACT The certifying body's own materials state two different growth rates for the same practitioner count. Its executive summary reports a 13 percent increase over 2023; its press release reports 15 percent. A separate page on its website describes the $5.34 billion figure as almost double the 2023 total and gives that total as $2.849 billion, when the 2023 study reported $4.564 billion and $2.849 billion was the figure from the 2020 edition. [1] [2] [3] [4]

ASSESSMENT That is a small error and it matters more than its size suggests. If the organization producing the category's only methodologically documented number misstates its own prior figure on its own website, every downstream page that cites it inherits the error. Several already have. [9] [22]

FIGURE 1 **The same category, sized five ways**



THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Published figures for overlapping definitions of one category. The chart is unreadable at the low end by design: that compression is the finding. Only the ICF/PwC figure publishes its methodology. The largest figure bundles leadership development and training, which is a different purchase from coaching. [1] [5] [7] [8] [9]

ASSESSMENT The practical rule for a reader is to ignore any coaching market figure that does not state its boundary, and to treat any figure above about $20 billion as a measurement of corporate leadership development rather than of coaching. The $112.98 billion estimate is not wrong so much as it is answering a different question. [8]

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Commercial research firms place category growth in the 8 to 12 percent compound annual range through the end of the decade. These projections use proprietary methodologies that are not published, start from base years that differ between firms, and are produced by organizations that sell reports to participants in the market being forecast. [5] [6] [7]

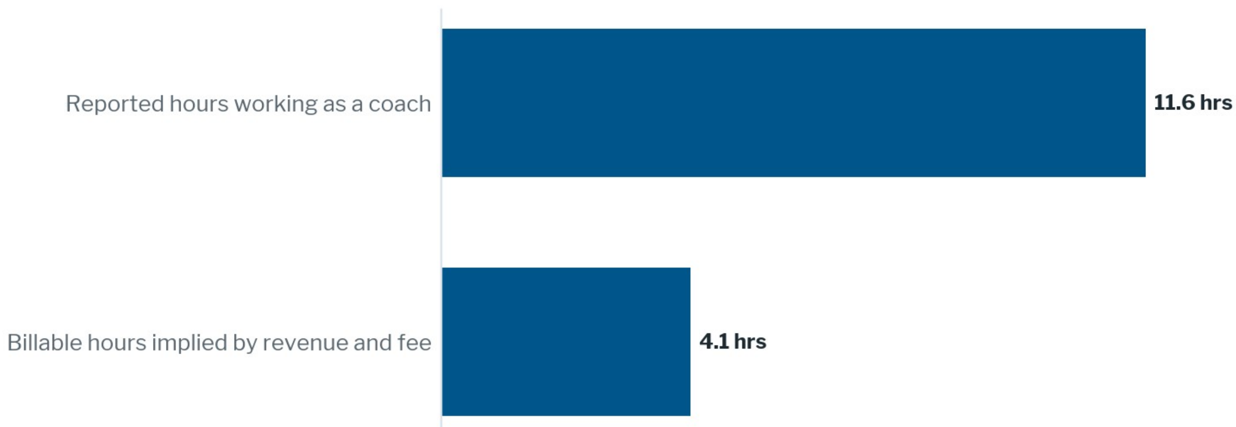
What a practice actually earns

FACT Active practitioners report a mean fee of $234 for a one-hour session, a mean of 11.6 hours per week spent working as a coach, a mean of 12.4 active clients, and mean annual revenue of $49,283 from coaching activities. [1]

ASSESSMENT Those four numbers do not sit comfortably together, and the tension between them is the most useful thing in the study. At $234 an hour, 11.6 hours a week for fifty weeks would produce roughly $135,000. Reported revenue is about a third of that. Dividing revenue by fee gives approximately 211 billable hours a year, or just over four a week. The other seven and a half hours are marketing, admin, notes, proposals, and unpaid discovery calls. [1]

ASSESSMENT A second calculation corroborates the first. Four billable hours spread across 12.4 active clients is about twenty minutes per client per week, which works out to roughly one session per client every three weeks. That matches the biweekly-to-monthly cadence at which coaching engagements are conventionally sold. Two independent paths reaching the same utilization figure raise confidence that the gap is real rather than an artifact of mismatched means. [1]

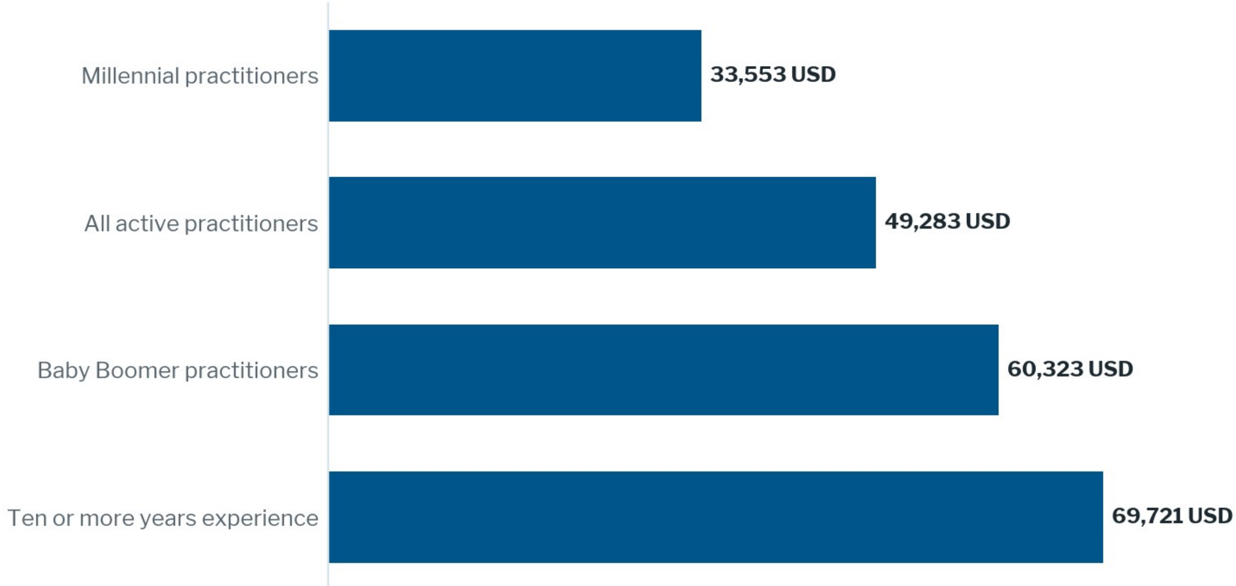
FIGURE 2 **Hours worked against hours billed, per week**



ASSESSMENT Billable hours derived by dividing mean annual revenue ($49,283) by mean hourly fee ($234) and spreading across fifty weeks. The derivation assumes both means come from a comparable respondent base; package and group pricing would move the estimate upward. [1]

ASSESSMENT The commercial implication is direct. A practitioner who raises rates by 20 percent and holds everything else constant adds roughly $9,900 in annual revenue. A practitioner who converts one additional hour per week from unbilled to billed adds roughly $11,700. The second is harder to sell as a strategy and produces more money, and the category's own advice industry concentrates almost entirely on the first. [1]

FIGURE 3 **Mean annual coaching revenue by cohort**



FACT Self-reported means from a self-selected survey population, 80 percent of whom are members of the sponsoring body. Means conceal distribution: no median or quartile data is published, so the spread within each cohort is unknown. [1]

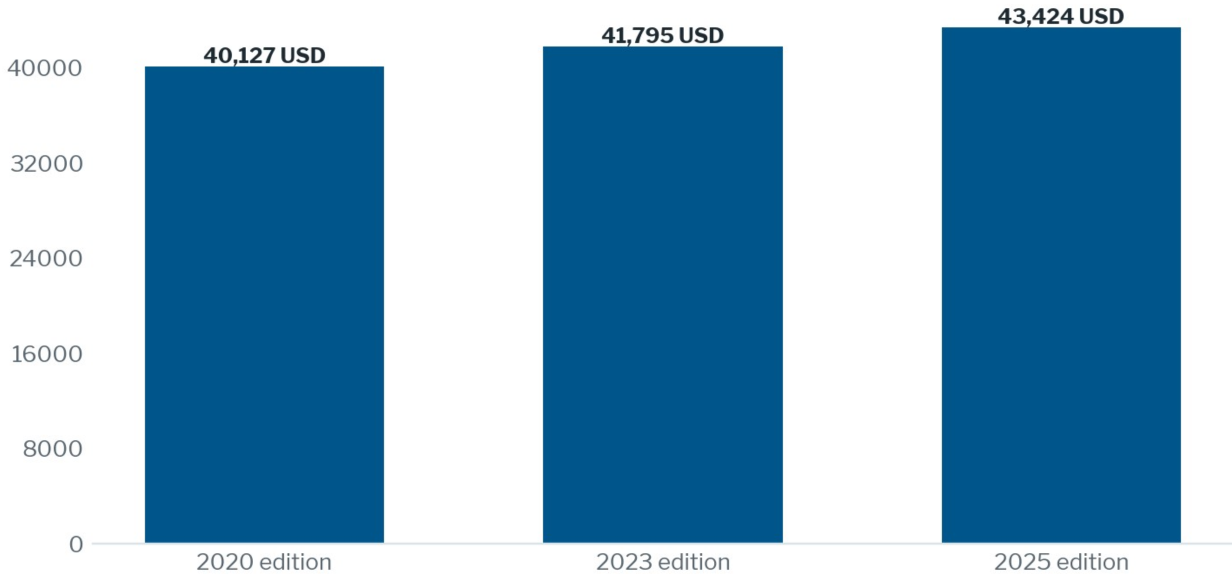
ASSESSMENT The experience premium is real and it is smaller than the category's marketing implies. A practitioner with more than ten years in the field averages $69,721, about 41 percent above the overall mean. That is a decent return on a decade, and it is not the outcome most coach training is sold on. [1]

ASSESSMENT The absence of median and quartile figures is the single largest gap in the published evidence. Service businesses of this shape almost always have a long left tail, and a mean of $49,283 is consistent with a large group earning under $20,000 and a small group earning several hundred thousand. Until the certifying body publishes a distribution, no one can honestly tell an entrant what the modal outcome is. [1]

Supply is growing into flat revenue

FACT Across three study editions, estimated global revenue moves from $2.849 billion to $4.564 billion to $5.340 billion, while estimated practitioner counts move from roughly 71,000 to 109,200 to 122,974. [1] [3] [4]

FIGURE 4 **Estimated revenue per practitioner, by study edition**



ASSESSMENT Derived by dividing each edition's total revenue estimate by its practitioner estimate. Both inputs are survey-derived and carry their own error, so the series is directional. Figures are nominal and unadjusted for inflation. [1] [3] [4]

ASSESSMENT Nominal revenue per practitioner grew about 8 percent over roughly six years. United States consumer prices rose approximately 25 percent across the same period. The deflator is imperfect here, since the revenue base is global and the price index is not, so the comparison is directional. Directionally, the average practitioner is earning less in real terms than in 2019 while the count of practitioners has risen 54 percent. [1] [3]

ASSESSMENT That combination describes an entry-friendly market rather than a lucrative one. Coaching has almost no capital requirement, no licensure barrier, and a well-developed supply chain of training programs. Categories with those properties tend to convert demand growth into practitioner growth rather than into practitioner income, and the data across three editions is consistent with that pattern. [1]

ASSESSMENT The certifying body reports 59 percent of coaches expecting revenue growth, driven mainly by more clients and sessions rather than higher fees, with only 37 percent expecting fee increases. Read against flat real earnings, that is a profession expecting to work more hours for the same rate. Optimism about volume in a market adding practitioners faster than revenue is the least reliable sentiment in the survey. [1]

What the funded tier's financing says

FACT BetterUp closed a $300 million Series E in October 2021 at a $4.7 billion valuation, having raised a $125 million Series D at $1.7 billion eight months earlier. No priced equity round has been reported since. [10]

FACT The company announced a layoff of approximately 16 percent of staff in August 2023. [11]

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Third-party trackers put BetterUp revenue at roughly $151.7 million in 2023 and $214.6 million in 2024. These estimates come from services that do not publish their methodology and should be treated as indicative only. [12] [13]

ASSESSMENT Even taken at face value, that revenue figure is worth holding next to the category's total. A single vendor at roughly $215 million represents about 4 percent of the certifying body's estimate for all global coaching revenue, and its 2021 valuation of $4.7 billion is close to the entire profession's estimated annual turnover. Either the vendor is an enormous share of a small market, or the market is considerably larger than the survey captures, or the 2021 valuation reflected a growth assumption that has not been repriced. The third reading is the most economical. [1] [10] [13]

FACT CoachHub raised a $200 million Series C in June 2022, bringing total funding to $330 million. Its December 2024 raise of approximately $42 million was a growth financing facility from HSBC Innovation Banking, structured as debt rather than a priced equity round. [14] [15]

VENDOR CLAIM At the time of the Series C, an investor in the round stated that the digital coaching segment was expected to grow by up to one hundred times, with most major organizations implementing digital coaching at scale by the end of the decade. [14]

ASSESSMENT Four years on, that claim is testable and it has not survived. Neither of the two most heavily funded vendors has raised a priced equity round since 2022, and the growth trajectory implied by a hundredfold expectation would have been visible by now in fresh rounds at higher marks. Investor forecasts made at the point of investment are the least reliable category of claim in this report, and this one is retained specifically because it can be scored. [10] [14] [15]

FACT Both vendors brought AI coaching products to market in the same window. CoachHub announced general availability of its AI coaching product in June 2025 with a broader rollout in May 2026. BetterUp introduced a human-plus-AI suite in October 2025 including real-time prompts inside Slack and Microsoft Teams. [12] [16] [25]

ASSESSMENT The read is straightforward. Capital that stopped flowing in 2022 has forced the platform tier toward profitability, and the largest variable cost in a coaching platform is the human coach. AI is being deployed first where it removes hours from the delivery model, not where it improves outcomes. Products branded as extending support between sessions do exactly that: they lower the number of paid human hours per seat while keeping the seat price intact. [12] [16]

The AI evidence base is two studies that disagree

FACT A 2022 randomized controlled trial compared an AI chatbot coach against human coaches over ten months, measuring goal attainment against two control groups. Both the human coaches and the AI coach outperformed the controls, and the AI coach was as effective as the human coaches at trial end. [18]

FACT A 2026 randomized controlled experiment with 114 coachees compared accredited human coaches directly against automated AI coaches for the first time, using validated psychometrics for goals, motivation, resilience, and wellbeing. It found substantial effectiveness with mid-to-high effect sizes for human coaching only. The paper explicitly states that its findings do not support the earlier study. [17]

ASSESSMENT The two trials differ in population and that difference carries the argument. The 2022 study used students pursuing personal goals, a setting where a structured protocol does most of the work. The 2026 study used senior managers on open-ended development questions, where the protocol runs out and the relationship has to carry the session. Nicky Terblanche is an author on both papers, and the later paper carries a disclosure that one author is an AI developer with a commercial interest in the technology under test. [17] [18]

ASSESSMENT Two trials do not establish a category truth, and the honest position is that AI coaching efficacy in senior populations is unresolved rather than refuted. The 2026 paper itself notes that it tested a chatbot, while newer enterprise products are built on agentic systems with memory and context that did not exist when the study was designed. A buyer being sold AI coaching today is being sold something the published literature has not tested. [17] [19]

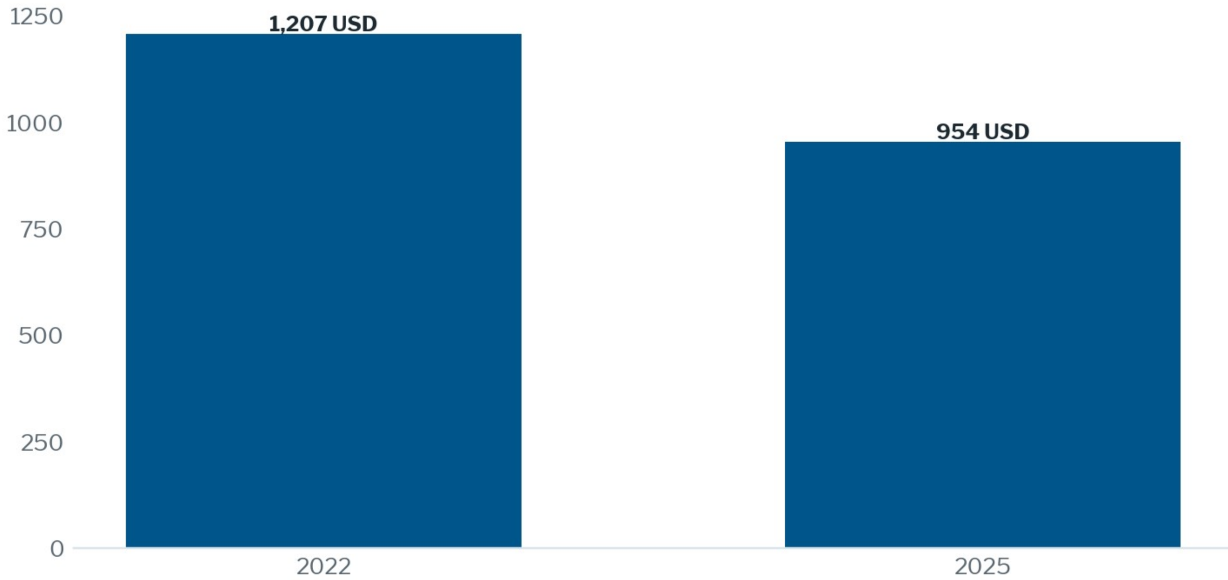
HYPOTHESIS If the effect that separates human from AI coaching is co-regulation between two people rather than the content of the questions asked, then AI will substitute effectively for protocol-driven, model-based coaching and poorly for open-ended developmental work. This would be confirmed by a replication in a senior population showing AI parity on structured goal attainment and a persistent human advantage on wellbeing and self-efficacy measures. It would be refuted by an agentic system matching human effect sizes across all four measures in a leadership sample. [17]

The demand side is consolidating around scale

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE United States corporate training spend rose from $98 billion in 2024 to $102.8 billion in 2025, an increase of about 4.9 percent, according to figures attributed to Training Magazine's annual industry report. [20]

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Per-employee training spend over a longer window moved in the opposite direction, from $1,207 in 2022 to $954 in 2025. Formal learning hours per employee, measured separately by the Association for Talent Development, have declined every year since 2020, reaching 13.7 hours in 2024 from 17.4 in 2023. [20] [21]

FIGURE 5 US training spend per employee



THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Two observations from one survey series, reported second-hand rather than read from the primary publication. Survey definitions of what counts as training spend vary between editions, so a portion of the decline may be definitional. [20]

ASSESSMENT More total money reaching fewer dollars per head is the signature of a buyer shifting from depth to coverage. An organization extending development to a wider population at a lower unit cost is describing exactly the product the platform tier sells, and exactly the opposite of a $234 hourly engagement with a senior individual. [20] [21]

THIRD-PARTY ESTIMATE Reported figures also show small firms spending materially more per learner than large enterprises, roughly $1,091 against $468, which is consistent with the absence of scale economies below a certain headcount. [21]

ASSESSMENT That gap is where independent practice survives. A company of forty people cannot amortize a platform contract across enough seats to make the per-seat price work, has no procurement function to route the purchase through, and buys development the way it buys legal or accounting help: from a specific person somebody trusts. The platform tier's economics do not reach down there, and that is a structural protection rather than a temporary one. [21]

What actually decides an independent engagement

ASSESSMENT In the independent tier the purchase is decided by prior relationship, a specific and legible problem, and a named referral source. Credentials, methodology, and program structure are qualifying criteria that a buyer checks after deciding, not the criteria that produce the decision. This is the reverse of the enterprise tier, where a procurement scorecard weights credentials heavily precisely because no individual relationship exists to substitute for them. [1]

ASSESSMENT The commercial consequence is that credentialing investment has an asymmetric payoff. It is close to mandatory for joining a platform roster and close to irrelevant for winning a direct engagement from someone who already knows the practitioner's work. A practitioner choosing where to spend the next thousand dollars should be clear about which market they are selling into. [1]

FACT The certifying body reports that among practitioners with more than ten years of experience, 38 percent primarily serve executives and nearly 30 percent serve managers, against 18 percent and 10 percent respectively for those with under one year. [1]

ASSESSMENT Seniority of clientele is acquired slowly and it is the mechanism behind the experience premium. An entrant cannot price like a ten-year practitioner because they cannot yet reach that practitioner's buyer. The rate gap is a symptom of an access gap, and coaching business training that treats it as a pricing confidence problem is solving the wrong variable. [1]

The failure statistic, and why this report will not use it

ASSESSMENT The claim that 82 percent of coaching businesses fail within their first two years appears across a large number of pages in this category, frequently attributed to the International Coaching Federation. It does not appear in the 2023 or 2025 study editions reviewed for this report. Variants circulate at 80, 81, and 99 percent, which is itself diagnostic: a figure with a real source does not drift. [1] [4] [22] [23]

ASSESSMENT Every page found repeating the statistic sells training, coaching, or a system to coaches. One page repeating it also states that there are 109,200 coach practitioners in North America alone, when that figure is the 2023 global estimate, and gives average coach earnings as $62,500, which matches neither the global nor the United States figure in the underlying study. [1] [22]

ASSESSMENT The same pattern applies to the return-on-investment claims that anchor most coaching sales conversations. The two most-cited figures, a 5.7 times return and a return above 700 percent, both trace to studies published in 2001. A category that has grown 54 percent in six years and still leans on twenty-five-year-old effectiveness evidence has an evidence problem, not a marketing problem. [24]

ASSESSMENT Naming this is worth more than using it. An independent practitioner who declines to quote the failure statistic, and says why, is making a credibility argument that the practitioners quoting it cannot make. [22] [23]

Why point forecasts fail in this category

ASSESSMENT Three properties make single-number projections unreliable here. The category boundary is contested, so a forecast's base is unstable before any growth rate is applied. The supply side has almost no barrier to entry, which means demand shocks convert into practitioner counts rather than into prices. And the largest live variable, whether AI substitutes for or complements human sessions, currently rests on two published trials that reach opposite conclusions. [17] [18]

ASSESSMENT The forecasts already on record demonstrate the problem. An investor projection of hundredfold growth in digital coaching, made in 2022, is not directionally wrong so much as unfalsifiable at the time it was made and clearly unmet now. Scenarios with stated probabilities and observable tripwires are the honest alternative, with the caveat that the probabilities are the least reliable content below and the tripwires are the most useful. [14]

Scenarios to 2028

SCENARIO A Barbell 45 percent

The platform tier absorbs volume development work at the manager and individual contributor level while independent practice consolidates at the senior end and in narrow domain niches. The middle of the market, generalist coaching sold to mid-level professionals at mid-level prices, contracts.

Consequence. Generalist independent practices without a domain specialty or a senior network see engagement counts fall while top-quartile practitioners hold or raise rates. Practitioner counts keep rising and mean revenue keeps stagnating.

Earliest visible sign. Two consecutive study editions showing practitioner growth above revenue growth, combined with a widening gap between the ten-year-experience cohort and the overall mean.

SCENARIO B Rate compression through the platforms 25 percent

The funded tier consolidates under profitability pressure, and the surviving platforms use their position as the primary demand aggregator to push down coach rate cards while holding seat prices to employers.

Consequence. Independent practitioners who supplement direct work with platform rosters see effective hourly rates fall. Platform work shifts from an income floor to a low-margin filler, and the incentive to build direct demand strengthens.

Earliest visible sign. A merger or acquisition among the top five funded platforms, or a publicly reported change to a major platform's coach compensation structure.

SCENARIO C Evidence reset 20 percent

Replication studies in senior populations firm up the human advantage on developmental work, and enterprise buyers start requiring validated outcome data rather than engagement statistics. Measurement becomes the axis of competition.

Consequence. Practitioners who can produce structured pre and post outcome data take share from those selling on testimonials. The credential loses ground to demonstrated results as the primary trust signal, which favours experienced operators with client histories over newly certified entrants.

Earliest visible sign. A second independent randomized trial in a leadership sample replicating the 2026 human-only result, or a Fortune 500 employer publicly tying a coaching renewal to outcome measurement.

SCENARIO D Agentic parity 10 percent

> Agentic AI systems with persistent memory and organizational context match human effect sizes in a leadership sample, closing the gap the 2026 trial identified and removing the quality argument for human delivery at the mid-market.
>
> **Consequence.** The independent tier retreats to the segment where the relationship itself is the product: board-adjacent, founder, and succession work where confidentiality and standing matter more than session quality. Volume coaching becomes software.
>
> **Earliest visible sign.** A published trial with an agentic system reaching parity on wellbeing and self-efficacy measures, not only on goal attainment.

SCENARIO Probabilities are the author's subjective assessment and sum to 100 percent. They are the least reliable content in this report. The tripwires beneath each scenario are observable without private information and are the part worth monitoring.

Leading indicators

If this happens	It means	Moves toward	Where to watch
BetterUp or CoachHub raises a priced equity round at or above its last mark	The growth thesis for platform coaching has been repriced upward and capital returns to the tier	Scenario B	Company press releases, funding trackers
Either vendor is acquired, sells assets, or raises at a reduced valuation	The funded tier is consolidating under profitability pressure rather than expanding	Scenario B	Independent press, acquirer filings
The certifying body publishes median and quartile practitioner income rather than means only	Supply-side transparency improves and the modal outcome for an entrant becomes knowable	Tests Finding 3	Next study edition, expected 2027
A second randomized trial in a leadership sample replicates the human-only result	The co-regulation explanation strengthens and the human quality argument holds	Scenario C	Human Resource Development International and adjacent journals
An agentic AI system reaches parity on wellbeing and self-efficacy in a senior sample	The quality gap closes and volume coaching becomes substitutable software	Scenario D	Peer-reviewed trials, not vendor studies
Practitioner count growth exceeds revenue growth for a third consecutive edition	Entry continues to absorb demand growth and real earnings per practitioner keep falling	Scenario A	Next study edition, expected 2027

If this happens	It means	Moves toward	Where to watch
US per-employee training spend rises for two consecutive years	Buyers are returning to depth over coverage and the squeeze on hourly engagements eases	Against Scenario A	Training Magazine annual industry report

Implications

For an independent practitioner

ASSESSMENT Work the utilization ratio before the rate. Four billable hours in eleven and a half worked is the number that determines whether a practice clears a living, and the standard advice in this category addresses the wrong half of it. An hour recovered from unpaid discovery calls, proposals without a decision-maker, and pipeline activity with no qualification step is worth more than a rate increase and is entirely within the practitioner's control. [1]

ASSESSMENT Choose a tier deliberately. Selling into procurement rewards credentials, platform rosters, and rate-card competitiveness. Selling direct rewards a specific problem, a named referral network, and domain credibility that a generalist credential does not supply. Attempting both splits the investment and wins neither, and the data on client seniority suggests the direct route compounds while the platform route does not. [1]

ASSESSMENT Build outcome measurement now rather than when a buyer demands it. Under Scenario C it becomes the competitive axis, and under every other scenario it is a differentiator against a field selling on testimonials and twenty-five-year-old return-on-investment figures. The cost of instrumenting engagements is low; the cost of retrofitting a client history that was never measured is that it cannot be done. [24]

For an organizational buyer

ASSESSMENT Ask any vendor selling AI coaching for outcome data with a control group, not engagement statistics. Usage tells you people opened the product. The only direct comparison in a leadership population found effects for human coaching alone, and no published trial has yet tested the agentic systems currently being sold. [17]

ASSESSMENT Match the delivery model to the population. Structured, goal-attainment work in a broad population is where the evidence for automated delivery is strongest and where per-seat economics work. Open-ended developmental work with senior people is where the evidence favours a human and where per-seat pricing is a false economy. [17] [18]

For an investor

ASSESSMENT The category's total addressable market is smaller than the largest published figures imply, because those figures measure leadership development rather than coaching. A thesis built on the $113 billion number is underwriting a different market than the one the vendors sell into. The $5.34 billion figure is closer to right and is itself likely overstated at the practitioner level. [1] [8]

ASSESSMENT The absence of priced equity rounds across the two largest vendors since 2022 is the most informative datapoint available on private marks in this category, and it has now persisted long enough that it reflects something structural rather than a temporary financing window. [10] [14] [15]

What this document cannot answer

Four questions matter for anyone making a decision here and none of them can be resolved from public sources. Each would need primary research.

What is the median income of a coaching practitioner, and what does the bottom quartile earn? Only means are published. The shape of the distribution determines whether the category is a viable profession or a lottery with a professional vocabulary, and it is the single most consequential unknown in this report.

What share of engagements in the independent tier originate from referral rather than from marketing? The utilization problem identified here has a completely different solution depending on the answer, and no published dataset separates the two.

What is the actual attrition rate of new practitioners, measured longitudinally rather than asserted? The widely circulated failure figure has no traceable source. A cohort study following credentialed entrants for five years would settle it and does not appear to exist.

Do agentic AI coaching systems close the gap the 2026 trial found? Every published trial tested chatbots. The products now being sold to enterprises are architecturally different, and the evidence base is roughly two years behind the market.

Half-life of this assessment

Decaying within six months: the funding positions of the two named vendors, the count of published trials comparing human and AI coaching, and the specific corporate training spend figures. Any of these can be overturned by a single announcement or publication.

Decaying within twelve to twenty-four months: the practitioner count and revenue figures, which refresh with the next study edition expected in 2027; the utilization estimate, which is derived from those figures and moves with them; and the scenario probabilities, which should be re-scored against the tripwires as they resolve.

Architectural, and unlikely to change on this horizon: the three-market structure of the category, the absence of entry barriers on the supply side, the asymmetry between procurement-driven and relationship-driven purchasing, and the observation that published sizing for this category is not comparable across sources. These are properties of how the market is built rather than measurements of its current state.

Limitations

This assessment was produced independently. The author holds no financial interest in any vendor named, receives no compensation from the certifying body or any coach training provider, and does not operate a coaching practice.

The evidence base has three specific weaknesses. Almost every practitioner-level figure originates from one self-selected survey administered by an organization with an interest in the profession appearing healthy, and no independent dataset exists to check it against. Vendor revenue figures come from third-party trackers that do not publish methodology, and neither company discloses financials. The AI efficacy evidence consists of two trials, one of which shares an author with the other, and that author has a disclosed commercial interest in the technology being tested.

The utilization finding, which is the most consequential judgment in this report, rests on dividing one reported mean by another. That operation is legitimate only if both means derive from a comparable respondent base, and the published summary does not confirm that they do. The corroborating calculation from client counts and session cadence strengthens the finding but does not eliminate the risk. Readers weighing a decision on this point should treat the direction as reliable and the magnitude as approximate.

No primary interviews were conducted. Every source is publicly accessible and listed below with its provenance type, so any reader can check the chain of inference for themselves and reach a different conclusion from the same material.

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