Driving your career
by coach

Using the services of a business coach can be instrumental in professional development and identifying the right career direction. Carmel Doyle reports

'A growing area is around professional branding where employees are going about trying to develop their own brand within their own industry, within their sector'

Just as athletes have coaches to help them increase their performance levels and up their game, the application of coaching techniques in the corporate space has been steadily gaining in popularity. As Timothy Gallwey, creator of the 'inner game' approach, says: "Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them."

Business coaching can be broken down into two main strands: executive or performance coaching where the coach is employed by a company to help enhance the on-the-job performance of employees in managerial or senior roles; and career coaching, where an individual personally invests in a coach to help with their own career development or direction.

"Coaching gives you time outside your busy working world to work with somebody in a safe environment who will support you and challenge you to fulfill your potential," explains Adrienne Davitt, managing director of Davitt Corporate Partners, which specialises in executive coaching.

She says executive coaches are often engaged to help professionals who have been identified as being high-potential employees or leaders of the future, as well as those who already fill leadership roles who need support to develop as effective leaders. They may also be brought in to help people moving into new roles who need to learn new skill sets such as managing and leading people.

"You would have executives transitioning from positions where they were experts in an area in a functional role, but are now being asked to lead maybe a global team, which means they can no longer be as operationally involved, so they need to now learn how to motivate other people to effectively deliver results and be successful," says Davitt.

John Fitzgerald, founder and managing director of Harmonics, a firm that combines both executive and career coaching, says that while coaching, training and development budgets were slashed in many organisations in 2009, companies are recognising how they need to develop their core employees, particularly those who have

John Fitzgerald

Paul Mullan

Adrienne Davitt

had to take on more responsibility and make tough decisions.

"It's critical to focus on the leaders' development and I see that businesses are now putting more money into helping existing people lead through change."

Personality mapping

At the start of the executive coaching process, Davitt says psychometric profiling is instrumental in helping people map out their own personality, exploring areas such as self-awareness, where they are currently, how they behave, what they think about how they impact others, how they manage relationships within the organisation and how they manage their work.

The coach will then work with the individual to identify the areas that are critical in terms of achieving success, bearing in mind that the process will often require some shift in attitude and certain behavioural changes. "What you are looking at is helping people identify the new behaviours and skills they need and find ways to acquire them, not just academically but also in practice."

While the length of a coaching relationship can vary, Davitt recommends that it be at least six months, with a 12- to 18-month contract being standard.

Fitzgerald, meanwhile, offers the view that more than one year is "unhealthy" for a coaching relationship. "I think people need a fresh person every year if they are having continual coaching. A typical programme would last between six and 12 sessions – maybe one or two sessions a month."

The coach from within

Where people are moving into leadership roles within their organisation, Fitzgerald says those who have been very task-focused up to now may find the transition a challenge. "When they move into leadership roles, the task becomes less about how they are rewarded. It's a whole new skill set. That's why coaching is so important to leaders."

Davitt adds: "You work with somebody who has been promoted into a leadership position and what they frequently ask is 'how can I know what the strengths and development needs of my people are and how can I help them?' Part of our leadership programme is to help the leaders become coaches to their own people."

With young leaders often catapulted into a role because of their talent in a particular area of expertise, she says a whole new landscape opens up, which can be quite scary and complex, especially in fast-growing firms. "It's about being strategic in your thinking, taking time-out to reflect on how effectively you are behaving and planning to be more effective and successful."

Brand 'me'

On the flip side of the coin, people who are unhappy in their current role, or in a career where they feel unfulfilled, choose to see a career coach to help decide their career direction, explains Paul Mullan, founder of the career coaching firm Measurability.

"They could be in a profession that they are miserable in. They want to work with someone to help them understand how they can bring more happiness into the role they are fulfilling," he explains.

For people who have been made redundant or who are changing jobs, Mullan says a career coach can help them look at how they market themselves on documents such as CVs, cover letters and social media profiles. "A growing area is around professional branding where employees are going about trying to develop their own brand within their own industry, within their sector," he says.

Fitzgerald points to how he has worked with a lot of marketing people over the past 12 months who have been made redundant and who now have to 'reinvent' themselves. "They are quite often working with powerful brands and it's about helping them to identify what their personal brand is when they go out into the marketplace," he says.

And in some cases, he points out that people may have been in the right job but in the wrong organisation. "We help them to identify their skills – the skills that they love to use and the skills that stress them out. We help them to identify their interest areas, so that they can align a career or a company in that space. Then we talk about values: what their most important values are, whether they are currently being satisfied and how they can be satisfied in the future."

The key benefit of the coaching process, he says, is that it helps people focus on their individual strengths and make the most of their innate skills and talents. "It is about increasing self-awareness, understanding how others perceive you, building trust and building great relationships," concludes Fitzgerald.