To Assist My Understanding of the Extent to which, and how, Coaches Encouraged Clients to Experience a Sense of Optimism During Career/Redundancy Coaching Sessions, Available to BBC Staff Facing Redundancy During the Period of 2006-2008

Research

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Project Title:
To assist my understanding of the extent to which, and how, coaches encouraged clients to experience a sense of optimism during Career/Redundancy Coaching sessions, available to BBC staff facing redundancy during the period 2006-2008.

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Project Summary:

This research project was undertaken with Career Coaches at the British Broadcasting Corporation and explored the extent to which and how coaches encouraged *optimism* whilst working with staff facing redundancy.

A literary search highlighted *optimism* as a key aspect of Positive Psychology and a critical component in engagement, motivation, self-confidence, perseverance and success. All of which can be considered valuable behaviours and attributes in the context of redundancy. Additionally, as developing a sense of optimism is a key part of my own coaching approach I was keen to learn more about its value to other coaches and about how they approach its development.

The research was conducted with the BBC's CareerLink Plus service. Data was collected from three coaches via a Questionnaire and follow-up discussion.

Analysis of the data showed that:

1. Coaches did aim to encourage a sense of optimism in all, or the majority, of their sessions with clients.

2. Coaches encouraged clients to experience a sense of optimism by using the following techniques:
   - Fundamental coaching skills e.g. attentive listening, showing empathy, clear goal setting.
   - A Phased Approach of 4 stages.
   - Appreciative Inquiry.
   - Reality-Checking.
   - Career Coaching 'tools'.

3. Optimism encouraged via coaching sessions was supported by the client's 'whole experience' of the CareerLink Plus service.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My research project was undertaken with Career Coaches at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and explored the extent to which and how coaches encouraged *optimism* whilst working with staff facing redundancy.

<u>Context</u>

In 2005 the BBC announced its plan to generate funding for new television, radio, online, and digital services by restructuring its major divisions (excluding World Service) over a three year period. This resulted in job loss for circa 4000 staff across the organisation.

Learning from past experiences, the organisation appreciated that a planned and structured support system for these staff would be beneficial to whole staff morale; Trades' Union negotiations; and value for money. As a result it offered a series of workshops; online resources; <u>plus</u> 2 one-hour Career Coaching sessions to staff who had been identified as redundant. This package was branded as **CareerLink Plus** (CLP).

Career Coaching had been available to staff for many years. However, faced with a large increase in potential clients the organisation supplemented its existing in-house and external career coaches by training volunteers from across the BBC. The CareerLink Plus service went live in April 2006, and by January 2008 had held career coaching sessions with 950 staff.

Chapter 2: Terms of Reference/Objectives & Literature Review

The purpose of this research was to assist my understanding of:

the extent to which, and how, coaches encouraged clients to experience a sense of *optimism* during Career/Redundancy Coaching sessions, available to BBC staff facing redundancy during the period 2006-2008.

<u>Why research Optimism?</u>

A literary search highlighted *optimism* as a key aspect of Positive Psychology (Martin Seligman) and is defined by Robert Biswas-Diener & Ben Dean (2007) *(1)* as being **'about having a favourable attitude towards yourself and believing that you can and will be successful in the future'.** Research by Charles Carver & Michael Scheier (2005) *(2)* shows that **'optimism and pessimism influence people's subjective experience when confronting problems, and they influence the actions people engage in to try to deal with these problems'**.

They and other researchers in the field *(3)* highlight *optimism* as being a critical component in engagement, motivation, self-confidence, perseverance and success. All of which can be considered valuable behaviours and attributes in the context of redundancy.

As developing a sense of optimism is a key part of my own coaching approach I was keen to learn more about its value to other coaches and about how they approach its development.

As a BBC volunteer Career/Redundancy coach I observed that the majority of clients left the session appearing more relaxed, with increased energy, and smiling. During the session I observed them gain increased positive appreciation of:

- Their current skills & abilities, and how transferable these were to other jobs & industries.
- The opportunities redundancy could offer in pursuing life dreams and/or new directions.
- The fact they could be in control of a future which could be as, if not more, fulfilling than their time at the BBC.

I observed that the quality of their thinking increased by exploring positive future possibilities and was regularly in awe of the ideas they developed. This made me consider the impact of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) techniques in Career/Redundancy coaching and how this links to creating a sense of optimism. David Cooperrider (2008) describes that **'change is more powerful, energizing, and effective when we inquire into the true, the good, the better and the possible'** (4) and that **'AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen (a system's) capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. The discovery, dream, design and destiny model links the energy of the positive core to changes never thought possible.'** (5).

Developing a sense of optimism did not form an explicit part of BBC training in Career/Redundancy coaching; nor was it an explicitly stated aim for CLP. However, it appeared implicit in the tools and techniques coaches were trained to use. I was interested to learn if other coaches were of the same opinion.

(1) Robert Biswas-Diener & Ben Dean 'Positive Psychology Coaching', 2007, p159 ISBN-13: 978-0-470-04246-5 John Wiley & Sons, Inc

(3) C R Snyder; Kevin Rand; David Sigmon 'Hope Theory', 2005, p 257-277 Handbook of Positive Psychology, ISBN 1-57675-269-0 Lakeshore Communications Inc, and Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc
/ Chris Peterson & Tracey Steen 'Positive Psychology coaching, 2007, p159-160, ISBN-13:978-0-470-04246-5, John Wiley & Sons, Inc

(4) 'Appreciative Inquiry Commons' online commentary, David Cooperrider 2008.

(5) '*Appreciative* Inquiry Handbook,' David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, Jacqueline M Stavros 2003, p.3, ISBN 1-57675-269-0 Lakeshore Communications Inc, and Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc

Chapter 3: Methodology

<u>Which research paradigm?</u>

My chosen research methodology was to use a phenomenological approach

involving a Questionnaire and follow-up face-to face discussion.

I chose a phenomenological approach as I believed its key features would work well

in the context of this particular research project, in that it:

- Tends to produce qualitative data,

- Uses small samples,

- Is concerned with generating theories,

- Gives rich and subjective data,

- Generalises from one setting to another,

- Validity is high

Jill Collis & Roger Hussey, (2003) *(6)*

I considered that producing qualitative data was appropriate to aid my understanding

of **how** coaches encouraged clients to experience a sense of optimism; that small

sample research was appropriate given the fact that data collection would be carried

out with 3 coaches; and that the rich and subjective data it would give may assist me

to generate theories which I can apply in future to my own coaching approach.

However, as my research was also concerned with **the extent to which** coaches

encouraged clients to experience a sense of optimism I also needed to use a degree

of positivistic approach in order to capture and process that data.

As a result, the Questionnaire and the follow-up discussion included questions to

elicit both phenomenological and positivistic data.

<u>Which data collection techniques?</u>

Stage 1: I chose to use a Questionnaire in Stage 1 because it offered the following benefits:

- Research participants could give focussed thinking to the subject of optimism at a time convenient to them.

- Provides consistent data.

- Allows 'methodological triangulation', whereby both quantitative and qualitative methods of data were collected - Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991) *(8)*.

- Generates themes for analysis, which could be further explored in subsequent discussion with each research participant.

Stage 2: I chose to use face-to-face discussion for Stage 2 in order to generate additional qualitative data from which to generate themes, and enable data triangulation.

Despite these positive benefits, I was also aware that the rich and subjective data produced by using a Phenomenological approach would generate a large degree of information, which was likely to prove difficult to codify and analyse. In response, I planned the Research Timetable to take account of this. Although a Phenomenological approach would enable high validity for the research, it could result in low reliability. I took encouragement that, with a phenomenological approach, validity is more about whether <u>similar</u> observations and interpretations can be made on different occasions and/or by different observers, than being about observing the <u>same</u> results.

Sample selection

As described in Chapter 1, CLP uses coaches from three different populations. I considered it important to sample participants from each of these populations to enable me to determine any similarities and/or differences (if any) between them.

As a result, the sample for this research was:

- One in-house coach, representing 100% of the available group.
- One external coach, representing 50% of the available group.
- One volunteer coach, representing 5% of the available group.

Individuals were identified by the Third Party Sponsor. All three coaches in the sample were women whose ethnic origin was White European; and had completed 20+ Career/Redundancy coaching sessions.

What not to include in the sample?

When formulating my research proposal I considered the benefit of exploring whether or not clients had experienced a sense of optimism during, or following, their Career/Redundancy coaching sessions.

I concluded that, although this would have enabled me to correlate the degree of match between the experiences of coaches and those of their clients, such exploration was outside the parameters of this project. My research focused on the experience of coaches, and it was their experience which intrigued me during my initial thinking about the subject of optimism. A similar view was also held by my Third Party sponsor. She commented that she was fascinated I had chosen to consider the research from the perspective of coaches rather than clients, and that CLP had not undertaken any other research into the experience of their coaches.

In addition, identifying and contacting potential research participants amongst former CLP clients would have proved difficult for CLP as their programme is designed for BBC staff leaving the organisation.

When formulating my research proposal, as I describe in my Learning Log, Appendix 7, I had to curb my natural inclination to want to 'add value' to things I get involved with. I have a tendency to look for the bigger picture, for potential possibilities, for wider meaning – all of which were likely to get in the way of this project and impact on my ability to deliver on time.

In response, I concentrated my research solely on the experience of coaches. I managed my inclination by acknowledging and appreciating the value of new research to the sponsoring organisation.

Ethical Considerations

Individual participants were not identified in any part of the data analysis and subsequent report. However, because I used a phenomenological approach, you will see that I have included non-attributable quotes from research participants, in order to illustrate the data they provided in their responses.

Anonymity and confidentiality were stressed to participants in writing, and their agreement was sought to use non-attributable quotes in this report.

(6) Jill Collis & Roger Hussey 'Business Research', 2003, p55, IBSN 0-333-98325-4, Palgrave MacMillan 1997

Chapter 4: Project Activity

Data Collection

The Third Party Sponsor was the manager of CareerLink Plus.

Data was collected in 2 stages:

Stage 1: electronic Questionnaire.

Stage 2: follow-up face-to-face discussion with individual participants, to further explore their responses to the questionnaire.

A copy of the Questionnaire is included as Appendix 1.

Questions 2, 3,5,6,10,11 were designed with a phenomenological approach in mind, aiming to collect data about **how** coaches encouraged a sense of optimism (if indeed they did).

Questions 1, 4, 7, 8,8a, 9, 12 were designed with a positivistic approach in mind, aiming to collect data about **the extent** to which coaches encouraged a sense of optimism.

Stage 1: electronic Questionnaire

I designed the Questionnaire and sought the CLP manager's input prior to sending. The 3 Career coaches were identified by the CLP manager.

The CLP manager made first contact with potential participants and sent an email outlining the purpose and context of my research project; timescales; anonymity & confidentiality; and seeking their participation in the research. I drafted the content of the email, which the manager adjusted to the organisational context. A copy of this email is included as Appendix 2.

I sent a second email to the coaches who agreed to participate, outlining how I planned to collect the data; reiterating anonymity and confidentiality; asking them to complete the attached Questionnaire and to suggest a date/time for the follow-up discussion. A copy of this email is included as Appendix 3.

Eight working days were allowed for participants to complete the Questionnaire. Two responded within that timeframe and one required fourteen days due to holiday and work commitments.

<u>Helped & Hindered</u>

The Questionnaire was piloted with one Career/Redundancy coach who did not participate in the remainder of the research. This produced valuable additions and amendments which were incorporated into the Questionnaire. The CLP manager did not suggest changes to the questionnaire.

It proved useful that the participant who piloted the Questionnaire was able to estimate that it took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. This matched my own experience and enabled me to estimate the completion time in the email sent to research participants.

Stage 2: <u>Face to face discussion</u>

A follow-up face-to-face discussion, lasting 45 minutes, was held with each of the three research participants. Transcripts of these audio-recorded discussions are included as Appendix 4.

In preparation for the follow-up discussion I noted Questionnaire responses which warranted further clarity and exploration; and also emerging themes from the data from all participants.

This enabled me to focus the discussion, elicit further data around the emerging themes in order to check validity, and importantly, to manage the time allowed.

It was immensely gratifying that all participants reported how interested they had been by the research topic, and that they had welcomed the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their coaching approach.

Allocating 45 minutes for the discussion and managing the time effectively with a prepared and semi-structured format also meant I was able to reduce the amount of time taken to transcribe the audio-recordings.

Two participants had a private room in which we held the discussion. I met the third participant in a communal area, which in future I would avoid if possible.

Data Analysis

Data from the Questionnaire responses was collated in the form of a spreadsheet. This is included as Appendix 5.

Data from the follow-up discussions was added to the Questionnaire responses and collated into key themes, with illustrative quotes from the research participants. This data is reproduced Appendix 6.
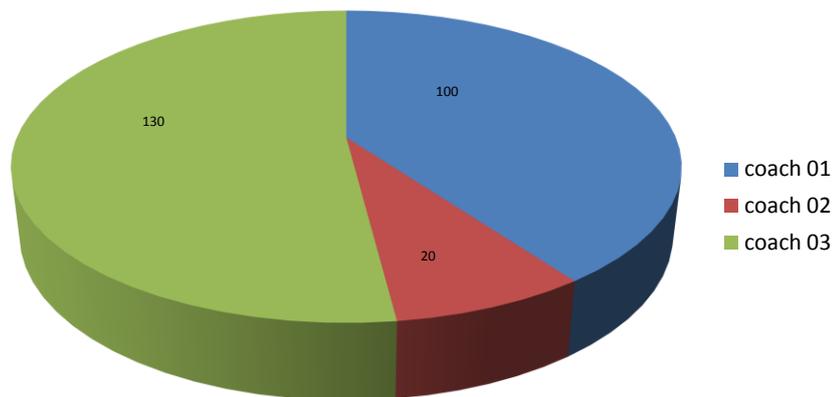
Chapter 5: Project Findings

5.1 The sample

Coaches had held the following number of coaching sessions:

5.2 Encouraging **a sense of optimism**

All coaches did aim to encourage a sense of optimism in their coaching sessions.

Two reported they aimed to do this in all their sessions, one reported she aimed to do it in the majority of sessions (80%).

Coaches estimated the percentage of clients they had observed experiencing a sense of optimism as a result of their coaching at 70%, 80%, and 95+%.

All coaches described that encouraging a sense of optimism was not an explicit part of their approach. One described *'Most of the time it's almost a given'* and *'it is inherent in the work you do, rather than an end goal in itself'*

The data showed 4 key phases of the coaching process, which coaches reported had encouraged a sense of optimism:
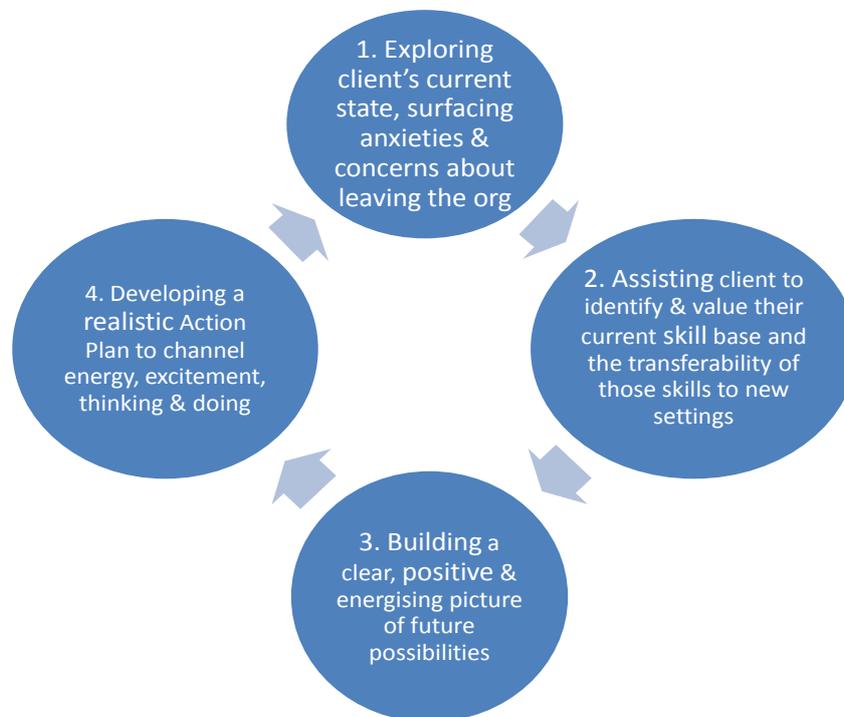

Client current state

All coaches described they did encourage clients to express how they really feel. As one coach put it *'People can come in and they look cheerful, they look fine, but you scratch the surface and they are not fine at all.'*

Optimism has a fluid quality

All coaches described that a sense of optimism could be diminished, or negatively affected, if the client was also dealing with other issues that took their energy and/or hindered their ability to look positively to the future. Examples of these other issues and the number of coaches who described each issue are shown in the following 2 charts:

Other issues which coaches described could diminish optimism - frequency of coach description, part 1
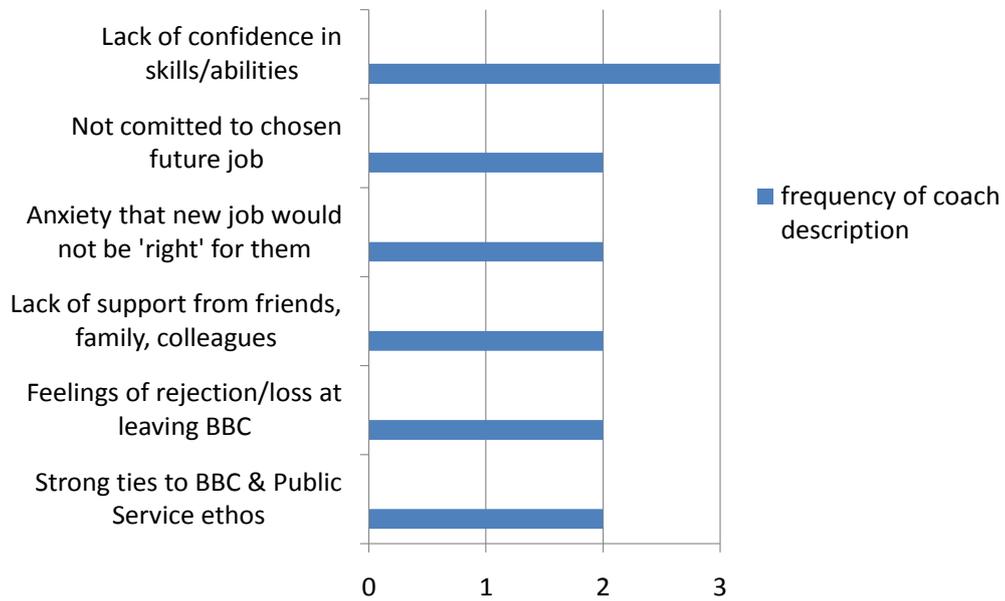
Other issues which coaches described could diminish optimism - frequency of coach description, part 2
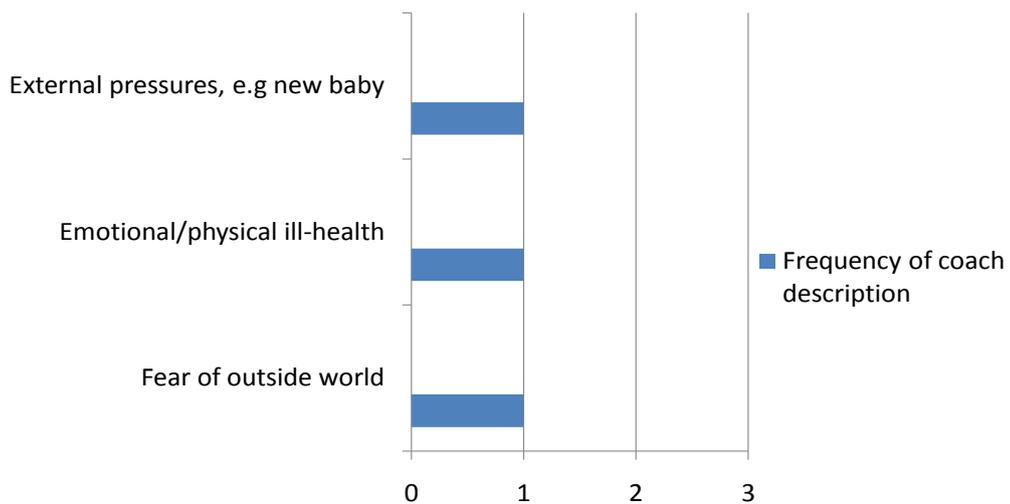
One coach found it *'useful to think of a scale of optimism'* as clients came to the first session in varying states of optimism. All coaches described that a sense of optimism could often be fluid within and between sessions. In their experience it is not a fixed sense, rather it is one to be worked on.

Assisting the client to identify and value their current skill base and the transferability of those skills to new settings.

All coaches reported clients generally came with a lack of confidence in their skill base and a lack of understanding about the degree of transferability of those skills to new settings.

In response, coaches regularly used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) techniques to assist clients to identify and value their current skills and abilities. AI techniques included reviewing past and current successes/achievements; identifying strategies which had successfully overcome previous difficulties; SWOT and/or Blocks & Bridges analysis; visualisation and articulation of the client 'at their best' and/or 'their ideal working day.'

One coach described what she saw happening *'Very often a sense of the energy going up, yeah definitely a sense of optimism – 'I can do these things, I remember that time and it was going really well. Yes it was me.'*

All coaches described the importance of giving authentic positive feedback about their experience of the client and reported client surprise, increased energy and confidence as a result.

The two coaches with experience of 100+ coaching sessions reported they had recognised 'Self-Limiting Beliefs' -*'There is usually an element of self-doubt in there somewhere, something holding them back.'* Both described using Cognitive techniques to assist clients to deal positively with those beliefs.

Building a clear, positive, and energising picture of future possibilities

All coaches described the powerful impact this had on clients:

'There is something about the detail, making it tangible, so it becomes more real. The way I picture it is that it moves from a foggy, sort of vague, picture- it's almost like a picture that is out of focus – to actually focussing it so (the client) *could see it.'*

'I think when (clients) start to think about the positives of leaving I think their anxiety probably goes down, they feel less anxious, and they have more energy to look at things. If you think leaving here is going to be the end of the world you would have no energy or inclination to do anything.'

All coaches used Brainstorming to assist clients to identify the wide range of future possibilities open to them and reported the positive effect this had in developing a sense of optimism.

Interestingly, one coach reported that she had experienced a different reaction between women and men to the exercise. *'I have found with men they are not as receptive and will only want to write up things they think they can do. And once they find something they really like they don't want to do anything more.'*

One coach found Occupational Interests Explorer and Job Satisfiers useful in encouraging optimism as *'if people can think about what gives them intrinsic job satisfaction it encourages them to feel optimistic.'*

Their experiences suggested that the link to optimism for the client is about breaking down your skills, acknowledging them, articulating them, owning them, and seeing they fit elsewhere; that in turn creates new opportunities for thought in your head, and somehow in your heart as well.

Developing a clear Action Plan

All coaches described that developing a clear Action Plan encouraged a sense of optimism in their clients because it was directly linked to gaining an increased sense of control over their future.

'I think one of the key roles of the coach in short intervention redundancy coaching is helping the client to regain a sense of control over their lives. Once they have that then they inevitably feel more optimistic about their future.'

'People want to have something more than all the thoughts and ideas; they want to know what they are going to go out and do.'

<u>Clarity needs reality</u>

All coaches described the importance of assisting clients to reality-check their ideas for future possibilities via the action planning process:

'While I think that it is important to encourage a sense of optimism, I think it is important that this is still realistic. Blind optimism that everything will turn out OK can mean clients are less likely to persevere, in the belief that everything <u>will</u> turn out OK

in the end – as though it is almost out of their hands and that fate will step in and sort things out.'

'*You are sometimes treading a fine line between bursting some of that bubble and actually it is not realistic.'* In those situations the coach worked with clients to develop a *'sense of not losing sight of the fact that the future is full of possibilities, but let's also look at what you have got here and now, and how can we make that work, maybe not this way, but one way.'*

With a client, whose sense of optimism had been deflated by the negative reaction of her manager, one coach used the Action Plan to assist the client to regain her sense of optimism *'the Action Plan was what really picked her up again, breaking down everything and seeing that she could do it.'*

5.3.4 Optimism had a positive impact on client motivation, perseverance, and a sense of being in control of their lives

Coaches were asked to rate the extent to which they believed that encouraging a sense of optimism had a positive impact on motivation, perseverance, and a sense of being in control of their lives. The following chart shows these findings:

The effect encouraging a sense of optimism had on clients

effectiveness rated on scale 0-10
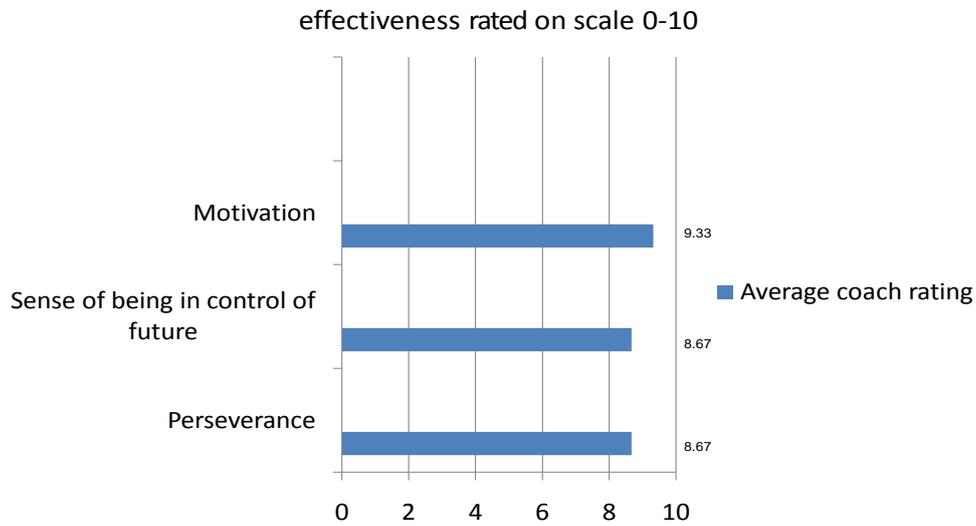
As reported earlier in this section, coaches described that Action Planning impacted on optimism, because it was directly linked to clients gaining an increased sense of control over their future.

Also, that a sense of optimism positively affected motivation and perseverance:

'I think if you have a sense that what you are doing will work out then you are going to feel like you are not wasting your energy in trying to achieve it. And so you are going to be motivated to go out there and do it.'

'I think it is fairly self- evident really – if you are pessimistic about things you are much more likely to give up, so you won't be motivated, you won't persevere.'

Coaches also added the term 'resilience' to the description of attributes impacted positively by optimism.

5.3 Other aspects of Career/Redundancy Coaching which encouraged a sense of optimism

5.3.1 Tools

Training for Career/ Redundancy Coaches included the use of 'tools.'

All coaches reported they judged when and with which clients they used the tools, rather than using with all clients. The chart below shows the extent to which each coach used the tools:

The extent to which coaches used 'tools'
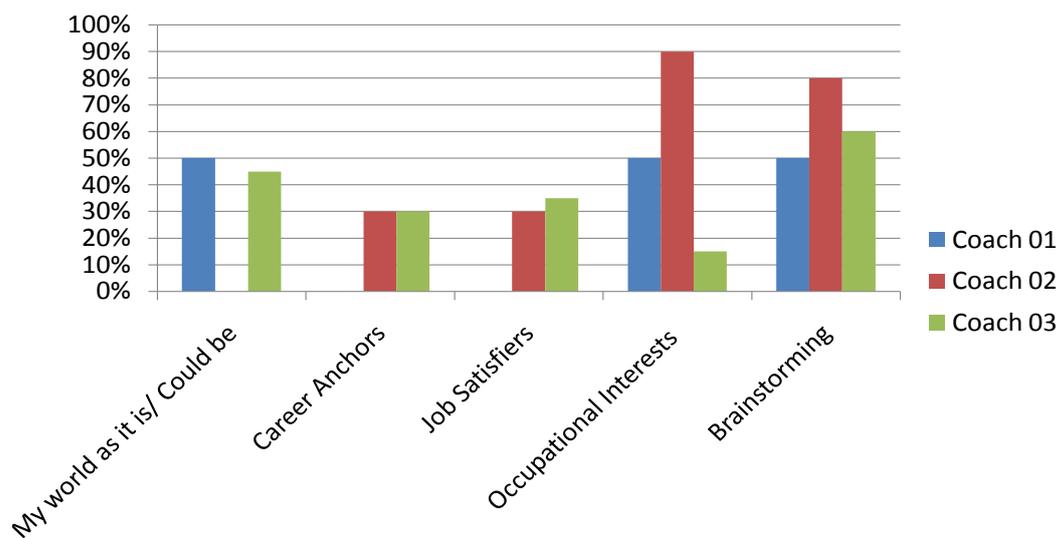
The data showed that the tools most often used by Coaches were **Occupational Interests Explorer** and **Brainstorming.**

Coaches were also asked to estimate the extent to which they found each tool encouraged a sense of optimism. The following chart shows these findings:

## The extent to which coaches found 'tools' assisted a sense of optimism
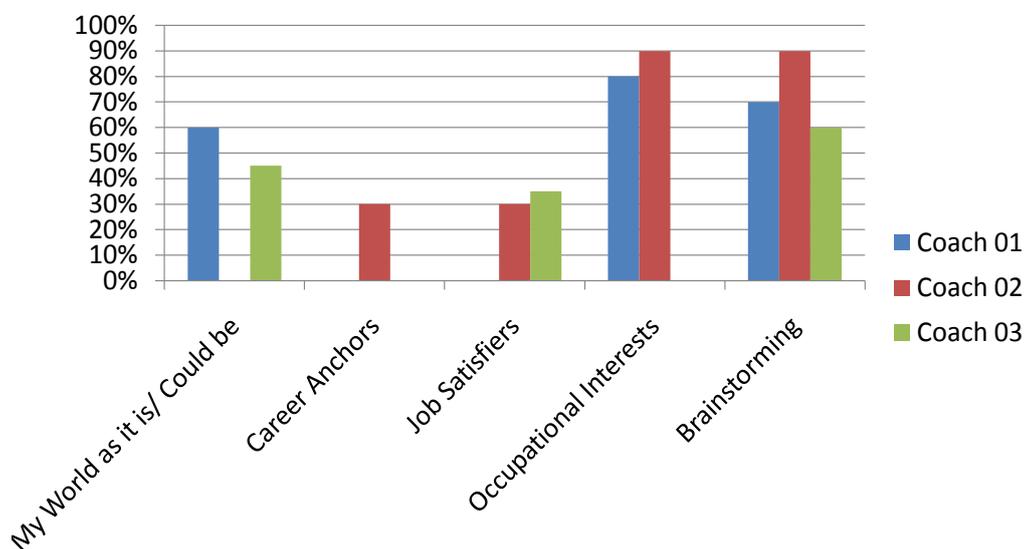
The tool used by all coaches, and which all found encouraged a sense of optimism, was **Brainstorming**, which they reported succeeding with between 60% and 90% of clients with whom it was used**.**

Two coaches reported they found **Occupational Interests Explorer** encouraged a sense of optimism with 80%-90% of clients with whom they used it. The third coach described she used it with 15% of clients but not in relation to developing a sense of optimism.

All coaches described they used the tools as a vehicle for the coaching conversation, rather than as an end in themselves.

Coaches were asked to rate the extent to which aspects of Career/Redundancy

coaching assisted the encouragement of a sense of optimism. The chart below

shows the average rating given to each aspect:

Coaching techniques used to encourage a sense of optimism
effectiveness rated on scale 0-10
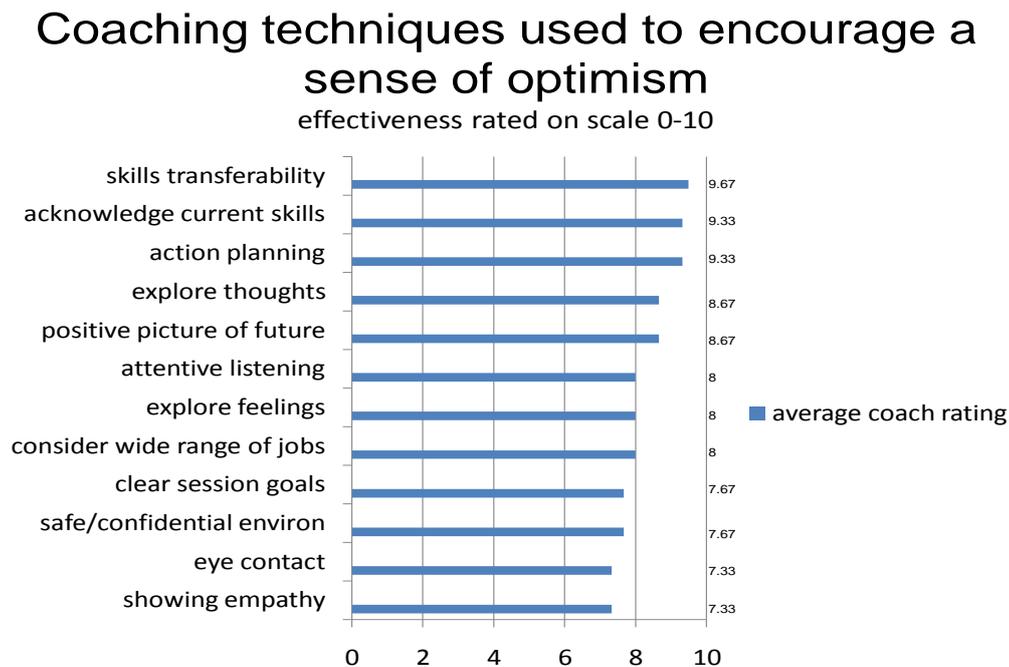
The data showed that coaches rated all aspects at above average effectiveness. As

described earlier, the aspects rated of most assistance (Likert Scale 0-10) were:

- Assisting clients to recognise how their current skills and abilities could

  transfer to other types of jobs (9.67).

- Encouraging clients to acknowledge their current skills and abilities (9.33).

- Assisting clients to 'action plan' their next steps (9.33).

However, the importance of fundamental coaching skills (attentive listening, creating

a safe & confidential coaching environment, assisting clients to be clear what they

wanted to use their two sessions for, showing empathy, and maintaining eye contact)

was key to building an effective, safe and trusted coaching relationship in which the most highly rated aspects could take place:

'Showing empathy etc has got to be an absolute given. But you have got to do more than that; you have also got to do these three' (the three most highly rated aspects).

5.3.3 CareerLink Plus as a whole impacts on optimism

All coaches stressed the importance the 'whole experience' of CareerLink Plus package had in supporting a sense of optimism:

'I think that contact with positive team members in CLP also contributes to a sense of optimism – this comes from the workshops as well as the coaching.'

One coach's thinking and discussion around encouraging a sense of optimism led her to consider how to place this attribute as a key component in future recruitment drives. She described *'I do think it's important people do have that experience as their last experience of the BBC before they go out into the wide world. It helps them feel valued.......I think that every part of the experience needs to be like that.'*

Chapter 6: Conclusions & Recommendations

<u>6.1 Conclusions</u>

6.1.1 **The extent**

The research found that coaches <u>did</u> encourage clients to experience a sense of *optimism* during all, or the majority of, Career/Redundancy Coaching sessions, available to BBC staff facing redundancy during the period 2006-2008.

They concurred with other researchers in the field [3] that *optimism* is a critical component in engagement, motivation, self-confidence, perseverance and success. They highlighted the fluid quality of optimism and the need to work actively to retain it.

6.1.2 **How coaches encouraged a sense of optimism**

The research found that coaches used the following techniques:

- Fundamental coaching skills:
  - o Creating a safe & confidential coaching environment.
  - o Showing empathy.
  - o Maintaining eye-contact.
  - o Attentive listening.
  - o Assisting clients to be clear what they wanted to use their 2 sessions for (clear Goal setting).
  - o Encouraging clients to explore and verbalise their thoughts & feelings.
  - o Giving authentic positive feedback about their experience of the client.
  - o The two coaches also encouraged clients to acknowledge and re-frame Self-Limiting Beliefs.

- These fundamental coaching skills enabled coaches to use the following phased approach to encourage a sense of optimism:
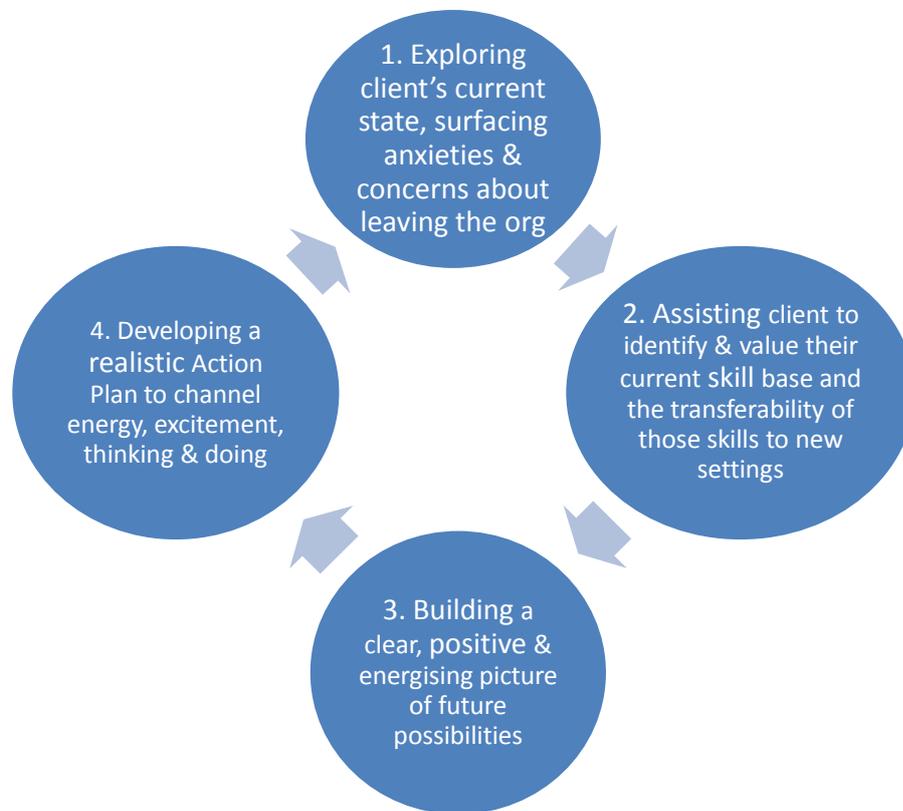
- Career Coaching 'Tools'

  'Tools' alone did not encourage a sense of optimism and as such were used as a vehicle for the conversation, rather than as an end in themselves.

  Brainstorming was found to be highly useful in Phase 3 – Building a clear, positive & energising picture of future possibilities.

- Appreciative Inquiry, particularly in relation to Phase 2 – Assisting client to identify & value their current skill base and the transferability of those skills to new settings.

- Reality-checking to ensure robust Action Planning.

In addition, all coaches described the importance of the 'whole experience' of the CareerLink Plus package in supporting a sense of optimism. Contact with the CLP team, Workshop tutors, fellow participants, as well as the experience of the Workshops themselves, contributed positively to the work undertaken in coaching sessions to encourage a sense of optimism.

6.2 Recommendations

- CLP may find it beneficial to consider the benefits of :
  - Undertaking complimentary research with a sample of clients in order to cross-reference their experience with the experience of this sample of coaches.
  - Sharing the findings of this research with coaches who did not participate in the research.
  - Positioning 'encouraging a sense of optimism' as an explicit outcome for Career/Redundancy coaching.
  - Re-assessing the use of Career Coaching 'Tools' in future training for CLP coaches.

Key Words: **Optimism, Redundancy, Coaching**

Word Count, Chapters 1-6: 4388

Project Supervisor, Middlesex University: Jean O'Neill