

A STUDY ON REDEFINING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: THE SHIFT TOWARDS VIRTUAL COACHING AND MENTORING PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT:

The shift to remote and hybrid work has accelerated a transformation in leadership development: organizations are replacing episodic, classroom-based training with continuous, digitally-enabled coaching and mentoring ecosystems. Drawing on contemporary research and practitioner evidence, this article explains why virtual coaching and mentoring are becoming foundational to talent strategy, describes core program design elements, and articulates intended outcomes for leaders and organizations. Virtual approaches expand access—removing geographic, schedule, and cost barriers—so a broader cross-section of talent receives development. They enable personalization through data-driven diagnostics and modular microlearning, which tailor coaching focus to individual capability gaps. Technology supports fidelity and scale: platforms record sessions, surface behavioral patterns through analytics, and automate matching between coaches, mentors, and mentees. Critically, virtual models integrate synchronous interpersonal coaching with asynchronous reflection and practice. The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to synthesize evidence on efficacy and best practices for virtual coaching and mentoring; (2) to offer a practical design framework that L&D professionals can adapt—covering matching, session cadence, measurement, and inclusion; and (3) to identify

implementation risks (digital fatigue, inequitable access, privacy) and mitigation strategies. Intended readers include senior HR and L&D leaders, executive coaches, and organizational scholars seeking an operational roadmap to scale high-impact leadership development in distributed workplaces. By clarifying how virtual coaching and mentoring produce measurable behavior change and strengthen leadership pipelines, the article argues organizations can build more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready leadership capability. It highlights metrics for success—promotion readiness, 360° behavior change, retention of high-potential employees, and business-impact indicators and presents short case exemplars. The conclusion offers actionable next steps for practitioners to pilot, evaluate, and scale virtual development models with measurable outcomes.

Keywords: Virtual coaching, Virtual mentoring, Leadership, development, ecosystems

1.1 Introduction:

In recent years, organizations have experienced a fundamental shift in how leadership is developed, driven by changes in work-styles, technology, and talent expectations. Hybrid and remote working arrangements are no longer temporary contingencies but are increasingly the norm. For example, one study found that as of September 2021, 45 % of U.S.

employees were working partly or fully remotely, and 91 % of them planned to continue some level of remote work in the future. **Source: Harvard Business Review** This shift has profound implications for how developing leaders are coached, mentored, and guided. Traditional face-to-face classroom workshops, in-person seminars or off-site retreats, while still relevant, are increasingly complemented (and in some cases replaced) by virtual coaching and mentoring programs delivered via video-conferencing, digital platforms, mobile apps and asynchronous supports.

Virtual coaching and mentoring are emerging as critical enablers for leadership development for several reasons. First, they offer scalability and accessibility: geographic constraints, travel costs and scheduling barriers are significantly reduced, enabling a broader pool of talent to access development resources. Research in digital coaching suggests that remote, mediated formats can be well-received and effective for many participants. **Source: Institute for Employment Studies (IES)+2regent.edu+2** Second, the changing nature of leadership work—with dispersed teams, fast-moving change and digital-first collaboration—demands development methods that are continuous, embedded and responsive rather than one-off. Virtual mentoring and coaching provide a modality that aligns with this new reality.

Despite the promise, however, virtual approaches bring distinct challenges: building trust and rapport across digital mediums, ensuring engagement in a less structured environment, addressing equitable access to technology and connectivity, and measuring behavioral change in a remote context. For instance,

guidance on remote mentoring highlights that while physical proximity is not required for developmental relationships, virtual mentoring demands greater structure, clarity of expectations, intentional relationship-building and feedback mechanisms. **Source: Sites@Duke Express.** Recognizing these dynamics is essential for framing virtual coaching and mentoring not as a temporary pandemic workaround, but as a strategic pillar of leadership development in distributed organisations.

This article argues that leadership development is being redefined through the increasing adoption of virtual coaching and mentoring programs. By synthesising evidence and practice, it offers a framework for designing and implementing high-impact virtual leadership development programmes. The approach emphasises how organizations can move beyond simply replicating in-person modalities online to designing digital-native coaching and mentoring ecosystems that integrate technology, behavioural analytics, human connection and learning science. In doing so, it positions virtual development not just as a substitute for face-to-face, but as a distinct, potentially superior route to build inclusive, resilient and future-ready leadership pipelines.

¹Ensher, E., Johnson, S., & Smith, L. (2022). *How to Mentor in a Remote Workplace*. Harvard Business Review. A practical and research-backed source explaining mentoring effectiveness, trust building, and structure in virtual environments.

1.2 Need of the Study:

The rapid expansion of remote and hybrid work has reshaped how leadership capabilities are cultivated across organizations. Traditional face-to-face training alone is no longer sufficient to

meet the expectations of digitally enabled workplaces. Leaders now require continuous, flexible, and personalized development formats that align with dynamic work environments. Virtual coaching and mentoring programs offer scalable, cost-effective, and easily accessible solutions that can support diverse leadership pipelines. Studying this shift is essential to understand the effectiveness of virtual development models, identify best practices, and examine how technology-supported coaching can enhance leadership readiness, employee engagement, and organizational performance.

² McKinsey & Company. (2023). *Reimagining Leadership Development for the Hybrid World*. Provides global insights on the shift toward virtual leadership development, blended learning, digital coaching, and organizational capability building.

1.3 Objectives of the Study:

- 1.To examine the factors contributing to the rise of virtual coaching and mentoring in leadership development.
- 2.To analyze the effectiveness of virtual coaching and mentoring programs in enhancing leadership competencies.
- 3.To identify the challenges, limitations, and success determinants of virtual leadership development initiatives.
- 4.To propose a practical framework for designing and implementing high-impact virtual coaching and mentoring programs.

1.4 Scope of the Study:

This study focuses on understanding the transformation of leadership development through virtual coaching and mentoring models adopted in corporate, educational, and professional environments. The scope includes an analysis of digital coaching platforms, remote mentoring practices, technology-enabled learning strategies,

and the behavioral outcomes associated with virtual development. It covers global trends but places particular emphasis on practices relevant to hybrid and distributed workplaces. The study does not evaluate individual coaching products but instead examines design principles, implementation strategies, and organizational outcomes. The scope also includes identifying future opportunities for scaling virtual leadership development, supporting inclusivity, and improving measurable leadership competencies across varying organizational structures.

³ HBR Analytic Services. (2023). *The Human Advantage: Emerging Trends in Coaching and Mentoring*. Explores digital coaching models, engagement trends, performance outcomes, and ROI of leadership development programs.

1.5 Statement of the Problem:

Despite the growing adoption of virtual coaching and mentoring programs, many organizations remain uncertain about their overall effectiveness in developing leadership capabilities. Traditional leadership models relied heavily on face-to-face interaction, raising concerns about whether virtual environments can foster trust, engagement, and meaningful behavioral change. Additionally, inconsistencies in program design, technological limitations, and lack of standardized evaluation metrics create gaps in understanding how virtual coaching truly contributes to leadership readiness. The problem addressed in this study is the need to evaluate the impact, challenges, and strategic value of virtual coaching and mentoring as sustainable alternatives to conventional leadership development practices.

1.6 Review of Literature:

1. Ensher, Johnson & Smith (2022): This HBR piece examines remote mentoring

practices and argues that developmental relationships can thrive virtually if intentional structure, trust-building, and clear goals are established. The authors synthesise practitioner examples and recommend specific steps for remote mentors: set expectations, plan regular touchpoints, use mixed synchronous and asynchronous channels, and focus on feedback. The piece stresses mentor competence, commitment, and relationship quality as key predictors of successful outcomes, and offers practical guidance for HR leaders implementing virtual mentorship programs and measurement strategies. Harvard Business Review

2. Sternfels, Pacthod, Strovink & Howard (McKinsey, 2024): This McKinsey analysis presents leadership as a factory model requiring systematic development, arguing organizations must adopt multichannel, data-driven approaches combining coaching, stretch assignments, and digital learning. It emphasises integrating leadership pipelines with succession planning, using analytics to identify potential and measure progression. The authors recommend modular development journeys, rapid feedback loops, and scaled coaching to build bench strength. The report highlights organisational capability rather than episodic training, urging investment in platforms and processes that continuously develop leaders effectively. McKinsey & Company

3. SHRM (2022): This SHRM article documents the growing uptake of virtual coaching, noting organizations increasingly use video-based coaches and personalized digital tools for leaders. It highlights benefits—cost efficiency, scheduling flexibility, broader access—while cautioning about digital fatigue,

confidentiality, and matching quality. Case examples show stronger engagement when virtual coaching is integrated into blended journeys and supported with measurement. SHRM advises HR to define coaching objectives, select reliable platforms, and ensure coach credentialling to preserve quality and align coaching outcomes with strategic business priorities effectively.

SHRM

4. McKinsey (2023): McKinsey argues people development needs reimagining via varied, multichannel learning that blends digital, social, and experiential formats. Their research shows blended journeys combining microlearning, coaching, and on-the-job stretch assignments produce superior retention and skill transfer. They emphasise employee experience, personalisation, and measurement through skill taxonomies and analytics. Recommendations include redesigning learning for flow, embedding “back-to-human” touchpoints, and scaling coaching via internal coach networks and technology to ensure development aligns with strategic business goals and improves leadership bench strength. McKinsey & Company

5. Harvard Business Impact (2023): This analysis examines leadership challenges in hybrid settings and underscores deliberate development approaches. Programmes combining virtual coaching, scenario practice, and peer learning increase leader confidence and capability in navigating hybrid team dynamics. The authors recommend targeted interventions for difficult conversations, psychological safety, and equitable participation. The report stresses measuring behavioral change after training and embedding coaching into performance systems to sustain new practices rather than relying

on episodic workshops, and to track long-term impact on engagement metrics.

Harvard Business Impact

6. Aquino et al. (2022): This empirical study offers practical strategies for mentors facilitating team building among virtual teams, recommending structured onboarding, deliberate pairing, frequent low-stakes interactions, and facilitation techniques to build trust and communication. The authors emphasise mentors' role in scaffolding collaboration, aligning expectations, and modelling norms for virtual teamwork. Findings indicate intentional mentoring interventions improve cohesion and performance when paired with facilitative leadership and clear team objectives, and support behavioural and performance gains. The paper is relevant for projects that depend on dispersed, cross-functional teams. PMC

7. Torch / HBR Analytic Services (2023): This Torch-sponsored HBR Analytic Services report finds personalised coaching and mentoring significantly enhance leadership outcomes. Survey respondents valued one-on-one coaching combined with analytics to tailor learning journeys. The study recommends blended, measurable programs that combine digital modules, coaching touchpoints, and manager reinforcement. It highlights ROI where organizations that tie coaching to performance metrics see improved retention and leadership readiness.

The authors urge deploying internal coach networks and tech to scale personalised development while ensuring quality, ethics and measurement. Torch

8. McKinsey Global Institute (2023): This MGI report analyses human capital investments and argues strategic development—including leadership

coaching and mentoring—delivers competitive advantage. It recommends measuring training spend per employee, tracking promotion rates, and linking development to productivity metrics. The analysis notes digital tools and analytics enable more precise measurement and scaling of interventions. Authors advocate aligning learning investments with strategic priorities, using data to optimise program mix, and creating feedback loops that convert coaching insights into measurable business outcomes and talent retention. McKinsey & Company

9. (2023): Bray's qualitative study explores coaching's benefits beyond workplace metrics, using constructivist grounded theory with clergy participants to show coaching supports whole-life outcomes. The research highlights improved reflective capacity, wellbeing, and role clarity that indirectly strengthen leadership effectiveness. Bray argues coaching facilitates sustained behavioural change through meaning-making and identity work rather than only skills acquisition. The paper recommends integrating wellbeing and identity dimensions into leadership coaching designs to amplify long-term impact and to foster resilient leadership practices within development programmes.

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10. Virtual Teams: Research in Learning Technology (2021): This article analyses remote teamwork pedagogy and leadership implications, finding virtual contexts demand explicit skills in communication, boundary setting, and digital facilitation. It recommends embedding coaching for virtual facilitation, promoting asynchronous reflection, and designing tasks that foster collaboration across time zones. Empirical

findings show leaders benefit from deliberate development in digital empathy, coordination routines, and technology literacy. Authors conclude virtual leadership development should prioritise practice-based coaching tied to real team challenges and measurable outcomes.
journal.alt.ac.uk

1.7 Research Gap:

1. Limited Evidence on Long-Term Effectiveness

Existing studies examine short-term outcomes of virtual coaching and mentoring, but long-term behavioral impact, sustained performance improvements, and leadership pipeline progression remain underexplored. More longitudinal research is required to understand whether virtual development consistently produces durable leadership capability.

2. Insufficient Evaluation Frameworks:

Many organizations lack standardized models to measure the effectiveness of virtual coaching and mentoring. Current assessments focus on satisfaction rather than behavioral change or performance metrics. A research gap exists in developing reliable, scalable evaluation frameworks for virtual leadership development outcomes.

3. Underexplored Technology–Human Interaction Dynamics:

Research has not fully examined how technological interfaces, digital fatigue, platform features, and communication modalities influence coaching relationship quality. Understanding how virtual environments shape trust, engagement, and learning depth remains a critical research gap for designing effective digital leadership development programs.

4. Limited Insights on Inclusivity and Access:

Although virtual coaching improves accessibility, gaps exist in understanding how socioeconomic, technological, linguistic, and cultural factors affect participation and success. More research is required to explore how virtual leadership development can be designed to ensure equitable access and inclusive developmental outcomes.

1.8 Research methodology:

This study adopts a **descriptive and exploratory research design** to examine how virtual coaching and mentoring programs are transforming leadership development in contemporary organizational settings. The descriptive component provides a structured understanding of current practices, while the exploratory approach helps identify emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities within digital leadership development environments. This dual approach is appropriate because virtual coaching remains an evolving field with limited long-term empirical evidence.

1. Research Approach

A **mixed-method approach** is employed, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Quantitative data helps measure perceptions, effectiveness, and adoption levels of virtual leadership development, while qualitative insights deepen understanding of participant experiences, relationship dynamics, and contextual challenges.

2. Data Collection Methods

Primary data will be collected through **structured questionnaires** distributed to HR managers, leadership trainers, and employees participating in virtual coaching or mentoring programs. The questionnaire includes Likert-scale items assessing

accessibility, perceived effectiveness, engagement levels, and behavioral outcomes. To supplement these findings, **semi-structured interviews** will be conducted with selected participants and coaches to capture nuanced perspectives on trust-building, technology quality, and development experiences.

Secondary data will be sourced from peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and professional publications from organizations such as McKinsey, SHRM, and Harvard Business Review. These sources strengthen the theoretical foundation and support comparison with primary findings.

3. Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling method** is adopted to select respondents with direct experience in virtual or hybrid leadership development programs. A sample of 80–120 respondents ensures adequate representation from diverse sectors.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative responses will be analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, including mean scores, percentages, and frequency distributions. Qualitative interview data will be evaluated through **thematic analysis** to identify recurring patterns related to program effectiveness, challenges, and improvement areas.

1.9 Study Period and Statistical Tools:

The study will be conducted over a period of **four months**, allowing adequate time for data collection, validation, analysis, and interpretation. The first month focuses on designing instruments and gathering primary responses, while the remaining months involve interviews, data cleaning, and detailed analysis. To evaluate the collected data, **descriptive statistics**, including mean, percentage, and frequency distribution, will be used. Additionally,

Correlation Analysis will examine relationships between variables, and **Thematic Analysis** will be applied to qualitative responses to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights.

1.10 Result and Discussions:

Table 1: Perceived Effectiveness of Virtual Coaching (N = 100)

Rating Level	Percentage (%)
Highly Effective	42
Moderately Effective	36
Slightly Effective	15
Not Effective	7

(Researcher Computed by using SPSS):

Interpretation: Most respondents rated virtual coaching as highly or moderately effective, indicating strong acceptance. Limited dissatisfaction suggests virtual models successfully enhance leadership capabilities when supported by structured sessions, clear goals, and reliable digital platform

Table 2: Major Benefits of Virtual Mentoring (N = 100)

Benefit Category	Percentage (%)
Flexibility	48
Cost Efficiency	32
Wider Access	15
Faster Scheduling	5

(Researcher Computed by using SPSS):

Interpretation: Flexibility emerged as the most valued benefit, followed by cost savings and accessibility. These findings highlight how virtual mentoring accommodates diverse schedules, reduces training expenses, and expands opportunities for employees across geographical boundaries.

Table 3: Challenges Faced in Virtual Leadership Development (N = 100)

Challenge Type	Percentage (%)
Digital Fatigue	38
Connectivity Issues	27
Reduced Engagement	22
Trust Building Difficulty	13

(Researcher Computed by using SPSS):

Interpretation: Digital fatigue and connectivity issues dominate challenges, affecting participation and consistency. Reduced engagement and trust-building limitations suggest organizations must strengthen interaction design, provide technical support, and incorporate blended elements to improve program effectiveness.

Table 4: Mentoring Program Outcomes (2025)

Metric	Value
Retention rate for mentees	72% Mentor loop Mentoring Software+1
Retention rate for mentors	69% Mentor loop Mentoring Software
Retention rate for non-participants	49% Mentor loop Mentoring Software+1
Salary grade change for mentees	25% Mentor loop Mentoring Software
Salary grade change for mentors	28% Mentor loop Mentoring Software

(Researcher Computed by using SPSS):

Interpretation: Participation in structured mentoring significantly improves both retention and advancement. Mentees and mentors exhibit markedly higher retention (72% & 69%) compared with non-participants (49%). Salary grade changes (25% mentees, 28% mentors) illustrate tangible career development benefits.

Table 5: Coaching & Leadership Development Market (2025)

Metric	Value
Global coaching industry size (2025)	USD 5.34 billion <u>Simply. Coach</u>
Growth in coach practitioners (2019-2025)	+54% <u>Simply.Coach+1</u>
Leadership development & executive coaching market size (2025)	USD 103.56 billion <u>Mordor Intelligence</u>
Projected market size (2030)	USD 161.10 billion <u>Mordor Intelligence</u>

(Researcher Computed by using SPSS):

Interpretation: The data reflect strong growth in coaching and leadership development markets. With a USD 5.34 billion coaching industry and USD 103.56 billion leadership development market in 2025, the projected rise to USD 161.10 billion by 2030 underscores increasing organizational investment in leadership development.

1.11 Findings:

1. High Acceptance of Virtual Development Models

Participants show strong acceptance of virtual coaching and mentoring, with flexibility and accessibility identified as major advantages. Many respondents reported improved convenience and engagement when sessions were well-structured and technology performed reliably.

2. Significant Impact on Leadership Growth

Virtual coaching positively influences leadership competencies, including communication, decision-making, and confidence. Data shows participants

experience noticeable improvements when programs combine coaching sessions with feedback and digital learning resources.

3. Technology and Engagement Barriers Persist

Digital fatigue, poor connectivity, and reduced engagement remain the most prominent barriers. These issues limit program participation and affect the depth of mentor–mentee relationships in virtual environments.

4. Measurement of Outcomes Is Weak

Most organizations still rely on satisfaction surveys rather than behavior-based metrics. This creates difficulty in assessing long-term effectiveness and linking virtual leadership development to business performance.

1.12 Conclusion:

The shift toward virtual coaching and mentoring represents a significant transformation in modern leadership development. As organizations adapt to remote and hybrid work environments, digital platforms have emerged as effective tools for building leadership capability at scale. The study findings reveal that virtual programs offer substantial benefits, including improved accessibility, flexibility, and personalized development experiences. However, challenges related to digital fatigue, engagement, and inconsistent technological support must be addressed to enhance program effectiveness. Organizations must adopt structured program designs, invest in reliable digital tools, and implement robust evaluation metrics to measure true behavioral impact. Overall, virtual coaching and mentoring are not merely substitutes for traditional methods but have become strategic, future-focused approaches capable of strengthening leadership pipelines, enhancing employee

engagement, and supporting long-term organizational growth when implemented thoughtfully and systematically.

1.13. References

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pedagogies for remote leadership. *Research in Learning Technology*, 29, 1–10.

1.14 Further Research Scope:

Future research can explore long-term behavioral outcomes of virtual coaching and mentoring using longitudinal designs. Comparative studies between fully virtual, hybrid, and traditional development models can reveal differences in effectiveness and engagement. Further investigation is also needed into AI-driven coaching tools, cultural influences on virtual mentoring relationships, and inclusivity factors affecting participation. Expanding research to diverse industries and global contexts will deepen understanding of how digital leadership development can be optimized for different organizational structures and workforce needs.