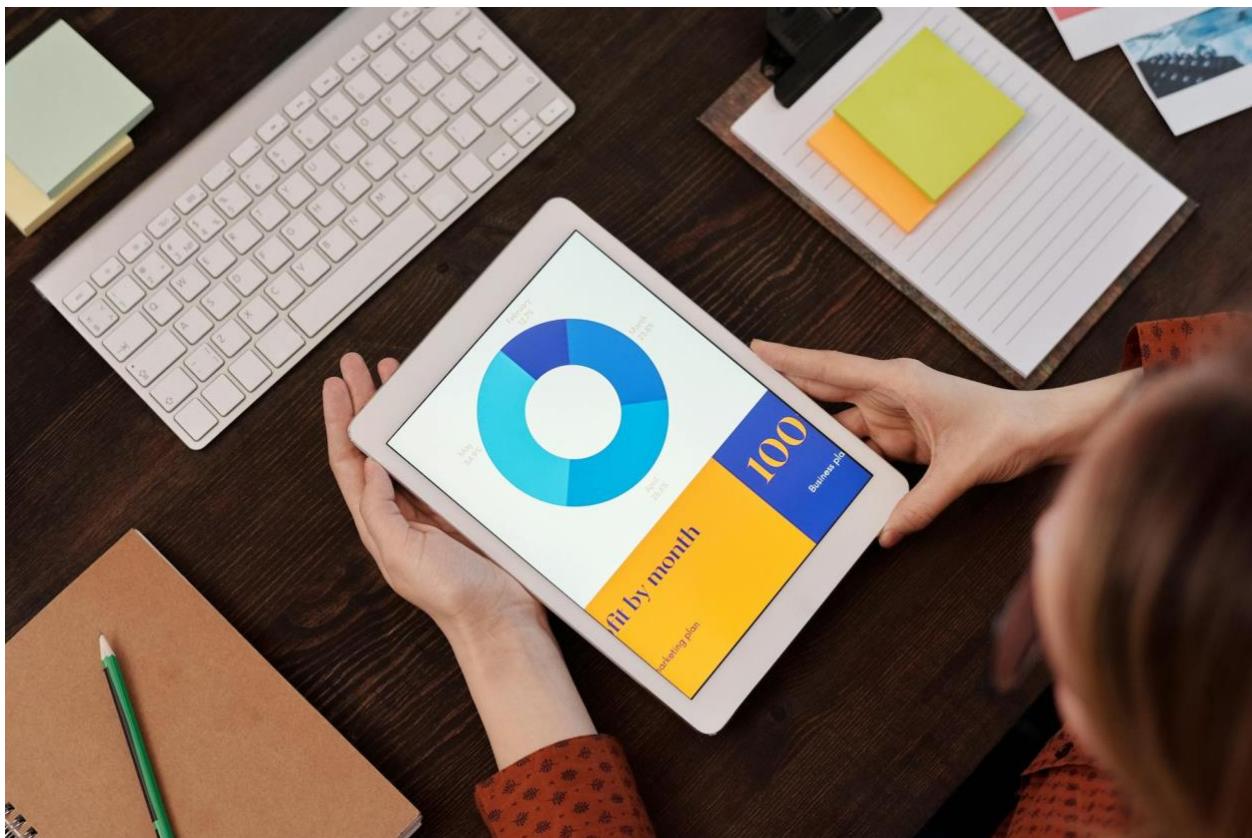


Are AI coaching agents learning friend or foe?: A qualitative study of learning & development leaders' perceptions of AI coaching agents using UTAUT2



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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how learning and development (L&D) leaders perceive and evaluate AI-enabled coaching agents and identifies factors shaping organisational adoption. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 senior L&D and HR leaders from large organisations who had recent experience of using generative AI coaching tools. Reflexive thematic analysis generated six themes relating to perceived value at scale, hybrid human–AI delivery preferences, adoption barriers, perceived conversational strengths and limitations, trust and governance concerns, and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) considerations. Findings are interpreted through UTAUT2 to clarify how performance expectancy, effort expectancy, facilitating conditions, habit and perceived value are refracted through organisational risk, data protection, trust and inclusion. The study contributes an adoption-focused account of how commissioners of workplace learning and development assess coaching and the emergence of AI coach agents, offering implications for governance, implementation design and future research on responsible deployment.

Key words: AI coaching; coaching chatbots; UTAUT2; learning and development; technology adoption; workplace learning

Introduction

Coaching is typically defined as a structured, reflective conversation that supports learning, development and performance through goal setting, insight and sustained behaviour change. Recent advances in generative artificial intelligence have enabled conversational agents to simulate coaching style dialogue at scale, creating new opportunities for widening access to reflective support and new risks associated with quality, safety, privacy and bias.

In this paper, we use the term AI-enabled coaching agent (AICA) to describe AI systems designed to support coaching-like conversations. For consistency, the manuscript uses the abbreviation AICA. We use the term 'coachbot' only when referring specifically to chatbot-based implementations.

Despite rapid growth in organisational interest in AI, empirical work on how organisational decision makers evaluate and adopt AI-enabled coaching remains limited. Prior studies have largely focused on user experience in constrained samples (Passmore Daly & Tee, 2025; Brunning & Boak, 2025; Barger, 2025), while little is known about AI adoption reasoning among leaders responsible for commissioning learning and development services.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to explore learning and development leaders' perceptions of AI-enabled coaching agents and to identify drivers, barriers and practical strategies associated with adoption in organisational contexts. The study

addressed two research questions: Research Question 1: How do L&D leaders perceive and evaluate AI-enabled coaching agents for organisational use? Research Question 2: What barriers shape adoption, and what strategies do leaders identify to improve responsible uptake?"

UTAUT Theory

The following sections introduce the conceptual framework used in the study. We briefly situate UTAUT as the precursor framework, then present UTAUT2 as the primary framework for this paper. We then summarise the emerging literature on AI in coaching and explain how UTAUT2 is applied to the adoption of AI-enabled coaching agents in organisational settings

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) provides an established account for technology adoption, proposing that intention and use are shaped by performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). As the present study examines adoption dynamics in contemporary organisational settings where technology use is increasingly voluntary and experience-based, we draw primarily on UTAUT2, which extends UTAUT to better account for such contexts (Venkatesh et al., 2012).

UTAUT introduced four core determinants: Performance Expectancy (PE), Effort Expectancy (EE), Social Influence (SI), and Facilitating Conditions (FC). PE refers to the belief that technology will improve job performance, while EE evaluates perceived ease of use. SI explores the degree to which individuals feel social pressure to adopt a technology and FC reflects the organisational support available. Moderating variables including gender, age, experience, and voluntariness also explain variance in user responses. In organisational learning and development (L&D), for example, employees are more likely to adopt AI tools if they believe these improve personalised learning (PE), are easy to navigate (EE), or endorsed by peers (SI), with sufficient IT support (FC).

UTAUT's strengths lie in its holistic approach, strong predictive power and wide applicability across domains including education, healthcare, and enterprise technology (Williams et al., 2015). However, it has been criticised for its lack of context sensitivity, requiring adaptation to specific domains (Slade et al., 2015). Critics have also argued that it fails to consider cultural variation in technology acceptance (Im et al., 2011), and UTAUT research has been dominated by quantitative survey designs, which can under-represent nuanced, contextual and personal experiences that qualitative methods can illuminate (Williams et al., 2015). These limitations have prompted refinements, most notably the development of UTAUT2.

UTAUT2 - Revised theory

UTAUT2 was introduced by Venkatesh, Thong and Xu (2012) to address the limitations of the original UTAUT model in consumer and voluntary-use contexts. While

maintaining the original four constructs; Performance Expectancy (PE), Effort Expectancy (EE), Social Influence (SI), and Facilitating Conditions (FC), the revised model adds three new variables: Hedonic Motivation (HM), Price Value (PV), and Habit (HT). It also retains three moderators (gender, age, and experience) but removes voluntariness of use reflecting the fact that UTAUT2 was developed for consumer contexts in which use is typically voluntary (Venkatesh et al., 2012). In organisational contexts, voluntariness may vary and should be treated as a contextual factor and reflects an organisations policy and their implementation plan.

HM captures the degree of enjoyment derived from technology use; PV evaluates the perceived trade-off between benefits and costs and HT reflects the extent to which technology use becomes routine. For instance, in people development environments, AI tools that are both engaging (HM) and cost-effective (PV) are more likely to be adopted, while repeated use can encourage habitual engagement (HT). PE and EE remain important, as users assess both the efficacy and usability of new systems.

It has been argued that UTAUT2 significantly improves the model's explanatory power, accounting for up to 74% of variance in behavioural intention (Venkatesh et al., 2012). The model has since been applied in a range of domains including banking (Alalwan et al., 2017) and healthcare (Hoque & Sorwar, 2017).

AI in coaching

The use of coaching in AI is relatively recent and the empirical literature remains sparse (Passmore, Olafsson & Tee, 2025). A recent systematic literature review identifies that while AI coaches can provide effective support in specific areas such as goal attainment, self-resilience, and physical activity improvement (Terblanche et al., 2022; Hassoon et al., 2021) caution is needed in generalising from student and patient samples to leaders. However, these users found the tool accessible, convenient, and psychologically safe (Mai et al., 2022; Terblanche et al., 2024).

Design issues have been highlighted by writers (Terblanche, 2020) as well as other issues in terms of the wider application, design and likely adoption within coaching (Passmore & Tee, 2023).

At the forefront of many of the discussions have been ethical concerns, particularly regarding data privacy, security, and AI bias. Further some writers have expressed fundamental reservations, arguing that coaching is a human endeavour and cannot be replicated by a machine, which lacks the curiosity, creativity and empathy of a human coach (Bachkirova, & Kemp, 2025).

Whether these views reveal or whether the views of buyers will lead to wider scale adoption remains uncertain. What is certain is that preliminary evidence suggests AI is being rapidly adopted by users and that coaching offers a possible options for organisations seeking to enhance access to coaching while manage the financial pressures which face all organisations.

UTAUT2 Application to AI coaching

Given the limited qualitative evidence on organisational commissioning of AI-enabled coaching, we used UTAUT2 as a sensitising framework to design a semi-structured interview guide. Each UTAUT2 construct was operationalised through one or more open prompts to (a) elicit leaders' lived experience of adoption decision making, (b) explore both enabling and inhibiting conditions and (c) support depth through follow up probes where responses were brief or ambiguous. Where multiple prompts are linked to a single construct, this reflects deliberate coverage of distinct facets of the construct rather than unequal weighting.

Table 1: Mapping of research questions and UTAUT2 framework

Questions	UTAUT2 Constructs
Tell us about your experience of engaging with AI technology?	HM (Hedonic Motivation)
What factors are you considering as the criteria when evaluating the success of an AI coaching tool?	SI (Social Influence)
Can you tell me about your current thoughts about the development of AI driven coaching tool?	SI (Social Influence)
How do you see AI Coachbots fitting into your wider approach to people development?	PE (Performance Expectancy)
From the feedback from others how intuitive / easy to use are AI bots are at present	EE (Effort Expectancy)
What is your perception about attitudes among commissioners of coaching to the adoption of AI coaching technology?	SI (Social Influence)
How might AI coach bot tools best be integrated with other tools and products you use at work?	FC (Facilitating Conditions)
When you reflect on the cost-value comparison – how might you weight up the cost of a human coach and a Coachbot	PV (Price-Value)
As you think about the future, what barriers exist to prevent wider adoption of AI for manager performance and development?	FC (Facilitating Conditions) SI (Social Influence) HT (Habit)
Many technology tools have driven adoption through daily use, what features might AI Coachbots add to create regular use?	HT (Habit)

Method

Procedure

This exploratory study was cross-sectional, qualitative and inductive (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) using semi-structured interviews. The research adopted a qualitative, thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Terry et al., 2017) and considered an ontology of relativism, accepting that experiences differ for people depending on their exposure and context to the subject matter and an epistemology of social constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The interview protocol was designed to address the study aims and research questions stated in the Introduction.

In alignment with best practices in qualitative research design. Inclusion criteria were defined in advance (Flick, 2022): participants (a) held senior responsibility for L&D or talent development, (b) were involved in commissioning, piloting or evaluating AI-enabled coaching tools, and (c) had used an AI coaching tool within the previous 12 weeks. Purposive sampling was used to obtain information-rich cases with direct organisational decision-making relevance. This approach ensured a purposeful sampling strategy, allowing the study to capture rich, context-specific insights from individuals with direct experience in AI-enabled coaching within large, complex organisations. Establishing clear inclusion criteria was particularly important given the emergent and interdisciplinary nature of AI coaching, where diverse organisational roles, technological familiarity and strategic implementation experiences can significantly influence perceptions and adoption behaviours. By pre-defining the sample parameters, the study enhanced both the credibility and relevance of the findings in relation to current debates in coaching technology adoption.

Participants

Thirteen Human Resources leaders were invited to participate in the study, participant titles included, Chief People Officer, CHRO, Global Head of Talent, with each participant holding organisational responsibility for learning and development within a global enterprise. Eleven participated in the online interviews. All participants had direct experience of using a Generative AI tool as a coach during the previous 12 weeks. The tools varied but included both popular purpose designed tools by global coaching providers and small start-up specialist AI providers. Participants were drawn from five industries and 11 organisations based in Europe. Six participants identified as male (55%) and five as female (45%). Nine participants identified as White (82%) and two as Black, Asian or minority ethnic (18%). Participants were aged between 26 and 60 years.

AI coach

Participants had used a variety of AI coachbot tools, however each was defined as a coach tool in that its focus was to stimulate reflective in the participant (coachee) as opposed to providing information or answers to questions from participants.

Table 2: Participants

Participant code	Gender	Age	Ethnicity (self-identified)	Industry / Sector
P1	F	40-60	White	Technology
P2	M	40-60	BIPOC	Technology
P3	M	40-60	White	Consulting
P4	F	40-60	White	Consulting
P5	F	40-60	BIPOC	Consulting
P6	M	40-60	White	Food & Beverage
P7	M	40-60	White	Technology
P8	F	40-60	White	Technology
P9	M	40-60	White	Financial Services
P10	F	18-39	White	Technology
P11	M	18-39	White	Aerospace

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained for the research from Ethics Committee, Henley Business School, University of Reading (Reference: SREC-HBS-20241219-JOPA8826). All participants signed a Consent form prior to the interview and were advised the data would be transcribed, anonymised and would be used for research purposes. Individuals were able to withdraw at any time.

Data collection & analysis

The interviews were structured around the ten questions related to the UTAUT2 framework and lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. The transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Terry et al, 2017). A review process was used to identify the key themes, which were then compared with the existing literature.

Themes

The researchers generated a series of themes from their analysis, which are reported in the next section. In total, six themes were identified. These are summarised in Table 3. To aid interpretability, the themes are also summarised against the research questions. Research question 1 is addressed primarily through Themes 1, 2 and 4, which capture perceived value, integration preferences and coaching-specific limitations. Research question 2 is addressed primarily through Themes 3, 5 and 6, which capture organisational barriers, trust dynamics, and ethical and DEI-related adoption constraints.

Table 3: Themes

Theme	Explanation
Theme 1: AI coaching as a scalable and cost-effective solution	AI coaching enables organisations to scale coaching access cost-effectively, providing more employees with coaching development support previously reserved for executives and minority groups.
Theme 2: AI coaching as a hybrid model – AI and human coaches working together	A hybrid model combining AI efficiency with human empathy is preferred, where AI supports routine tasks as well as transactional conversations and human coaches facilitate deeper and more nuanced human transformational impact.
Theme 3: Barriers to AI coaching adoption – Legal, ethical and organisational constraints	AI adoption is hindered by concerns around data privacy, ethics, regulatory compliance and the readiness of organisational systems and stakeholders.
Theme 4: AI's strengths and limitations in coaching conversations	AI is effective in structured coaching tasks but lacks emotional intelligence, limiting its role in complex coaching conversations and raising humanistic concerns.
Theme 5: User perceptions and trust in AI coaching	Trust in AI varies; while some appreciate its neutrality, others are concerned about data security and the impact of overreliance on human connection.
Theme 6: AI coaching and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)	AI can support inclusive coaching by reaching diverse groups but risks around algorithmic bias require careful design, governance and human oversight.

Table 4 offers a summary, comparing the research questions, the thematic findings and the most relevant UTAUT2 constructs.

Table 4: Research questions & summary answers

Research question	Summary answer	Most relevant themes	Most relevant UTAUT2 constructs
How do managers perceive and adopt AI tools in coaching?	Adoption is framed as value-at-scale, with preference for hybrid models and bounded use cases where emotional nuance is limited.	1, 2, 4	PE, PV, EE, HT
What barriers to adoption and strategies exist to improve uptake?	Barriers cluster around governance, privacy, trust, bias and organisational readiness; strategies include oversight, policy, integration, capability building and DEI assurance.	3, 5, 6	FC, SI, PV, EE

Findings

Theme 1: AI coaching as a scalable and cost-effective solution

The theme of scalability and cost-effectiveness emerged prominently across the interviews, with eleven participants highlighting these as core advantages of AI-enabled coaching tools. Participants framed AI-enabled coaching as a strategic enabler where coaching is valued, but cannot be resourced at scale through human provision alone.

Several participants emphasised the potential for AI to improve access to coaching. Participant 6 noted, "*It's instantaneous... I'm not waiting for a monthly meeting... and ultimately it's free as well*". This sentiment reflects a common view that AI coaching tools offer cost savings, and were often instantly available, thus enabling individuals to access support in the flow of work.

Participant 11 offered a strategic perspective on this, particularly within the context of a global business: "*We have 70,000 people growing and providing a different level of service, which is more of an equitable type... Coaching is where we're landing with the AI deployment*". This quote captures a broader institutional aim: to complement high-touch, human coaching with AI-based solutions that can support more junior or mid-level employees within the budget constraints faced by all organisations.

Furthermore, Participant 4 noted the organisational logic of deploying such tools: "*It's not really gone scalable... it's still mainly a few individuals... but the idea of connecting it to the language of our leadership development framework makes it easier to scale*". This underscores the importance of context-specific integration to realise the full scalability potential of AI coaching systems.

Theme 2: AI coaching as a hybrid model

The concept of AI coaching as part of a hybrid model—where digital tools complement rather than replace human coaching—was identified in nine of the eleven interviews. Participants widely acknowledged that while AI has significant potential in providing immediate, accessible, and scalable developmental support, it is most effective when positioned alongside human-led coaching. This dual approach was framed as a way to optimise both relational depth and technological efficiency.

Many participants reflected on the strengths of AI in facilitating continuity between human-led coaching sessions. For instance, Participant 10 described an evolving perspective in their organisation: "*We will end up in some sort of merge between AI and humans... where AI complements the coach and the coach uses AI*". This vision of AI as an enhancement tool—enabling reflection, goal tracking, or just-in-time prompts—was common among those seeking to scale development without sacrificing quality.

Several participants expressed enthusiasm about using AI tools to reinforce insights or provide structured follow-up between traditional coaching engagements.

Participant 7 also pointed to this complementary role in a global leadership context: *"There is a huge push on AI implementation... but it is in the piloting phase to apply classical AI coaches... not instead of, but in addition to"*. Here, the emphasis is on expanding the reach of development initiatives while maintaining personalised, high-value coaching where appropriate. The hybrid model was seen as particularly useful for large organisations with diverse employee needs and limited human coaching capacity.

Participant 9 reflected on the logic of deploying AI at scale while preserving human connection in more complex contexts: *"If it's about large scale access, then I'd be thinking... can it act at scale, can it be tailored... but at the senior end, the value is in the person across the table"*. This highlights a frequently drawn distinction between high-volume coaching access and high-touch executive development, suggesting a tiered model of support.

Collectively, these insights indicate strong practitioner support for AI tools that are carefully integrated into existing coaching ecosystems. Rather than replacing human interaction, AI is viewed as a means of enhancing the coaching journey—providing immediacy, continuity, and inclusivity while leveraging human expertise for situations where greater empathy, complexity, and relational aspects are involved.

Theme 3: Barriers to AI coaching adoption

Barriers to the adoption of AI coaching tools were identified by seven of the eleven participants, demonstrating that despite enthusiasm for the potential benefits of AI in development, significant challenges exist. These barriers included ethical, technological, organisational and cultural aspects. Concerns were often linked to the sensitive nature of coaching, the complexity of AI systems, and the readiness of both individuals and organisations to adopt new modes of engagement.

A common theme across several interviews was a lack of trust and clarity around data privacy, particularly in regulated sectors. Participant 6 reflected on this institutional concern: *"Work at the minute, like most organisations, is very unsure about the use of ChatGPT and OpenAI on the basis of, you know, where does that data go?"*. The potential for sensitive content to be stored or accessed externally was seen as a fundamental barrier, by some organisations. This perception of risk created hesitation, even among those personally open to experimentation with AI.

Another significant obstacle was cultural resistance, particularly those more comfortable with traditional coaching formats. Participant 4 remarked: *"It's not really gone scalable... it's still mainly a few individuals using it regularly"*. This limited uptake, even where tools had been introduced, was often attributed to a lack of understanding, confidence, or

training around AI coaching systems. Participants highlighted the importance of internal education, role modelling, and support to shift organisational mindsets and encourage meaningful engagement.

Several participants also noted doubts about the current capabilities of AI tools, particularly their limitations in providing deep, context-aware support. Participant 2 was particularly critical: *"I tried several formulations, several types of detail, level of details and so on, so forth...It was all the same, all the same questions, all the same answers."*. This sentiment was echoed in other interviews, where the generic nature of responses and the absence of emotional intelligence were cited as reasons users might disengage or fail to see value in the tool.

Theme 4: AI's strengths and limitations in coaching conversations

Ten participants reflected on their direct experiences or observations of AI's performance in coaching dialogues, frequently highlighting both its functional benefits and notable shortcomings. This theme revealed a nuanced understanding of AI's strengths in facilitating structured thinking and accessibility, alongside its limitations in delivering depth, empathy, and contextual responsiveness—key components of effective coaching.

Several participants praised AI's ability to enable immediate reflection, particularly in settings where speed or privacy is valued. For some, AI offered a psychologically safe space for exploration—free from judgement and available on demand. The structured and consistent nature of AI-generated prompts was seen as helpful for initial reflection, ideation, and developing clarity on goals or next steps.

However, nine participants also pointed to critical limitations in AI's ability to replicate the depth of human coaching. Common concerns included its inability to recognise emotional nuance, tailor responses meaningfully, or challenge assumptions in a personalised way. Participant 11 noted, *"Yes, it can get people to think differently, but it can't pick up on the nuances... it just hasn't got that last human bit that you need"*. This distinction between conversational fluency and genuine understanding emerged repeatedly, particularly among those with coaching expertise or responsibility for leadership development.

Participants also described overly generic or repetitive responses. Participant 2 offered a critical assessment: *"It didn't understand my state of mind,...."*. For experienced users or those seeking deeper engagement, the limitations of AI in understanding complex, evolving human narratives were seen as a barrier to adoption. These limitations raised questions about the credibility of AI as a standalone coaching solution, particularly in high-stakes or emotionally charged contexts.

Despite these limitations, some participants suggested that improvements in AI models—especially those trained on specific organisational contexts or values—could

enhance their ability to provide meaningful and relevant coaching interactions. However, the consensus was that, in its current form, AI was best suited to support early-stage reflection, low-stakes problem-solving, or augmenting human coaching rather than replacing it.

Theme 5: User Perceptions and trust in AI coaching

User perceptions and levels of trust emerged as a defining theme in eight of the interviews, influencing both the initial engagement with AI coaching tools and participants' openness to ongoing use. Participants described a spectrum of responses—from enthusiasm and emotional connection to uncertainty, scepticism, and even discomfort—reflecting how personal experience, context, and organisational culture shaped individual attitudes.

For some participants, particularly those with frequent personal use of AI, trust was quickly established. For some AI tools, despite their artificial nature, were experienced as affirming and supportive—especially when they provided reliable, non-judgemental responses. Several participants noted that users who are neurodiverse, introverted, or anxious about interpersonal disclosure may actually find AI to be a more psychologically safe interface than a human coach.

However, this level of trust was not universal. Participants also expressed caution or ambivalence, often rooted in concerns about data security, transparency, or the perceived lack of emotional intelligence in AI systems. Participant 10 captured this tension, stating: *“People are still reluctant to adopt many of the current capabilities... our own biases and our interpretation of coaching sometimes get in the way”*. This observation points to a broader cultural challenge: trust in AI coaching tools is not just about functionality, but also about belief in their legitimacy, credibility, and alignment with coaching values.

Theme 6: AI Coaching and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

The theme of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) emerged in six of the interviews, particularly in relation to AI coaching's potential to broaden access to developmental support and its capacity to engage those who might not otherwise participate in traditional coaching relationships. Participants also raised critical reflections on how AI tools might serve or overlook the needs of underrepresented groups.

Several participants described how AI coaching could offer a more inclusive space, especially for individuals who feel less comfortable in face-to-face or hierarchical coaching settings. Participant 6 noted, *“I'm naturally an introverted person... I find it a lot easier to express myself and my personal feelings and thoughts into something that is non-judgemental”*. These observations illustrate the potential for AI to enhance inclusion by supporting diverse communication preferences and psychological needs.

At the same time, concerns were raised about the risks of AI tools failing to reflect diverse perspectives, particularly where training data, design teams or evaluation processes under-represent non-dominant groups, which may embed cultural and demographic biases into responses (Gengler et al., 2024). The importance of inclusive training data and culturally aware design was implied, though not always explicitly named. Across the interviews, there was cautious optimism that, if developed ethically and inclusively, AI coaching could be a tool for widening participation and supporting equity in leadership development.

Discussion

This study explored learning and development leaders' perceptions of AI-enabled coaching agents within organisational settings using UTAUT2 as a conceptual framework. While emerging work suggests AI coaching tools can be experienced by some users as accessible and convenient in specific contexts (Passmore, Daly & Tee, 2026; Bruning & Boak, 2025; Barger, 2025), questions remain about how organisational commissioners evaluate value, risk and fit when considering adoption at scale.

Addressing this gap, the present study examined two research questions concerning (1) adoption perceptions and (2) barriers and uptake strategies. By mapping the six themes to UTAUT2 constructs, the discussion connects leaders' accounts of value-at-scale, hybrid delivery preferences, governance concerns, trust dynamics and DEI implications to a structured adoption model, thereby strengthening theoretical and practical inferences from the qualitative findings

Beyond confirming the relevance of core UTAUT2 constructs, the findings indicate that AI-enabled coaching introduces adoption conditions that are not fully captured by UTAUT2 in its original form. In particular, participants' emphasis on privacy risk, vendor governance, 'explainability' and perceived relational safety suggests the need to treat *trust and assurance* as proximal antecedents that shape how facilitating conditions and price value are interpreted in AI coaching procurement. Similarly, concerns about emotional nuance and authenticity imply that, in coaching settings, perceived usefulness is partly evaluated through *relational adequacy* rather than task efficiency alone. A contemporary application of UTAUT2 to AI coaching may therefore benefit from incorporating coaching-specific boundary conditions, including perceived confidentiality, perceived accountability and perceived human oversight as determinants of behavioural intention in organisational commissioning contexts.

AI Coaching as a Scalable and Cost-Effective Solution

Performance Expectancy and Price Value were central to participants' endorsement of AI coaching as a scalable, cost-effective approach within learning and development. This finding strongly aligns with UTAUT2, which identifies PE as the most robust predictor of technology adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Participants repeatedly articulated AI's ability to democratize access to coaching, especially within resource-constrained or geographically dispersed organisations. These perceptions of benefit

were compounded by a favourable cost-benefit calculus, as highlighted in the Price Value (PV) dimension. Several participants framed AI-enabled coaching as 'free' or near-zero cost relative to human coaching. This perception is analytically important because it reflects a focus on marginal unit cost rather than total cost of ownership. In organisational procurement, price value is likely to be recalibrated once indirect costs are considered, including governance and legal assurance, data protection impact assessments, vendor due diligence, integration with learning ecosystems, change management, and ongoing monitoring for bias and misuse. The findings therefore suggest that early adoption enthusiasm may partly reflect an incomplete cost-benefit appraisal, and that organisations should distinguish between low per-user delivery costs and the non-trivial institutional costs required to implement AI coaching responsibly at scale.

Participant responses indicated that the perceived economic value was often framed in contrast to traditional executive coaching, which had previously been limited to leaders in organisations. In organisations with thousands of employees, the ability to offer on-demand, reflective support at scale was an important factor. This supports Venkatesh et al.'s (2012) assertion that PV becomes a more salient driver of adoption if the objective is to offer access to coaching at scale. Furthermore, in some cases, the economic appeal was viewed not only as an efficiency gain but also on ethical grounds: as a means of extending access to development resources across all job levels, including blue collar workers.

AI Coaching as a Hybrid Model

The theme of AI-human hybrid coaching relationships maps onto the interplay between Performance Expectancy, Social Influence, and Facilitating Conditions. Participants conceptualised AI not as a replacement for human coaches but as an enhancement—providing continuity between sessions, offering just-in-time nudges, and supporting broader coverage. The hybrid model proposed by participants suggests that successful AI adoption is most likely in contexts where it complements rather than replaces existing human capabilities.

This vision aligns with UTAUT2's treatment of Facilitating Conditions, which emphasises the importance of organisational infrastructure and integration mechanisms in enabling effective use. Participants stressed the need to embed AI within broader talent and leadership frameworks, reflecting a systems-level understanding of implementation. Moreover, the Social Influence dimension emerged through discussions of peer experimentation and senior leadership advocacy. Where AI coaching was endorsed by visible champions or integrated into team norms, adoption was more likely to be sustained. Thus, the hybrid model represents a culturally attuned application of AI, in which user acceptance is mediated by both systemic support and collective endorsement.

Barriers to AI Coaching Adoption

Despite widespread interest in the potential of AI coaching, several barriers to adoption were observed. Most notably, concerns around data privacy and ethical risk impacted perceptions of Facilitating Conditions. Participants raised questions about where data was stored, who could access it, and how compliant AI tools were with regulatory frameworks such as GDPR.

In addition to structural concerns, there were affective and cognitive barriers relating to trust—particularly among those unfamiliar with AI or sceptical of its value in emotionally nuanced contexts. This points to the role of Social Influence and Habit as mediators of behavioural intention. In organisations where AI was perceived as "experimental" or disconnected from established professional values, uptake remained limited.

Conversely, organisations that had already invested in digital literacy and normalised AI use in other domains were more likely to foster acceptance. This supports calls to consider cultural and institutional variables when applying UTAUT frameworks to emergent technologies (Slade et al., 2015).

AI's Strengths and Limitations in Coaching Conversations

The capability of AI to simulate elements of a coaching conversation was frequently acknowledged—particularly its ability to provide structured prompts, reflection guides, and accessible language. These attributes reflect the Effort Expectancy, contributing to perceptions of ease of use and reducing friction during engagement. However, limitations in emotional responsiveness and contextual understanding curtailed Performance Expectancy, especially in scenarios requiring relational depth or psychological sensitivity.

Participant narratives often highlighted an expectation-reality gap. While many were impressed by AI's surface fluency, several felt it lacked humanity, specifically a capacity for sensitive empathy and appropriate challenge. This tension illustrates how perceptions of AI are not only technical but also relational and value-based. In UTAUT2 terms, this may reflect a nuanced interaction between Hedonic Motivation and PE: users may enjoy interacting with AI, but question its ability to deliver meaningful outcomes. These findings echo broader concerns in the literature around the anthropomorphisation of AI and the psychological effects of human-machine interaction (Passmore & Tee, 2024). They also suggest that Performance Expectancy in coaching contexts must be expanded beyond utility to include the quality of reflective engagement.

User Perceptions and Trust in AI Coaching

Trust emerged as a dynamic construct in participant accounts, influenced by prior experience, individual preference, and organisational framing. This aligns with the broader literature on digital trust and relates directly to UTAUT2's Effort Expectancy and Habit constructs. In several cases, initial scepticism gave way to trust through repeated

use, as participants developed familiarity with the AI interface. This suggests that trust may function as both an antecedent and an outcome of Habit—a construct that UTAUT2 introduces as a critical predictor of sustained technology use.

Notably, some participants described AI as a non-judgmental space, providing a sense of psychological safety not always present in human-led coaching. This indicates a potential affective benefit, captured in the Hedonic Motivation construct. However, others remained cautious, raising concerns about overreliance on tools whose inner workings were opaque and its impact on employee development, hinting at the perceived risks of cognitive offloading (Gerlich, 2025). The complexity of these views reinforces calls for UTAUT to attend to both individual differences and contextual cues in understanding adoption dynamics.

AI Coaching and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The DEI theme carries direct implications for adoption because it shapes both social influence and facilitating conditions in organisational settings. Participants positioned AI-enabled coaching as a potential mechanism for widening access to reflective development, including groups historically excluded from executive coaching provision. At the same time, concerns about algorithmic bias, representational harm and differential psychological safety indicate that inclusion outcomes are contingent on governance, auditing and transparent design (Gengler, Hagerer & Gales, 2024). In UTAUT2 terms, DEI considerations may function as a values-based social influence mechanism that legitimises or delegitimises adoption, while the presence of robust bias controls and accountability structures constitutes a critical facilitating condition for responsible implementation. Future work should treat equity assurance, bias monitoring and inclusive evaluation as core implementation requirements rather than optional ethical add-ons.

Limitations of the study

The qualitative design of this research study, while rich in insights, does not allow for generalisability across larger populations. The study's reliance on semi-structured interviews with eleven senior Human Resources professionals, means these results cannot be generalised to other groups. While the sample was intentionally selected to include HR leaders from large organisations, this sample introduces a further bias and may not fully represent smaller businesses or those in government organisations. Furthermore, the inclusion of only senior HR leaders may overlook the views of other stakeholders who are integral to the adoption of AI technologies, such as IT professionals, procurement or finance professionals.

Another limitation is the potential for social desirability bias in the interviews. Participants were likely to present themselves and their organisations in a favourable light, particularly when discussing emerging technologies like AI. This could lead to an overemphasis on the potential benefits of AI coaching tools and a minimisation of the challenges faced during implementation.

A further limitation is that participants had recently engaged with an AI coachbot as part of an organisational trial in the 12 weeks preceding interview. This exposure may have shaped perceptions through novelty effects, organisational framing and selective exposure to early-stage functionality. It may also have increased coherence in responses because participants were discussing a bounded experience rather than a purely hypothetical adoption decision. Future research should compare leaders with and without recent trial exposure, and should capture contextual data about trial design, vendor communications and organisational positioning to better interpret how such factors influence perceived value, trust and adoption readiness.

Fourthly, the study's focus on a single theoretical framework—UTAUT2. This may have constrained the exploration of other relevant theories or constructs that could provide further depth to the findings. Although the UTAUT2 framework has proven effective in explaining technology adoption (Venkatesh et al., 2012), its application to AI in coaching is still emerging.

Finally, the study did not address potential cultural differences in the adoption of AI tools, specifically how organisations in APAC or Africa, where perspectives and rates of adoption may vary, reflecting cultural differences in attitudes towards technology and AI technology specifically where cultural nuance is often perceived as lacking.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study provide several important practical implications for organisations and coaches seeking to integrate AI coaching tools into their development frameworks. Organisations can leverage AI technologies to make coaching more scalable and cost-effective, extending coaching to groups who have not previously been able to benefit from coaching. The ability to provide on-demand coaching at a lower cost than traditional human coaching has the potential to democratise access to professional development.

The study also underscores the importance of adopting a hybrid model, where AI tools enhance, rather than replace, human coaching. Coaches can benefit from using AI to support routine tasks, such as tracking progress and offering feedback, while focusing their expertise on the more complex, nuanced aspects of coaching that require emotional intelligence and a deep understanding of the individual's context. Future research should examine how coaches integrate AI-enabled coaching agents into their own reflective practice and client work, and the effect this change has on coaching processes and client outcomes.

For coaches, the study highlights the need to develop new skills in the changing world of coaching (Passmore & Woodward, 2023). Specifically, the ability for coaches to utilise AI tools working alongside their traditional models of delivery, this may be in creating AI agents to create notes from sessions for clients, to make suggestions of Intersessional Activities, respond to emails or offer 24-7 client access between diarised sessions.

We have summarised in Table 5 insight from the research for Learning and Development leaders and coaches.

Table 5: Practical Actions

Role	Actions
L&D Leader actions	Explore the potential of AI coaching leverage AI technologies to make coaching more scalable and cost-effective for those unable to access human coaching
	Adopt a hybrid model – combining AI with human coaching
	Leverage AI to support routine tasks, such as nudging completion of goals and Intersessional Activities
	Integrate different coaching interventions into wider coaching ecosystem with clear reasons for adoption and contribution to wider L&D strategy
Coach actions	Develop AI literacy – understanding the roles, benefits and limitations of technology
	Leverage AI to support clients, such as automation of communications and reminders

Implications for theory

The findings suggest that applying UTAUT2 to AI-enabled coaching adoption requires greater attention to constructs that condition how the established variables operate in high-stakes organisational contexts. In particular, leaders' accounts imply that assurance mechanisms such as governance, privacy safeguards, and transparent accountability shape perceived facilitating conditions and, through them, behavioural intention. In coaching contexts, perceived performance expectancy appears partly anchored in relational adequacy, including perceived psychological safety and bounded suitability for emotionally complex work. These refinements indicate that UTAUT2 may be strengthened for AI coaching by treating trust and assurance as proximal determinants of the interpretive frame through which value and usability are assessed.

Future research

Future studies should test these propositions through mixed-method and longitudinal designs that examine how adoption perceptions change beyond initial novelty periods, including how trust, governance and oversight evolve with organisational learning. Comparative work should also examine hybrid versus fully automated models, investigating which coaching outcomes and user groups are most sensitive to human oversight, and how DEI assurance influences adoption decisions across organisational cultures and regions

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of learning and development leaders about AI-enabled coaching tools within organisational settings,

using the UTAUT2 framework. The findings highlight the potential of AI to enhance coaching accessibility and scalability while complementing traditional human coaching methods. However, challenges remain, particularly around data privacy, trust, and AI's limitations in replicating the relational depth of human coaches. The study suggests that a hybrid approach, integrating AI with human-led coaching, is one currently favoured by learning and development leaders, as a way to achieve user adoption. However, the pace of change in this field is rapid and as AI technologies develop, the adoption of AI technologies is likely to continue to evolve.

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