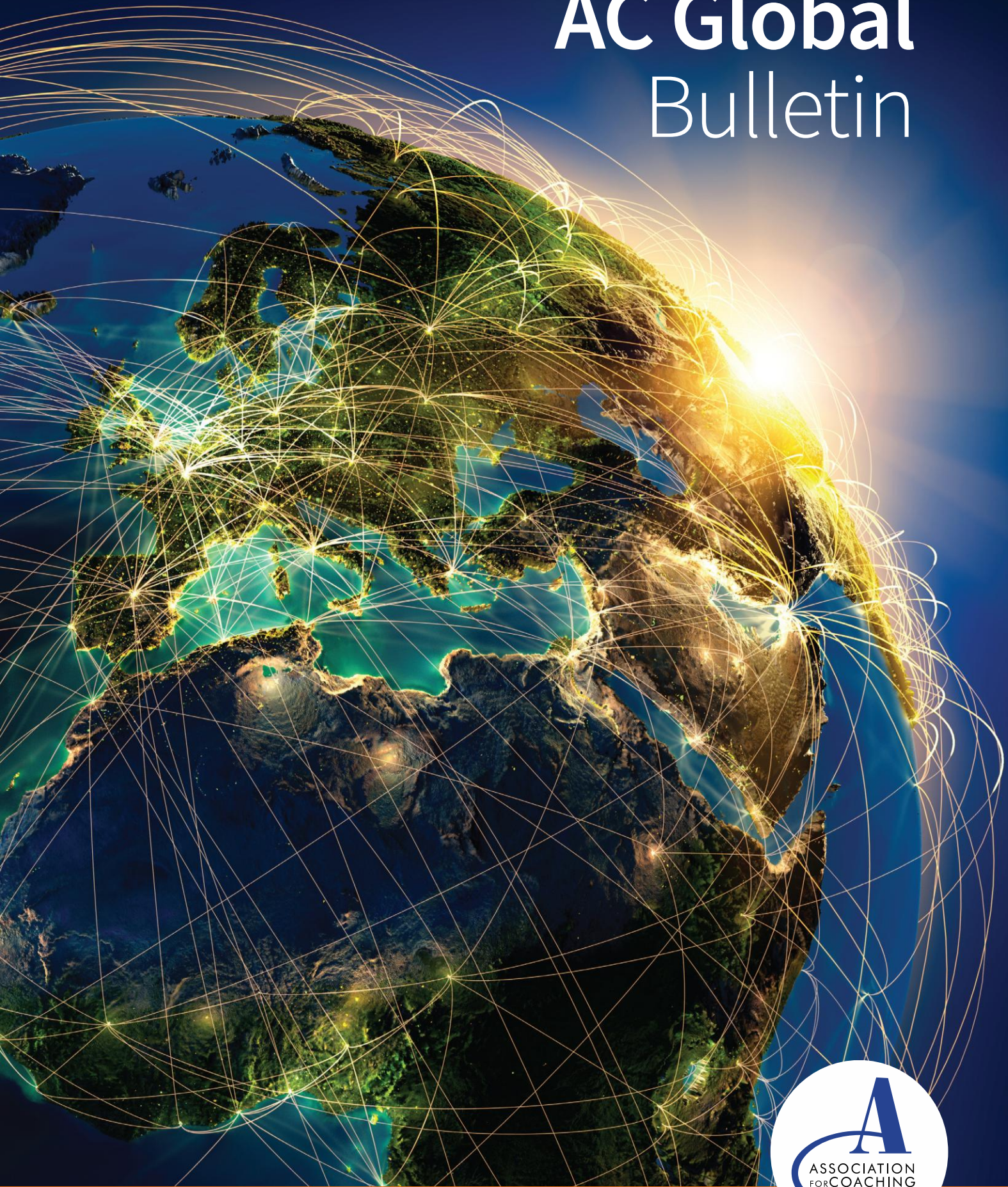


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"promoting excellence & ethics in coaching"

Coaching in Greece

When coaching psychologist Andrew Armatas first arrived in Greece in 2001– after a personal journey that included his native Australia, the US and the UK – coaching was essentially unknown as both a term and distinct practice. A lot has changed since then...

In 2001 all services fell under three categories: a) consulting, b) training, and c) therapy. At the time, taboos associated with seeking psychological help were being broken and companies had embraced professional development training programmes for their staff. Day-long seminars with the typical information overload were the premiere choice for investing in learning and development....

Fast-forward a couple of years, Athens was hosting the 2004 Olympic Games and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) were being introduced to the Greek market. Although they didn't manage to kick off as expected, they did help with the business case for employee counselling and paved the way for an easier acceptance of coaching later on. Meanwhile, the European Social Fund offered programme funding in support of working women and a small number of Greek companies applied to take advantage of it. Rather than going for the usual training format, I suggested to the company I was working with a group-coaching format with an emphasis on tackling work and life issues. There were qualms about the openness of Greek employees to such services but they were soon allayed. The initiative was a resounding success; positive responses were indicative of need and male employees requested similar opportunities.

The news about its impact on participating employees and the company's bottom line spread fast. Add funding to the advantages of these initiatives and you have an investment with a positive impact and with no monetary risk. It comes as no surprise that a surge of companies followed suit. Almost all of the organizations that ran similar EU initiatives kept the group-coaching format. These initiatives served as a solid foundation for coaching services to be built upon and soon become accepted practice. The following years were a nourishing ground for coaching although there was still confusion as to what coaching is and its difference to consulting and therapy.

It wasn't long ago before coaching evolved from a little known industry in Greece to a familiar feature of the business field. A contributing factor to its rising acceptance in business is the fact that many Greek professionals train overseas and bring their knowledge and experience home. Additionally, international firms started offering coaching services to their branches in Greece, further popularizing coaching in occupational contexts. Coaching services are also seen as a means of showing corporate social responsibility (CSR) - an additional reason for organizations to take it up. Especially during difficult times – as has been the case for Greece – employees

appreciate the support needed to better cope with professional and personal issues.

Until 2010, there was only a LinkedIn group for Greek coaches. That online community evolved into the first Greek coaching society, which is currently associated to the EMCC and has around 100 members. As part of the EMCC, they organized the 20th Annual Mentoring and Coaching Conference in Greece in 2013 – the first conference of its kind in the country. According to a survey conducted in 2011 and presented in 2012 (of 70 coaches, 60 coachees and 54 organizations) coaches were predominantly university degree holders, 65% of coaches were women and the majority of coaching took place in business contexts. Surveyed coachees expressed satisfaction with their coaching experience and would happily repeat a coaching engagement (80%) with insight topping the reasons for their request. As far as organizations are concerned, 86% of companies found coaching to have a positive impact on leadership and individual performance. While still relevant, the coaching scene has developed over the last three years. Still, the majority of coaches hold university degrees, more men are entering the field while personal/life coaching is on the rise. This year, the ICF established its Greek branch and the Association for Coaching has announced its presence in the country.

Similarly, there are now several coaching schools offering training in both a classroom format and as a distance learning option. It is promising to see that the schools that stand out are accredited by a coaching body such as the Association for Coaching and are encouraging their students to become members of coaching societies (some schools cover the cost of students' AC membership). This instils the importance of gaining professional credentials and fosters an ongoing learning and ethical ethos.

Coaching's acceptance and growth has been noticeable in business settings with personal/life coaching falling considerably behind. There's an interesting story here. When life coaching was being introduced in Greece, some psychologists pursued this route, despite not being their preferred choice of work, but rather a necessary professional compromise. The Greek constitution requires higher education to be entirely public; private universities are prohibited; despite this a number of colleges affiliated to foreign universities exist in Greece. Degrees granted by these affiliates of foreign universities (and there are many) are not recognized by the Greek government. Many students from these colleges proceeded to acquire postgraduate degrees (sometimes from top universities) only to be told that



since their undergraduate degree is considered invalid, this invalidates all further qualifications. Psychology graduates were denied licensure and thus could not practice as psychologists. Hence the shift to coaching as a way around this issue since coaching is not regulated. Although the laws governing academic recognition remain the same, coaches can pursue a professional recognition route.

What used to be a compromise or less attractive option for psychologists has now become a career choice in its own right. Still, coaching is often seen as an easier option to pursue: unregulated, lengthy training is not required, and you can be branded an expert in a short period of time. This is doing a disservice to the coaching industry and can explain why personal/life coaching has fallen behind its business counterpart. In Greece, psychologists are the choice for support in personal matters –clinical or not – due to their extensive training and regulation (licensure in Greece is granted by the Ministry of Health). There are concerns as to how qualified life coaches are to tackle personal issues and offer personal development services. An additional roadblock is liability risk. Since all aspects of psychology are highly regulated, a life coach could be held liable in this country if the services they offer are considered to fall into the psychology category. There is much to be done if life coaches are to be seen as trained experts – starting with the training that they receive, educating the public as to what coaches do and don't do and clarifying the legal aspects of coaching practitioners.

Interestingly, when coaching was introduced, there were discussion threads on LinkedIn attempting to find the appropriate translation for coaching in Greek. These were abandoned - instead, the English word was adopted has been used ever since. Coaching research is lacking in Greece, as is the presence of coaching books. As an advisor and scientific editor to one of the largest publishers in the country, I can attest to the hesitation of a publishing house to make such an investment due to the small target audience and the financial woes of this country, which have no less affected publishing than all industries here.

Despite this climate I see coaching in business becoming a mainstream developmental activity, life coaches with no counselling or psychology background as facing challenges ahead alongside increasing professionalism in the field as a whole. There is already an Association for Coaching LinkedIn open group (AC members and non-members can join) and we have had an encouraging number of coaching professionals expressing interest in joining the AC Greek community. Next steps include getting the community together with events, growing it in size and uploading AC web content in Greek.

Although many challenges lay ahead, these instil energy, spark creativity and offer an excitement journey. Who can say no to that?

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