

Lack of control on e-coaches

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There is no guarantee that smart, personal coaching apps can live up to claims to make our lives more healthy and more productive. Users may receive incorrect, commercially slanted, or ineffective advice. It is also unclear to users how producers of e-coaches deal with the intimate information that is collected. The Rathenau Instituut – a Dutch organization for assessment of science, technology and society– recommends to implement standards which will assure data privacy, and, moreover, quality, reliability and effectiveness of provided services.

Limitations of technology

The Rathenau Instituut looked at the performance of e-coaches in fields from health management to financial coaches, social action and sustainability. Coaching apps are full of promises, from convenience and optimizing behaviour to improving wellbeing and preventing illness. However, the quality of the e-coaches on the market now differs considerably. They show limitations in all three areas of digital coaching – measuring, monitoring, and motivating. Not enough use is made of proven scientific methodology regarding user behaviour. As a result, the user may receive incorrect or ineffective advice. Unlike human coaching, where quality assurance is based on professional codes, producers of e-coaches are not subject to professional confidentiality requirements. Clarification is needed: how does the device arrive to its recommendations? What is the evidence base for the advice?

Privacy policies

The lack of quality criteria for e-coaches can lead to problems, particularly in the case of health coaches. The data collected by e-coaching devices – especially when combined – are sensitive, personal and highly detailed. They are therefore of interest to many parties. Data from coaching apps are shared and sold to third parties. Privacy policies are lengthy and difficult to understand for users, and can be adjusted by e-coach providers at any time. "Consumers and policy makers have to realize that data collected by e-coaches are often very sensitive and can for example, be used for commercial purposes. It needs to be mandatory for providers to be transparent about their [revenue model](#). And these rules have to be understandable to user, too" comments Dr. Melanie Peters, director of the Rathenau Instituut.

Recommendations

1. Use of professional codes and requirements developed for non virtual coaches as a standard for e-coach applications.
2. Medical e-coach devices should be based on European health laws. The Rathenau Institute calls on regulatory bodies and providers to be transparent about their revenue model and create criteria for quality.

Provided by Rathenau Instituut

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