

A network visualization graphic showing a complex web of interconnected nodes and lines, with nodes in various colors (blue, orange, red, yellow) and lines in blue, set against a dark blue background with a subtle grid pattern.

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## **The Professional Section**

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## The brain walk – a journey for peace of mind to cultivate coaching mental readiness

Eve Nguyen and Betska K-Burr

### Abstract

Anecdotal reports indicate that The Brain Walk® - A Journey for Peace of Mind tool (TBWJ) has been effective in assisting Mind-Kinetics® (MK) coaches to develop mental readiness for coaching. This exploratory, mixed methods research investigated what benefits MK coaches experience when using TBWJ for this purpose. Forty survey results were obtained from eight MK coaches who completed TBWJ before coaching five clients each. The original, self-report survey identified and explored reported benefits. The self-report benefits most frequently ranked as most valuable to the coaching session were grounding and focusing, overcoming judgement of self, and helping to choose valuable coaching questions.

### Originality/Value

No previous works have investigated how TBWJ may foster pre-coaching mindset readiness. The present work provides insights into how preparing a pre-coaching mindset may be beneficial for coach and client and how subconscious exploration can be a valuable part of this process.

### Keywords

Mental Readiness, The Brain Walk, Subconscious Exploration.

The aim of a coach is to assist the client in overcoming challenges and achieving goals, and to do this most effectively coaches will take part in ongoing self-management and self-reflection. As James Flaherty (2005, p. xi). has stated, "The discipline of coaching puts the centre of its attention on the question of how a person can help other people develop new capabilities, new horizons, and new worlds of opportunity for themselves and those around them." Self-management and self-reflection are deemed to be important to help coaches develop a deeper awareness of the coach's own cognition, perceptions, emotions and behaviour and how these may influence the coaching session (Kemp, 2008; Shaw & Glowacki-Dudka, 2018).

Many coaches are aware of expected compliance with coaching ethics and values (Abravanel & Gavin, 2017), yet their mindset may not be conducive to modelling these at an optimal level during every coaching session. As Giges et al. (2004, p. 431) affirm, coaches "... bring to their roles and tasks fundamentally the same psychological needs as other people." Thus, how can a coach develop mental readiness to coach at a higher standard and in doing so best assist their client? It has been suggested that an effective strategy to develop mental readiness is one that involves self-reflection with the intention to discover one's conscious and subconscious strengths and limitations. Betska K-Burr developed TBWJ in 2002, and since then anecdotal reports indicate that TBWJ tool has been successfully used by MK coaches for this purpose (Burr & K-Burr, 2010).

Thus, formal research was conducted to learn how TBWJ tool might benefit MK coaches for the purpose of cultivating mental readiness for coaching. This exploratory, mixed methods research was guided by two core questions:

1. How might TBWJ tool assist coaches when preparing mental readiness for coaching sessions?

2. If and when TBWJ does not help to foster mental readiness for coaching, what reasons do coaches report for this experience?

## **Creating Mental Readiness Before Coaching**

Different factors for consideration may come to light when a coach undertakes a mental readiness exercise before coaching. In some instances, a coach's internal narrative may present with judgement. This is problematic because there is a widely held view that, "judging and coaching cannot coexist." (Hicks, 2022, p. 60). Providing insights with tones of criticism, blame, rejection, and anger negate openness to feedback, yet the opposite can occur when feedback is given with acceptance and the absence of blame (Rachlin, 2012). In short, judgement impedes the coach's ability to help (Hicks, 2022).

Judgement can be viewed as the opposite of unconditional positive regard (UPR). UPR is a humanistic element that has been linked with positive coaching outcomes as well as being an important factor in building strong relationships between coach and client. The humanistic perspective also places value on the coach demonstrating empathy which can build trust in the coaching relationship and allows the client to build trust in their coach (Marshall, 2006).

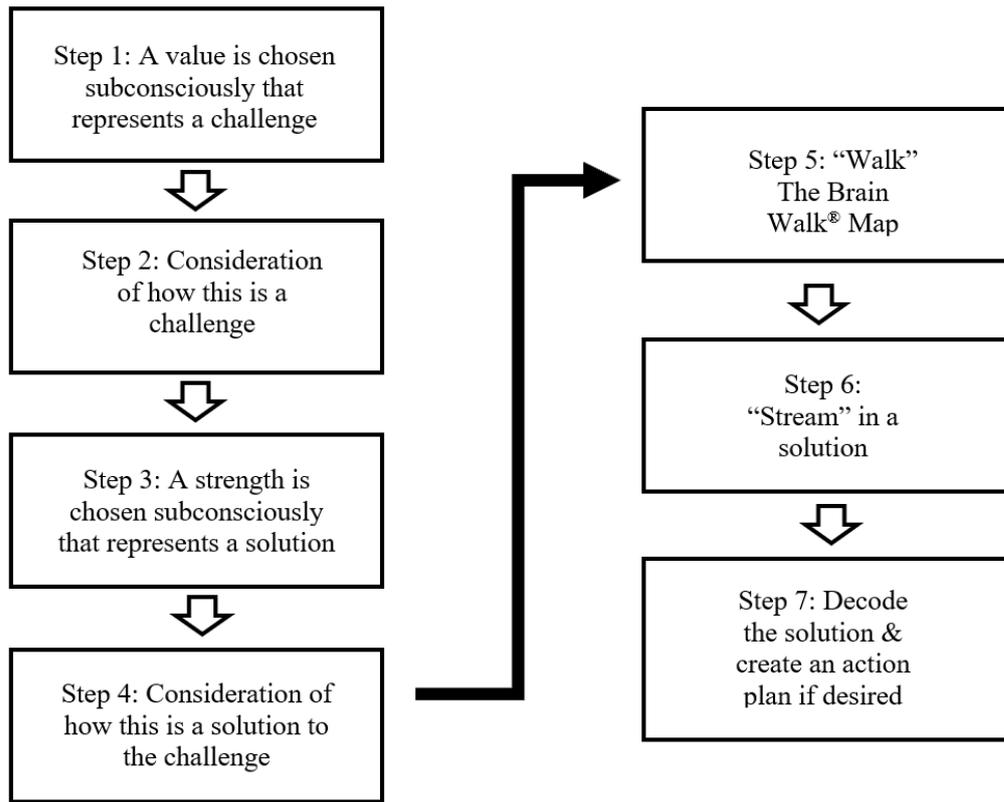
Coaches can also experience self-judgement which has been identified as being disruptive and counterproductive when coaching a client. Hicks (2022) highlights that such self-judgement can hijack self-talk during the coaching conversation resulting in mental energy being redirected inward, thus reducing the ability of the coach to understand and connect with the person they are assisting. When a coach experiences doubt and anxiety this is often felt by both coach and client (de Haan, 2008).

A caveat to pre-coaching mental readiness can be a coach's own blind spots which can be discovered through subconscious exploration. Rothaizer and Hill (2009, p. 58) have stated, "But why explore what's below the surface when we can just focus on holding a vision, creating some action steps, and moving wonderfully and powerfully toward our chosen goals? For one, because, if we're honest, we know that this simplistic and naïve growth model hasn't worked for almost any of us, including those of us who are executive/organizational coaches. Individuals (and coaches!) have an unconscious, and ignoring it doesn't stop it from having an ongoing and profound impact on near everything we do."

A well-documented example of subconscious attitudes and bias is implicit bias. Human beings all have implicit or subconscious biases. These can relate to various aspects of the client including their gender, social status, and ethnicity. Such biases can lead to differential treatment of others (Jost et al., 2009; Masters et al., 2019). Despite this, the facets of coaching which require changes in beliefs and attitude have been viewed as less important to the coaching practice by some coaching trainees (McCusker & Welply, 2020). This is unfortunate because in gaining more perspective on their implicit biases, coaches may gain more expansive awareness of themselves and others. This can lead to better emotional resilience and an increased ability to assist clients (Lee, 2010).

TBWJ is a tool that has been utilized by MK coaches prior to coaching clients to self-elicite conscious and subconscious challenges and solutions (Burr & K-Burr, 2010). MK coaches utilize a printed version, though a slightly modified version of TBWJ is freely available online for public self-coaching purposes. A brief overview of the tool is presented in figure 1.

**Figure 1** The Brain Walk®- A Journey for Peace of Mind Methodology Overview



It is important to note that eliciting the “challenge” and “strength” is done subconsciously by utilizing MK values cards that are shuffled with the values face down. That is, the person undertaking TBWJ sets the intention and then subconsciously chooses a card that represents the challenge, and the same process is carried out for the solution with the chosen values then explored. Miller et al. (2011) utilize similar values cards with similar exploratory questions (though a different process) in the Personal Values Card Sort. The authors state that the exploration of values can deepen the understanding of an individual.

After reflecting on the challenging and solution-oriented value, the user “walks” The Brain Walk® map (depicted in Figure 2) and does an image streaming exercise. This is done by tracing the map with one’s finger while their eyes also “walk the map” by moving their concentrated gaze over the different colours of the map until reaching the pink flower in the centre. The eyes are then closed as the user allows a positive image, colour, word, symbol etc. to come to mind. This is the image streaming process. Finally, the user considers what the image represents and how it is a solution to their challenge. The activity takes approximately five to ten minutes to complete, and users can create SMART goals if they wish to.

**Figure 2** *The Brain Walk® - Journey for Peace of Mind Map*

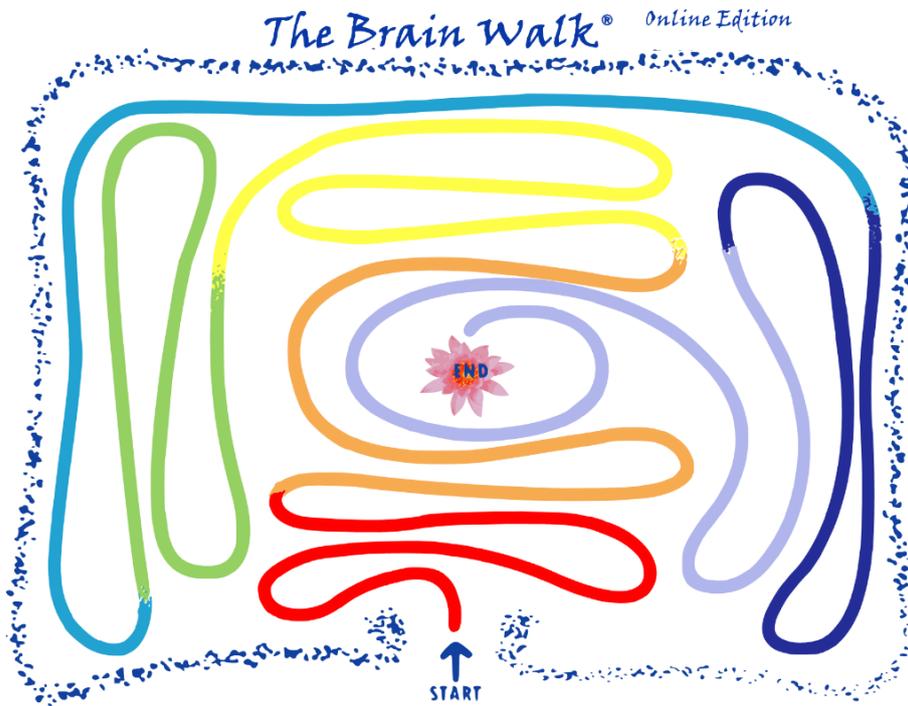


Image streaming methods have been found to develop more efficient mental processing. The streaming process is thought to encourage different parts of the brain and mind to cooperate, thereby nurturing and promoting the “streaming” in and/or development of creative solutions (Rachman et al., 2019).

The image streaming process activates the theoretical superconscious mind which is a term utilized in transpersonal development fields in reference to the higher subconscious. While the lower subconscious can include unprocessed trauma, compulsions and primitive instincts, the higher subconscious is theoretically affiliated with talents, resources, and helpful self-attributes (Vitale, 2018). Chopra et al. (2015, p. 45) state that, “The superconscious is our vast, pure intelligence.” Lombard (2017, p. 464) states that the “superconscious holds our greater human potential.” Psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1965, p. 16) explained that “from this region we receive our higher intuitions and inspirations – artistic, philosophical, or scientific, ethical “imperatives” and urges to humanitarian and heroic action.” This distinction is discussed in part because the image streaming component utilized in TBWJ is used to derive solutions (not explore challenges).

Thus, TBWJ is utilized by MK coaches to tap into one’s conscious mind and subconscious mind in order to cultivate mental readiness before coaching a client. Diller et al. (2021) state that an individual must be able to access, reflect on, and understand themselves in order for one to see their ideal self and compare it with their actual self. Anecdotal reports describe that TBWJ has provided coaches with such insights, suggesting that it may also magnify elements such as trust, empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity. Gabriel et al. (2014) have highlighted that these elements are considered to be essential to a good coaching relationship. Thus, much like an athlete would cultivate mental readiness by “identifying the best mindset for a particular task and developing ways to instil that mindset when required”

(Ievleva & Terry, 2008, p. 10), TBWJ has been used by MK coaches to cultivate coaching readiness.

## **Method**

### Survey development

A self-report survey was created by the authors as no relevant, validated surveys could be identified for use. The process of creating the survey involved the authors completing TBWJ before coaching clients and noting benefits that they experienced, then constructing the survey based on face validity. Two consultants reviewed the survey (a MK coach and a layman) for question comprehension and overall useability.

A mixed methods approach was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data for broader understanding (Almalki, 2016). Participants were asked what benefits they experienced as a result of doing TBWJ. If they experienced no benefits, they were asked to explain their experience. They were also asked to rank and describe their top 1-3 benefits in terms of usefulness for the specific coaching session. Researchers have asserted that quantitative and qualitative approaches matter, and that the qualitative component of research is necessary in understanding coaching processes through providing unique insights (Grant, 2017; Hefferon et al., 2017).

### Survey deployment

To recruit participants for the study an email was sent out to all MK coaches who had completed a minimum of their Associate Power Coach training. Participation was voluntary and coaches received no compensation for taking part. MK coaches were chosen because they are already familiar with TBWJ tool and did not need to undergo training on how to use it. Through their study the coaches have demonstrated their ability to image stream and demonstrated at least a basic level of self-reflection. These capabilities are required to utilize TBWJ tool in the capacity of a pre-coaching tool. Obtaining multiple survey responses from each participant was done due to the acknowledgement that each coaching session is different and can provoke different challenges within a coach (de Haan, 2008).

### Participants

Eight MK coaches took part in the research. The coaches came from various countries: one participant from America, two participants from Canada, two participants from India, two participants from Romania and one participant from the United Kingdom. The age range of participants was 36 years old to 71 years old. The mean age of participants was 45.8 years of age.

A study representative ensured the anonymity of participants by assigning an anonymous identifier to each participant. This was used to track how many surveys each participant completed. Participant anonymity was utilized as a strategy to encourage honest responses and discourage socially desirable responses.

## **Thematic Analyses**

### **1. Identifying Benefits Experienced**

Survey participants were asked to respond to the question of how TBWJ assisted them during the coaching session. If the participant noted that no benefits were experienced, they were asked to describe their experience and why they think that there was no perceivable benefit.

## 2. Ranking and Explaining the Benefits

After listing the benefits experienced, the participants were asked to rank the top 1 – 3 benefits in order of most valuable to the coaching session. They also described their experience of the stated benefits.

### Results

#### Objective 1.1.

##### 1. Identifying Benefits Experienced

All participants reported that they experienced benefits when doing TBWJ before each coaching session. The benefits reported by the participants and how frequently they were reported is outlined in Table 1.

#### Objective 1.2.

##### 2. Ranking and Explaining the Benefits

The self-ranking of each benefit by participants is outlined in Table 1. The self-report benefits most frequently reported in the top three ranking were:

1. Grounding and focusing.
2. Overcoming judgement of self.
3. Helping to choose valuable coaching questions for the client.

**Table 1.** Benefits Reported After Doing The Brain Walk® - A Journey for Peace of Mind

Benefit	How frequently the benefit was self-reported	Self-Reported Top Benefit	Self-Reported Second Top Benefit	Self-Reported Third Top Benefit
Helped to overcome judgements about myself	16	20%	12.50%	5%
Helped to ground / focus for the coaching session	31	50%	20%	10%
Helped to stick to the appointment time limit because of the insight gained	4	-	2.50%	2.50%
Helped to overcome judgement towards the client	14	5%	7.50%	7.50%

Helped to have more empathy for the client	12	2.50%	12.50%	12.50%
Helped to choose valuable coaching questions for the client	14	5%	5%	20%
Helped to overcome judgement or criticism of the client's presenting issue or goal	1	-	2.50%	-
Helped to more deeply understand the client's presenting issue or goal	11	7.50%	2.50%	5%
Helped to more deeply understand the challenges that the client is experiencing	8	5%	2.50%	2.50%
Helped to identify pattern/s during the coaching process	9	-	10%	2.50%
Provided helpful insights regarding the solution for the client's presenting problems/issues/goals	10	-	7.50%	2.50%
Helped when providing mentoring to the client	6	2.50%	7.50%	2.50%
Supports moments for thinking during the coaching session (for coach and client)	1	-	-	-
Assisted with image streaming during coaching sessions	1	-	-	-
Seeing the client as a mirror	1	-	2.50%	-
Being Present to Best Serve the Client's Interests	1	2.50%	-	-
No second top benefit ranked			5%	
No third top benefit ranked				27.5%

It is important to note that there was often an umbrella effect whereby one benefit was reported by the participant, yet when reading their experience, additional benefits were also listed under the main benefit stated.

**1. Grounding and Focusing.** This benefit was also the most frequently reported benefit overall. Terminology used to describe this included taking a “deep breath”, “relief”, “light and grounded feeling”, and helping to overcome feeling “scattered” and “distracted” before the coaching session.

Participants at times outlined the aspects of TBWJ that facilitated this. One participant conveyed that the image streaming process was the catalyst: *“I was anchored in the image I had at the end of The Brain Walk that gave me peace and serenity, so I was completely able to focus on my client in the session.”* Another response describes how the strength value was important: *“The (BWJ) session helped me to stay focused and present during the session. Lot of times clients share their stories and it's possible to get lost. The value of gentleness reminded me to redirect the client in a gentle way to the objective of the session.”*

Another response linked the state of being grounded and focused with improved confidence and purpose: *“The methodology of Brain Walk Super Loop came up (for the client). I was able to steer the client with confidence and purpose. There was absolute clarity on the patterns, the loop pattern, its connection with the goal. We worked with conviction on the belief systems. I attribute this to the grounding from the Brain Walk just before the session.”* Identifying patterns in client behaviours, and thought processes is a key component in some MK coaching methodologies, especially at the Certified Practitioner Coaching level and above.

**2. Overcoming Judgement of Self.** One participant described their experience of overcoming self-judgement in the following way: *“This one surprised me! This was a new client and I realize now in the first session with someone even after all of these years I can still have a bit of - will they connect with me? Who am I showing up as? Doing the BWJ helped me to release all of those thoughts.”* The participant’s surprise suggests that this was initially a subconscious challenge, though the participant didn’t state what the self-judgment was. From context the authors assume it was self-judgement about how they might be perceived by the client.

In 77% of cases where participants ranked overcoming judgement of self as a top benefit experienced, they also ranked being more grounded and focused as one of the most valuable benefits within the coaching session. An example is one participant who identified their self-judgement before a coaching session in the following way: *“I felt I could not manage talkative clients. I would allow them to wander, as I believed this served them. During TBWJ, my stressor value was “orderliness”. My strength was “friendliness”. I streamed in grains of corn “pop” as they are heated. I interpreted this solution as “intensity would benefit the client”. Upon reflection, the participant realized that his/her coaching approach had not been optimal, initially thinking that: “By allowing them to vent, I was helping them to heal and conducting the session with a proper process would not serve them. But none of this was true.”* These discoveries helped the participant to feel grounded and focused: *“Rather than tell myself (subconsciously) at the start that I would have to allow some waywardness, I grounded myself better and silently resolved to have a focused session. This resulted in the following: “The client participated fully in an orderly session, respected the boundaries I set, and gained handsomely from it.”*

**3. Helping to choose valuable coaching questions for the client.** This benefit occurred at different points within the coaching process and at times lead to additional benefits occurring. One coach described the benefit occurring at the end of the session: *“It (TBWJ) helped me to ask questions that made a shift in the client's thinking process. The client experienced insights that helped them to design specific and measurable goals (SMART goals).”*

Another response described the participant's experience in the following way: *"The client used a metaphor that I connected to the value I had chosen to overcome my challenge from The Brain Walk, that made me use my intuition and ask a question related to that value; it was a very significant moment for the client who rapidly identified a pattern."*

One participant explained that utilizing the strength value that was chosen in TBWJ facilitated this benefit: *"I was able to really tap into my strength of curiosity and allowed my intuition to guide me in next best questions."*

Another response mentioned curiosity in the following way, *"Becoming neutral helped me to be curious and to ask great questions."* In this case, the benefit was also linked to TBWJ assisting the participant to overcome judgement or criticism of the client: *"Some things didn't add up and I was able to remain neutral."*

The following themes were present throughout various top-ranked benefits. These included:

### **Improved Listening**

In 50% of cases where improved listening was directly mentioned, the description also referred to feeling more focused/grounded. The feedback from one participant describes this: *"When I was grounded with The Brain Walk, I was in deep listening without judgement. It helped to understand the client's presenting problem."* Another survey response explained: *"Because I was grounded, I was very able to listen even beyond words in order to really hear this client at a deep level."*

### **Supporting the Client**

One participant listed this as a unique benefit independent from any other benefits: *"With respect to this client, while she received powerful results and was happy with the coaching, I feared deep down whether she would extend her contract. The Brain Walk before her session made me present to the value of being truly selfless. I also recognized that clients "graduating" from my sessions and moving on was a positive sign. Freed of the concern, I could make myself available more fully for the client. That seemed to rub off on the client. She demonstrated more courage, fluency, and clarity in the session. She created a phenomenal set of belief systems.... This shift within me will benefit me as a coach."* Another client realized that there was a need to overcome personal subconscious bias to better serve clients: *"It helped me realize that I have an unconscious bias and had to deal with my own issue before coaching again."*

### **Discussion**

With the top ranked benefit being the facilitation of a grounded and focused state, this supports anecdotal evidence of MK coaches using this tool for this purpose before coaching clients. It is known that coaches using various coaching styles may have a pre-coaching "ritual" that involves developing a specific state within themselves before coaching clients (Getley, 2022). However, this research supports that TBWJ was not limited to this general benefit, and that the term "grounded and focused" does not always totally convey additional benefits experienced and described under this umbrella term.

This research seems to suggest that in addition to helping create a focused mental state, TBWJ also assists with discovering and resolving coach limitations specific to the coach and coaching scenario. It is important to recognize that each client and coaching session is unique, and thus can trigger different challenges within coaches. For example, de Haan (2008) studied "critical moments" in coaching. Participants described critical moments that

included coaches wondering whether clients will like them, coaches finding it more difficult to coach certain people (e.g. senior people with more experience), and even coaches experiencing judgement and irritation while coaching. Möller and Zimmermann (2020) describe that if difficult moments in coaching are not resolved in an appropriate manner, this may result in disadvantageous effects on the coaching process and the results.

It is important to acknowledge the unique and meritorious component of utilizing the subconscious mind to achieve a coaching-ready mental state. Stanton (2012, p.11) has stated that, "much of the learning that takes place during coaching requires actively accessing the subconscious and unconscious mind where reflection, intuition, connection, processing, and imagination take place." This research supports this view. It also supports the view of Whitmore (2001) that acknowledges that moments when the subconscious emerges into consciousness can further personal growth which is encouraged within coaches. This research also appears to support the view of Rothaizer & Hill (2009, p. 66) that, "Unfortunately, those who limit their coaching work to what's present and already conscious are, albeit unintentionally, greatly limiting their client's potential." This is because this research suggests that subconscious exploration by the coach can result in benefits for the client. Hence this research supports the views that subconscious exploration can facilitate client and coach growth, with subjective benefits in coaching quality reported.

### **Further Considerations**

This is a self-report study and the sample size of coaches who took part in the research is small. Although this yielded 40 completed surveys, it is recommended that further research be carried out with a larger sample size. This cohort was chosen due to familiarity of TBWJ tool and provided the researchers a baseline of participants with a demonstrated competence in image-streaming. The authors recommend further research to explore whether similar benefits might be experienced by coaches from various coaching backgrounds. In such research, participants would be required to demonstrate image-streaming competence and a basic level of self-reflective skills. Image streaming is natural to many, but some people require some practice to achieve competency (Wenger & Poe, 2017).

In using a sample of MK coaches, one may consider implicit bias and the halo effect. Steps taken to minimize this included participant anonymity and discourage social desirability in responses. The survey was designed with participants having to explain the reasoning behind reporting no benefits, and the reasoning behind reporting the top 1-3 benefits. Providing explanation of their experiences was intended to help overcome implicit bias and the halo effect by requiring reflection and explanation.

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