

Safety Pros Dislike Cash Rewards for Weight Loss by Workers But It May Work



Some companies have wellness programs designed to help workers lose weight, get in shape, quit smoking and address other general health issues, such as diabetes. The idea is that companies benefit when workers are healthier overall.

But just because a company has a wellness program doesn't mean workers are going to use it or be successful when they do. So some employers are going further and offering workers cash rewards if they, say, lose a certain percentage of their body weight or improve their body mass index (BMI).

For example, a New York-based company called HealthyWage helps employers use competition and cash rewards to get workers to lose weight, reduce their BMI and get healthier.

But when we asked you if you thought employers should give cash rewards to workers for losing weight, most of you didn't like the idea:

- 79% said no, cash rewards don't get at the underlying causes of weight issues.
- 13% said yes, money is an effective motivator.
- 5% said no, obesity isn't an employer's concern.
- 3% said yes, but only if the workers have some money at stake if they don't lose weight.

It's absolutely true that giving someone a prize for losing a few pounds doesn't address why they were overweight to begin with and doesn't ensure that they'll keep the weight off.

In fact, one reader commented, 'This is probably the silliest question I have ever heard of. So we give them money and they gain the weight back. What do you do then? Give them more money or take what they earned away?' 'There is a reason the person is fat; the underlying problem needs to be addressed. If employers are that worried about obesity, they should provide counselling and have a less stressful work place.'

But providing financial incentives for weight loss might actually work.

Study Shows Effectiveness of Cash Rewards for Weight Loss

A study by researchers at the Mayo Clinic examined a group of 100 adult Clinic employees or their dependents ages 18-63 who had a BMI of 30 to 39.9 kg/m². An adult who has a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese, according to the CDC.

The participants were assigned to one of four weight loss groups: two with financial incentives and two without. All were given the goal of losing four pounds per month up to a predetermined goal weight. They were weighed monthly for one year.

Participants in the incentive groups who met their goals received \$20 per month, while those who failed to meet their targets paid \$20 each month into a bonus pool. Participants in both incentive groups who completed the study were eligible to win the pool by lottery.

The researchers found that the participants who got financial incentives were more likely to stick with a weight loss program and lost more weight than participants who received no incentives. Highlights:

- The completion rate for the incentive groups was 62% compared with just 26% for the non-incentive groups.
- In the incentive groups, participants' mean weight loss was 9.08 pounds compared with 2.34 pounds for the non-incentive groups.
- Even participants in the incentive group who paid penalties were more likely to continue their participation in the study than those in the non-incentive groups.

Lead author Dr. Steven Driver, an internal medicine resident at Mayo Clinic, said, 'The take-home message is that sustained weight loss can be achieved by financial incentives. The financial incentives can improve results, and improve compliance and adherence.'

Senior study author Dr. Donald Hensrud, a preventive medicine expert, added, 'Traditional therapies are not working for a lot of people, so people are looking for creative ways to help people lose weight and keep it off. The results of this study show the potential of financial incentives.'

So despite the fact that cash rewards don't get at the underlying reasons for a worker's weight problems, they can provide enough incentive for people to lose weight.

If you want to start a weight loss or other type of wellness program in your company with or without financial incentives, read about five companies who did so and the benefits to their bottom lines.

Looking for some recipes to share with your workforce? You can also check out this list of weight-loss-friendly smoothies from eMediHealth.