

Study Shows Incentives Improve Employee Participation in Walking Programs



More companies are implementing workplace wellness programs to help employees get in better shape, lose weight, quit smoking, etc. But such programs can only succeed if employees actually participate in them. So how do you increase employee participation?

According to a recent study by researchers from Pennsylvania health insurer Independence Blue Cross, ongoing events, rewards and other incentives may increase employee participation and boost results in a workplace walking program.

In a nine-month comparison of workplace wellness programs with and without 'enhanced' features, researchers found participants in the enhanced programs logged more steps, lost more weight and reported more improvement in energy and mood.

Researchers compared groups of employees at companies participating in the Independence Blue Cross Wellness Partner program. In all, 13 groups of employees age 19-77 were randomly assigned to either the standard walking program or an enhanced version. A total of 474 people participated in the study, with about half in the standard walking program and half in the enhanced version.

The standard walking program included flyers and posters to be distributed in the workplace, and a toolkit for employers with suggestions for optional ways to motivate employees to participate.

The enhanced program included all these as well as monthly rewards for employee participation, coaching, feedback, competitive biweekly challenges and monthly wellness workshops.

All participants received pedometers to log their daily steps; each week they logged into a website to upload that data. Two weeks before the program started, then three, six and nine months into it, all participants also got physical health screenings and answered questionnaires about their mood, stress levels and overall health.

Results: An enhanced walking program significantly increases participation rates

and daily step counts, which were associated with weight loss and reductions in body mass index.

Specifically, employees in both groups increased their step counts during the first 10 weeks' but step counts started to decline in the standard program group after week 10.

Overall, people in the enhanced program averaged 726 more steps per day and were more likely to meet the recommended 10,000 steps a day compared to the standard group.

Even at the end of the study, participants in the enhanced program were logging almost 1,000 steps a day more, on average, than those in the standard program. This higher average number of steps was tied to improved energy levels, mood and sense of overall health. The enhanced group also tended to log into the website and enter their step counts more often than the standard group.

In addition, in all groups, men who upped their step count by at least 1,000 per day compared to the beginning of the study lost an average of 3.8 pounds, while women who did the same lost an average 2.1 pounds.

'Giving out rewards as simple as tokens generated a lot of camaraderie among the employees,' said lead author Aaron Smith-McLallen, a social psychologist at Independence Blue Cross in Philadelphia. 'We noticed that employees motivated each other. They even started their own walking groups and went on weekend walks together.'

'Walking is a very simple activity that most people can do, which makes it the ideal program for employers to adopt and promote to their workforce,' he added.

OHS Insider has additional resources to help you implement a wellness program in your workplace or convince senior management to do so, including:

- How a [wellness app](#) can help workers eat healthier
- How to use a [food and beverage policy](#) to improve workers' health
- Information on how to use a [guide to implement a successful workplace health promotion program](#)
- A [study](#) that suggests wellness programs may lead to improved worker health, increased productivity and reduced costs for employers
- The benefits of wellness programs for [small companies](#)
- [Model Wellness Questionnaire](#)
- [Checklist](#) for evaluating your readiness for an integrated OHS and wellness program.