

insights

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*Cover Feature: Making Healthy Cool
Engaging Employees in Wellness
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How Do You Make It Cool to Be Healthy?

Wellness Programs that Foster Intrinsic Motivation

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I was having coffee with some friends recently when our conversation turned to children. One friend told the story of asking her pre-teen to clean her bedroom. The response was “How much will you pay me?” Trying not to show her disgust, she responded, “Think of the sense of accomplishment that you will feel when your room is clean, everything in its place and easy to find.” I’m sure you know the response she got — you got it — the eye roll.

The expectation of being paid to do something is not just for pre-teens. In our society, and especially in business, we have many places where being paid to do something that someone else wants you to do is commonplace. Incentive programs

are part of everyday life (frequent buyer discounts, frequent flyer programs, etc.). Performance bonuses are a typical example of financial incentives for achieving specific results.

The same is true for worksite wellness. Paying employees to adopt healthy behaviors, or at a minimum participate in wellness offerings, is a widely used practice. A recent survey by Aon Hewitt indicates that 68% of employers use some form of incentive to encourage behavior change.¹ In another study 86% of employers surveyed indicated that they currently offer wellness-based incentives. This represents an increase of 73% since 2011 and 57% since 2009.²

In this article, we will examine the use of incentives and whether paying employees to change their behavior is sustainable and, in the long term, effective. We will also look at an alternative approach to moving towards intangible rewards and creating the conditions that will encourage employees to be intrinsically motivated.

INCENTIVE DEFINITIONS

INCENTIVE: An anticipated positive or desirable reward designed to influence the performance of an individual or group. Incentive can be formal — rewards that are communicated openly or directly — or informal — rewards that are not communicated openly and directly.

DISINCENTIVE: An anticipated negative or undesirable consequence design to influence the performance of an individual or group.

MOTIVE FORCE: The extent to which an incentive produces behavioral compliance with its requirements. Motive force makes the object on which it is acting move.

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INCENTIVES WORK. OR DO THEY?

Social science research tells us that human behavior is purposeful in nature. People exhibit particular behavior for distinct and largely discernible reasons, and usually don't change their behavior without good reasons. In the context of worksite health promotion programs, incentives provide those "good reasons" (at least according to those who are in favor of the practice). It is important to note that there is a lot of debate on the use of incentives. There is also research that shows that the offer of a higher bonus led to poorer performance.³ Alfie Kohn, a noted author on the topic of incentives, has demonstrated through significant research that "When it comes to producing lasting change in attitudes and behavior, however, rewards, like punishment, are strikingly ineffective."⁴

Here's where there is agreement: the success of any wellness program depends upon employee participation. Period. Moreover, the necessary behavior change requires *sustained* engagement and changed behaviors over time in order to fundamentally mitigate health risks. The thinking is that by increasing engagement and participation, the desired behaviors will follow.

There is research suggesting that incentives can help to encourage short-term change. For example, in a randomized, controlled study of providing incentives for smoking cessation, the quit rate was 14.7% for the group offered \$750 if they quit and didn't smoke for a year, versus 5% for the group invited to participate in a smoking cessation program with no incentives.⁵ While incentives may produce short-term results, do they foster long-term sustainable behavior change? In a comprehensive review of 17 studies on financial incentives for smoking cessation, none of the studies found significantly higher quit rates after six months among people who had financial rewards compared with those who did not.⁶

An increasing number of employers are now turning to disincentives — or penalties. In particular, employers are growing impatient with employees' use of tobacco. A study by the National Business Group on Health and Towers Watson found that 9% of companies use penalties for tobacco users not joining a smoking cessation program, and 42% of companies use surcharges for tobacco users, at roughly \$50/month. This 42% is up from 35% in 2012.⁷ As evidenced by Penn State, the use of disincentives to encourage participation can be disastrous. The proposed program of a \$100 per month non-compliance fee for employees who didn't complete an online assessment, made national headlines after faculty and staff objected.⁸

There may be two additional reasons we need to further consider to determine whether or not incentives are sustainable. First is the cost. As the value of incentives continues to increase, this practice will likely become cost-prohibitive for many organizations. The median value has increased 25% since 2011, to \$500. The median dependent incentive is up to \$375, from \$300.⁹

A second and equally important consideration is that research has demonstrated that tangible rewards tend to have a negative impact on intrinsic motivation.¹⁰ The presence of the reward undermines the individual's taking responsibility for motivating themselves — and the focus shifts to the reward and away from the activity itself.

The real challenge is to find ways to have wellness be driven by intrinsic motivators. People need to *WANT* to be healthy. Period. Not paid to be so. That is the only long-term, sustainable foundation. All of the research suggests that long-term change must be intrinsically based.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

We recognize that incentives motivate — at least in the short term. But to support long-term sustained behavior change, we need to think beyond the

MOTIVATION DEFINITIONS

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION: Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge entailed rather than because of external products, pressures or reward.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION: Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome.

money. In a perfect world, employees would already be intrinsically motivated to achieve and maintain high levels of self-responsibility regarding their personal health. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence that we don't live in this perfect world. Just look at the rates of obesity and lack of physical activity. In the U.S., 35.7% of adults are obese and less than half (48%) get the recommended amounts of physical activity.¹¹

There are sides to the motivation coin: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation (in this case, the use of incentives) refers to doing something in order to obtain a reward or avoid a punishment. Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than as a means to an end. Since *ALL* of the research suggests that behavior change is only sustainable when it is intrinsically based, our goal over time should be to reduce the dependency from exclusively extrinsic motivation to design programs that foster intrinsic motivation.

Ryan and Deci's social determinant theory posits that competency, autonomy and relatedness are all necessary conditions for intrinsic motivation. Competence depends on an environment filled with challenges or positive/

constructive feedback. Autonomy is the processes by which action and experience are initiated and governed by "the self." Relatedness fosters involvement and the sense of belonging.¹²

As previously mentioned, extrinsic rewards run the risk of diminishing autonomy and intrinsic motivation. When rewards are perceived as controlling, they diminish one's sense of autonomy and competence.¹³ When humans are autonomous, on the other hand, they are in touch with their own needs and are able to act in accord with them.¹⁴

'Don't ask how you can motivate other people. Ask how you can create the conditions in which others will motivate themselves.'

*– Edward Deci, Professor of Psychology, University of Rochester
Co-Creator – Self Determination Theory, TEDx FlourCity*

In our less than perfect world, incentives will likely persist. It's the way we do business — and employees have now come to expect them. But we *CAN* begin to design health promotion programs to create the conditions in which people are more likely to be intrinsically motivated.

So how do we encourage intrinsic motivation? Here are few ideas that can be incorporated into your programs:

- **Make the program personal.** When a program is focused on the needs and interests of individuals, they are far more likely to participate. Health coaching is one way of accomplishing this focus on the personal goals and interests of the individual. Intrinsic motivators are personal and may be specific to subsegments of the population. What motivates a single, 20-something employee may not motivate a 40-something mother of two.
- **Offer opportunities for choice.** A "one size fits all program" may be easier to design and implement, but it does not address the interests of subpopulations of your workforce or support autonomy. When designing incentive programs,



Making programs and activities fun can foster a sense of not taking ourselves so seriously.

provide choices. Allow employees to choose which activities they want to participate in, how often, etc. The opportunity to choose supports the need for autonomy.

- **Encourage skill building and goal attainment.** Helping individuals feel a sense of accomplishment can fulfill a sense of competency. It also increases self-efficacy — which is the belief in one's ability to influence events that affects one's life.¹⁵ Skill building and goal attainment opportunities provide for small successes that can enhance the individual's belief that he or she can succeed.
- **Health is the new status symbol.** A sense of belonging, or need for relatedness, is an innate human need. The health promotion program can help foster a sense of belonging by making employees feel part of something that is tied to the cultural norms of the organization. Create a "wall of fame" with photos of those individuals who have achieved and sustained a new health behavior, such as quitting tobacco. Look for opportunities

to tell the stories of individuals who have had succeeded at making health changes. This provides them with the opportunity to be a role model for others and provide recognition for their personal accomplishment. A sense of belonging can come from shared experiences or purpose — create rituals within the workplace or community such as volunteering.

- **Make it social.** There is plenty of evidence that being part of a social network can influence our behavior. The research of Christakas and Fowler demonstrated that "good behaviors — like quitting smoking or staying slender or being happy — pass from friend to friend almost as if they were contagious viruses."¹⁶ Look for opportunities to connect individuals with buddies who are addressing the same behavior change issue, offer opportunities to meet as a group (Weight Watchers model), or in teams that can add the competitive element.
- **Play and laugh out loud.** Who doesn't like to have fun and laugh out loud? Making programs and activities fun can foster a sense of not taking ourselves so seriously. Purposeful laughter is has been demonstrated to enhance employees' morale, resilience, and personal efficacy beliefs.¹⁷ Offer humor workshops or create a game show contest to test health

knowledge. Include cartoons or funny, unexpected images in communications materials.

- **Let's be creative.** Some folks have creative abilities that may not be evident in their day-to-day work. Offer opportunities to foster creativity, such as having a healthy cook-off challenge and offer clear recognition to the winners. Ask employees to write blog stories about their personal journey in improving their health. Invite employees with create and artistic to submit personal photographs or artwork that can be used in program materials or communications.¹⁸

Have you ever heard a parent ask, "How do I motivate my kids to play?" Not likely. While we recognize the need to use financial incentives, creating an environment that fosters autonomy and makes it "cool" to be healthy, will create the culture that over time will increase intrinsic motivation. Incorporating elements of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation will most likely yield results for both your employees and your program. ■

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