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Marathon Month Promotes Healthful Lifestyles for Extension Employees

Abstract

This article describes Marathon Month, a workplace wellness program for Extension employees. The program promoted physical activity by challenging employees to walk or run the length of a marathon (26.2 mi) or half marathon (13.1 mi) over the course of 1 month. Of the 317 participants, 90% achieved a self-set goal of completing a full or half marathon, and 31% reported losing weight, with an average weight loss of 4.2 lb per person. Another reported benefit was increased workplace camaraderie. A number of practical ideas, such as sending email reminders and using social media, are provided to facilitate replication in other states.

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Introduction

Burczy and Bowin (1994) postulated that ". . .organizations are only as healthy and productive as their employees" ("Conclusions and Implications," para. 2). Organizational health, including improved productivity, is the stated raison d'ëtre for employee wellness programs. Employee health is even more critical for Extension personnel who have responsibilities as community role models.

Employee wellness programs help organizations reduce health insurance costs and increase productivity, among other effects (Person, Colby, Bulova, & Eubanks, 2010). Research has shown differences in employee participation in wellness programs. Person et al. (2010) found that 10.4% of employees participated in their university's wellness program. McLellan et al. (2009) found 37% participation among medical center employees. Robroek, van Lenthe, van Empelen, and Burdorf (2009) assessed 23 studies of employee wellness programs and found that participation averaged 23%.

Extension has provided education and leadership for corporations' employee wellness programs and conducted programs specifically for Extension personnel. Oregon State University Extension conducted a workplace wellness program at a corporation with a workforce of 600 (Case, 2010). This program produced

significant improvements in regular exercise and weight management (Case, 2010). Burczy and Bowin (1994) described an employee wellness initiative that targeted University of Vermont Extension employees and included walking programs.

Marathon Month: The Starting Line

A Healthy Lifestyles committee composed of 11 Extension employees was tasked with implementing workplace wellness for University of Tennessee (UT) and Tennessee State University (TSU) Extension employees. Previous research had shown that UT and TSU Extension employees needed support in taming stress, reducing obesity, and becoming more physically active (Franck & Donaldson, 2015).

The committee devised Marathon Month, a program intended to encourage employees to complete a full marathon (26.2 mi) or a half marathon (13.1 mi) by accumulating miles walked or run during May 2015. The program was designed to eliminate major barriers often associated with workplace wellness programs, including location and time (Person et al., 2010), as employees could participate from any location on multiple days each week.

Pacing the Marathon

Case (2010) recommended that a select group of employees promote employee wellness programs to other employees. Consistent with this recommendation, the Marathon Month initiative involved Champions 4 Balanced Life, employees who promoted the challenge to their peers via tweets, emails, texts, and phone calls. A Marathon Month logo (Figure 1) was used in all communications to increase marketing effectiveness.

Figure 1.

Marathon Month Logo

Email reminders emphasized the health benefits of increased physical activity and featured links to exercise tracking apps. For the less technologically savvy, a paper tracking form (Figure 2) was provided. Individuals tracked their own miles, with no centralized recording or oversight.

Figure 2.

Marathon Month Tracking Tool

Participants were encouraged to take and share Marathon Month selfies during their walks or runs. These selfies (Figure 3) were featured in social media posts and an organizationwide newsletter. A brief Qualtrics online survey (Qualtrics Research Suite, 2009) was administered for Marathon Month evaluation and reporting. Medals (Figure 4) were mailed to individuals who met the self-set goal of completing either a full or half marathon.

Figure 3.
Marathon Month Selfies

Figure 4.
Marathon Month Medallion

Results

The survey addressed participants' experiences, intended benefits of the program, and suggestions for the Healthy Lifestyles committee. One third of UT and TSU Extension employees (33%, 317 of 961) participated in Marathon Month. Participants represented every Extension job title (Table 1). More than one third of the

participants were Extension agents (34%, *n* = 108); the next highest category of employees proportionally was administrative support assistants (17%, *n* = 55).

Table 1.

Marathon Month Participants' Job Titles

Job title	*n* (317)	% [a]
Administrator[b]	10	3.2
Administrative support assistant	55	17.4
Extension agent	108	34.1
Extension agent and county director	46	14.5
Extension area specialist	8	2.5
Extension program assistant	34	10.7
Professorial/Extension specialist	28	8.8
Other[c]	28	8.8

[a]Percentages do not sum to 100% due to rounding. [b]Includes assistant dean, associate dean, regional director, etc. [c]Includes accounting specialists, business managers, and others.

Of the 317 participants, 90% achieved the goal of completing a full or half marathon: 223 completed a full marathon, 62 completed a half marathon, and 32 enrolled but did not complete either challenge. Of those 32, 26 provided reasons for not completing the challenge, and the major barriers they identified were time management, injury/illness, work schedule, and family/personal reasons. The vast majority of participants (84.2%, *n* = 267) reported that they increased exercise because of the program. Participants reported other benefits as well:

- 57.7% (*n* = 183) reported better stress management;
- 47.6% (*n* = 151) improved their sleep; and
- 31.2% (*n* = 99) reported losing weight, with an average weight loss of 4.2 lb per person.

Table 2 shows participants' perceptions relative to the intended benefits of the Marathon Month program.

Table 2.

Participants' Perceptions of Marathon Month's Intended Benefits

	Yes		No		Not sure	
Intended benefit	***f***	**%**	***f***	**%**	***f***	**%**

Increase exercise (*n* = 309)	267	86.4	39	12.6	3	1.0
Tame stress (*n* = 300)	183	61.0	50	16.7	67	22.3
Improve sleep (*n* = 306)	151	49.3	85	27.8	70	22.9
Lose weight (*n* = 298)	93	31.2	140	47.0	65	21.8

Respondents were asked to share descriptions of their Marathon Month experiences or other comments, and 134 of 317 (42%) responded. Responses included the following comments:

- "Personally, my stress level has improved. I am better able to handle stressful situations."
- "[I was recently] diagnosed with diabetes. I was instructed by my doctor to increase physical activity, which encouraged me even more to increase my activity for Marathon Month. I initially had made a goal of half a marathon; however, [my family member and I] completed a whole marathon. I also lost 10 pounds, getting closer to my goal weight. This challenge helped me to change my eating habits, engage in extra physical activity, become healthier overall, and to learn to manage my newfound diabetes."

Respondents noted increased camaraderie among Extension employees as a result of Marathon Month. For example, one respondent stated, "The camaraderie made it much more fun! It was fun to have this common experience with co-workers across the state."

Respondents reported that the email reminders and social media aspects of the program were helpful. In the words of one respondent, "It really helps seeing co-workers across the state on social media, [and] the email reminders were great to keep a person motivated. Knowing that others across the state were participating helped hold me accountable."

When asked for recommendations for the Healthy Lifestyles committee, 107 respondents provided comments. The most frequent comment (20.6%, 22 of 107 comments) related to providing additional challenges. Respondents offered suggestions for future programs, including implementing a "no soda month."

Discussion

The 33% Extension workforce participation was viewed as successful in comparison to workplace wellness participation rates at other organizations (McLellan et al., 2009; Person et al., 2010; Robroek et al., 2009). The evaluation results may be used as benchmark data for future workplace wellness programs among Extension personnel.

Although Marathon Month was designed to increase physical activity, health is more than physical well-being. This sentiment was reflected by respondents who expressed that Marathon Month provided improved stress management and a sense of camaraderie. It is recommended that additional challenges be designed to accentuate these benefits. Because some participants reported barriers to achieving their goals as either interpersonal (existing injuries and poor time management) or institutional (work schedules), an ecological perspective is recommended for the design of similar programs (Fitzgerald & Spaccarotella, 2009).

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