

Logging on to lose weight may be a tough sell for employers

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Many companies offer workplace wellness programs to help employees lose weight and improve their diets, but the long-term benefits depend on sustained lifestyle changes. A new study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* examined whether a convenient web support program could help employees maintain weight loss after an intensive kick-off. It turns out that a challenge may be just getting them to log on.

The study evaluated 330 employees of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston who had taken part in the hospital's Be Fit program, consisting of 10 weeks of exercise and nutritional counseling that included a free gym membership and individual sessions with a nutritionist and [personal trainer](#).

After the 10 week program, employees were split into two groups: a maintenance group given access to a personalized website that helped them set further goals and monitor progress or a [control group](#) without online [guidance](#). The two groups had similar body weights and had lost about the same [weight](#) during the initial intensive program (4.8 pounds versus 4.3 pounds).

After one year, researchers found that the two groups had kept off similar amounts of weight (3.4 pounds versus 2.5 pounds) and reported that they were still eating a healthier [diet](#), said Anne N. Thorndike, M.D., MPH, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School.

But the study also learned that fewer people than expected used the personalized website. Sixty-three percent of the maintenance group logged on to the website on only 5 or fewer occasions over 9 months. "We thought more people would take advantage of the website to help them maintain the lifestyle changes that they had made in Be Fit," she said. In fact, those who used the site lost more weight than those who didn't.

"Maintenance is the question of the century," Thorndike said. "How do you get people to maintain their [weight loss](#)?" The maintenance program may have had too light a touch, she added. After the intensity of the 10-week Be Fit program, which included a lot of personalized attention, friendly competitions between teams, and weekly rallies, the internet maintenance program may have been a letdown.

The lack of use of the website maintenance program also surprised Patricia Crawford, Ph.D., director of the Atkins Center for Weight and Health and adjunct professor at the School of Public Health at the University of California at Berkeley. As people incorporate more technology into their lives, improvements in these types of website-based programs will be made, she said.

"I suspect that those of us in the health field don't use technology to its fullest, so it will be interesting to have private companies use it and see if we can tap into that resource. It has everything we want to foster behavior change," she said. "A web-based approach has the potential to reach a greater number of people for a fraction of the cost. This has important implications for health maintenance programs, yet this study points to the need for more study of motivators which will promote utilization of web resources."

More information: Thorndike AN, Sonenberg L, Healey E, et al. (2012). Prevention of weight gain following a worksite nutrition and exercise program. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, In Press.

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