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Evaluation of the Energise.me Health and Wellbeing Programme

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SUMMARY

In the present report, we present the results of a feasibility study of the Energise.me programme, which comprises digital tools, group based activities and coaching aimed at improving health and wellbeing. The study involved interviews with 10 participants that had been through the programme during the pandemic.

The results indicate that the programme has the potential to bring about beneficial changes in health behaviours and other aspects of wellbeing. We suggest that the benefits of the programme are related to the perceived need for and usefulness of specific modules; participants' motivation to engage with the programme; support and encouragement from the peer group; support and encouragement from the coach.

We consider that the main areas for developing the programme relate to: integrating techniques to enhance social interaction in group based exercises; integrating the coaching more fully with data gathered from exercises; and provision of post-programme coaching support.

INTRODUCTION

Energise.me is a health and wellbeing programme consisting of a mix of digital tools, group based activities and coaching. Energise.me is assumed to work through improving skills in specific health and wellbeing domains. In turn, it is assumed improvements in aspects of health and wellbeing will feed forward into better workplace performance.

The purpose of this report is to summarise findings from an initial feasibility study to evaluate the potential of Energise.me to improve health, wellbeing and performance indicators of participants. The original proposal for this evaluation was predicated on using data captured from the Energise.me digital platform, including reports of health, wellbeing and performance in a survey from around 50 workers in 10 cohorts undertaking the programme with different starting dates in a step-wedge research design. Work had already begun on processes for capturing the data and analysis before the lockdown of March 2020 and further measures put in place during the pandemic.

However, as a result of the lockdown, up-take by employers of the Energise.me programme was less than anticipated, which led to a change in research design to accommodate the smaller numbers and the unusual context within which the programme was being used. Accordingly, we opted to change the design from a quantitative assessment to a qualitative exploration using a semi-structured interview approach.

METHODOLOGY

As no research interview lacks structure (Bryman & Burgress, 1994) most of the qualitative research interviews are either semi-structured, lightly structured or in-depth (Bryman & Burgress, 1994). Unstructured interviews are generally suggested to allow respondents to express in their own ways and pace, with minimal hold on respondents' responses (Corbin & Morse, 2003). In contrast, semi-structured interviews are those in-depth interviews where the respondents answer preset open-ended questions. One of the main advantages of the semi-structured interview method is its success in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant (Galletta 2013), enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participant's responses (Hardon et al. 2004, Polit & Beck 2010). This does occur in the data and as is the nature of interviews, some subjects are more open to conversation than others.

This study's utilisation of semi-structured interviews and qualitative methods is to ask mostly "open-ended" questions that are not necessarily worded in exactly the same way with each participant. With open-ended questions, participants are free to respond in their own words, and these responses tend to be more complex than simply "yes" or "no." In addition, with qualitative methods, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is often less formal than in quantitative research. Participants have the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods. In turn, researchers have the opportunity to respond immediately to what participants say by tailoring subsequent questions to information the participant has provided, to confirm or refine what the participant has said or to ask for elaboration on key points.

When considering the number of participants, time and resources available must be considered as critical factors. Determining an adequate sample size is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put, the particular research method and sampling strategy employed, and the research product intended. It was therefore determined that for this study 10 interview candidates would be sufficient. This decision was taken in consideration of the participating group, the numbers participating in the programme, and that the study is a feasibility study.

Each participant was contacted through the Energise.me programme team, and asked to contact the UEA research team directly should they wish to participate. Participants were contacted from two cohorts of participants who went through the programme. Because of the pandemic, the two cohorts had different experiences, with one cohort receiving an abridged version of the programme that did not include a coaching element. This could lead to divergent views on the programme.

The Energise.me team informed potential participants in general terms what the research entailed. They were also told about the method of data collection via video-call interview and once the meeting was arranged, the interviewee would then be told of all ethical concerns and asked to approve their participation in the research. All participants were informed of the likely time commitment, the purposes for which their data would be used, that interviews would be recorded with their consent, a guarantee of confidentiality of

information given and anonymity in reporting results, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were conducted over a period of 2 months over Microsoft Teams due to the COVID19 pandemic.

The interviews themselves were relatively short in comparison to many qualitative interviews with the mean interview length at approx. 22 minutes long. This is the case for several reasons; firstly, although the goal of the qualitative researcher is to gain a rich understanding of the study phenomenon (Polit & Beck 2010), it is ethically dubious to collect data that is not completely necessary for the research (Gibbs et al. 2007) and with the variety of characteristics of interviewees, there can be difficulty in obtaining data in the interview format without steering a bias or playing for time in some way. Secondly, to avoid theoretical saturation, wherein the interviewee begins to simply repeat themselves on a subject and has no more to add, there is no more value to be gained from simply extending the interview time. The interview schedule is shown in the Appendix.

Six participants were female and four male. The 10 interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber. A coding framework was developed from the interview questions and through reading the transcriptions. A 'pilot analysis' was conducted, whereupon analysis of the initial 5 interviews was done with the first coding matrix. Once this was complete, the coding frame was revised to include codes to account for any data that could not be accounted within existing codes. Any codes that were unused were bookmarked for potential removal. These initial interviews were then re-coded with the new framework and another five were coded alongside.

Data collection followed all ethical guidelines set out by the University of East Anglia and ethics approval was obtained from the UEA Norwich Business School ethics committee.

RESULTS

The results are categorised into key areas of the coding structure, giving a full understanding of the participants' views of the Energise.me programme. Firstly, the results will consider common reasons for participation, then consider participants interaction with the technological aspects of the programme. Afterwards the results will explore the positive aspects of the programme followed by a section of proposed improvements.

Reasons for participation

One of the initial questions posed to participants was their reason for participation in the Energise.me programme. The responses were not particularly varied and focussed on two or three common themes, namely, at request of their management, whereupon their team lead has chosen them to participate for expanding opportunities for the office or candidate, shown below.

"The office has kind of been looking at a number of holistic ways of developing people so not just focusing on either management skills or kind of work-related elements."

"…to then bring that back and round off the whole wellbeing thing to them bring it back to the group and spread it out across the team is the idea and then the mindset of it I guess."

Or following personal curiosity or desire for improved wellbeing by learning new techniques to help them in and out of the work environment.

"…it did seem interesting the topic it was covering. It just seemed an interesting thing to do so I thought I would give it a go"

"…we are looking at this do you want to give it a go, I love trying different things and it just seemed a good opportunity."

Technological aspects of the programme

When considering the technological aspects of the Energise.me programme, the general consensus from all participants was that the technology itself worked smoothly. There were no issues with the app itself, accessing tasks or completing them.

"I think the interface as a user was very good, very intuitive."

"…then some of it we had to draw our own information or pictures etc. and that was fine."

One participant mentioned that the on-line elements were convenient:

"it was kind of online and being able to dip in and out of it during the week or two that each section was running, I found that very useful"

The only technological issue that was mentioned by multiple participants was the difficulty in filling in online forms, finding them somewhat difficult to manoeuvre or operate. However, another point to make is that in each of these instances it was mentioned that the issue was fixed within the first few weeks of participation in the programme.

"Yes technical difficulties, the course work things there were different ways of doing it to start off with and then we put it a bit more of an online version where you answered questions or submitted your homework straight away"

"There was a little bit of getting the forms to work early on which I think the chap who runs it was learning how to get that to work. But that only lasted I think the first couple of weeks for a couple of people having issues responding to things."

Therefore, it seems that the technology side of the programme is stable, with the occasional early issue which has already been resolved.

Positive elements of the programme

The participants were then asked a series of questions concerning aspects of the programme they enjoyed, whether they met their objectives or what aspects they found helpful. This helped to build an idea of what elements of the programme were positive.

Coaching and direct contact with the Energise.me delivery team:

"Yes I think that really helped keep people focus"

"Yes if I am honest I enjoyed it, it was a nice thing to do, it was a nice chat."

"For me personally at my age and in the Covid situation we are in, I found it a very reassuring friendly sort of, its quite addictive in the way he was talking and coming across on the screen."

Another positive that was discussed a lot was how actively encouraging the programme was:

"And so it gave me the no don't just try and get out of this saying you can't do it, do it. So it gave me that, be positive aspect."

"Yes because it gave me better ideas really and little nuggets that would say no stop, stop this is negative turn it round to be positive."

"it was structured in a way that you would be given something to do, not just told about it but shown how to implement it."

Importantly, positive aspects highlighted by participants related to changes in behaviours and thoughts, indicating the programme has potential for improving health behaviours:

"I found really really useful, almost on a daily basis just because they have kind of changed how I deal with things."

"ones I found most useful were time and people management ones so for instance ever since that point I have got a tool on my phone which helps me track my hours as I go"

"And then general lifestyle things like thinking more about what you eat so eating more fruit and drinking more water and doing more regular exercise I have actually prompted me to start thinking about that properly."

"And there were several things that left me thinking, I found myself thinking about what they had raised later on during the day."

"I had got a bike but not used it for ages and that was fabulous to reintroduce myself to that. And to push myself because you have to go local but I pushed myself to look at different aspects of my local environment and appreciate it."

"I think it was a week later, so to cut a long story short we made some major changes at our house. We actually created our own home gym and that's because of the programme, how cool is that?? So we actually created ourselves a home gym."

"I have found having some of those tools for managing my work load and time and bits like that has helped me detach from work at the end of the day a lot better"

Two elements of the programme that seemed particularly valuable related to hydration and purpose.

"Just things like, after I did those modules I was then making a point of oh I will drink more water or instead of that I will have that. Just because it makes you think about it more I guess"

"The others were probably, the water one, were good reminders, water, I still drink coffee all day instead of splitting it but I know what I should be doing. But its a good reminder."

"The more useful ones are, I should have reviewed them before our chat, but it was more like the mental wellbeing ones I found more useful. There was definitely one about your purpose

in life and that purpose and what you want and what you think is important and all that kind of thing."

"I found one section more interesting than the other, the bit that I found really interesting was where you had to write your own eulogy and think of that. Now that was the bit that I thought was the most interesting."

An unanticipated benefit of the programme is the potential for its impact to be extended to others:

"Also there is one of my colleagues is going through his training at the moment and there have been things I have learnt on the course that have been very helpful for managing my time that I have been able to share some of those with him."

"for me there are things that we have noted down and we will introduce through our team meetings into some of the younger staff, if you haven't experienced the burnout."

"And I remember we printed off the worksheet that came with it and passed it around to a few people and said look."

Areas for programme development

Participants were asked to comment on aspects of the programme that they did not find positive, so indicating areas for programme improvement.

One area that stood out most was the reliance on social skills to engage with some aspects of the programme, especially in groups where people did not already know each other:

"And then when we had our two weekly calls, I am just not someone that likes to talk in them environments with a group of people that I don't know. That's just not for me so I never enjoyed that section of it."

"If I know people or if its one on one I am more than competent to speak out, I am quite outspoken anyway to be honest. But in that environment where you don't know people."

"And you just feel you are not going to add anything. So that's just a personal thing for me, I am an office girl I sit in the corner and I get on with my job. I am not out there I don't like talking openly unless there are people I know and then I am fine."

"I am just not a talker like that, I just don't feel like I need to talk about myself"

"A lot of the people didn't contribute to the, you could contribute comments and I tried to feedback where I can but then I thought oh dear its always me, so that kind of put me off a bit."

"And I think I am so old fashioned that I keep that to myself. And I feel that its my responsibility to sort myself out."

In contrast, one participant pointed out knowing other people in the group helped:

"Yes I am not sure how it would have worked if it was people externally because obviously we knew each other quite well and I think it might have also been the case that it was a certain kind of people if you know what I mean."

Suggested improvements often focussed around the social elements also.

"There was a similar course that I have done since then and that wasn't local that was international, I say international it was across, yes it was international actually. And I noticed that a lot of people used the chat which I found really interesting. And I think the first thing this course did was to say introduce yourself to your colleagues that are on this course. So by introducing yourself to your colleagues in a chat forum it kind of then opened up this ability to feel a bit more freer to say what you wanted to say."

Interviewer "do you think that might have worked better if you had a group of a few of you all from the same company that you already knew each other reasonable well and got on? Do you think that would have made that easier to do?

Participant *"Yes, I think with work you have got that work relationship haven't you."*

Another issue that may deserve some investigation in developing the programme concerns the distribution of material across elements of the programme and the ordering of the programme:

"I think some of the sections had a huge amount of content in them so I think its probably some thing that will come out of having done a few of these the pacing of it might get adjusted maybe. So some weeks there are a few things to do and that kind of filled up your week and some weeks there was a vast amount of reading."

"And its some what optional how much of it you take on board but some one like me I couldn't not look at what was being sent. So I think the pacing of it might get adjusted over time to suit volumes of what people can do."

"I think it was talked about in our sessions about the ordering of the modules like maybe ordering them slightly differently to set you up for a bit more of what was to come with the mental health side of it at the beginning. Rather that just getting through the healthy eating bit and getting that out the way and then getting into the other bits. I think maybe the order of the modules could be slightly different."

The role of coaching in relation to the modules and providing post-programme support were also mentioned as areas to investigate to develop the programme.

"But I think it probably would have been more useful when I had the coaching sessions the one to one coaching sessions with the coach probably to go through the questions and speak about it rather than that would have given our conversations maybe a bit more direction as well"

"I would have liked to have, say in the module where you are going through it on screen be told to think about the questions and think about your answers and stuff. And then when you have the call one to one to then pick those up and talk about them rather than sit and write the answers out, for me personally I would probably prefer that. So that you know what's coming and its not just sprung on you and you don't know what to say in the call"

"I think that support all sort of fell off a cliff and whether that was Covid related or what everyone has got a lot going on, they .. hence why I have not finished the course. Because there has not really been anything there to do you know what I mean, to kind of check back to."

Of the specific modules, only one was mentioned by more than one participants. This was the finance section, which was mentioned five of the participants.

"There was probably one section which I wasn't that impressed by which is the financial security. I thought that was a bit of an odd thing but maybe thats because my financial set up is quite OK any way."

"probably less useful to me probably the financial wellbeing one. Which I appreciate could be really useful for a lot of people but its not something that I have felt I needed coaching through"

"About the finance man, he was just totally boring to listen to… It didn't help that he was trying to tell us about a subject that we probably knew quite a bit anyway so that probably didn't help"

It is important to mention that all people are different, and therefore what may work for one person will not work for another. For example, when considering sleep technique and diet sections, there were comments from some participants about how useful the module was and others stating the opposite.

"And then general lifestyle things like thinking more about what you eat so eating more fruit and drinking more water and doing more regular exercise I have actually prompted me to start thinking about that properly."

"So that was quite, its just remembering to do things, to think I didn't have a good night last night why was that, and then to try and think well I need to do something better for the future and things like that."

"And I also thought the sleep, the information on what we learned about sleep was very interesting. And I did, when I started the training I didn't sleep horrendously badly but I would wake up 2 or 3 o'clock for whatever reason. And its not happening anymore"

"So there was a whole section on sleep where I don't really have trouble with sleep so I haven't really carried through any techniques from that session."

Finally, there were some comments in relation to presentational issues:

"Like the typing in the boxes thing feels a bit homeworky, I prefer to be thinking and just reflecting on it."

"I think they should basically ditch the Americanism of it all. If they want to appeal to the English market then it needs to be less"

"Well I don't like the, some of the exercises were drawings"

CONCLUSIONS

This feasibility study of the Energise.me programme has indicated its potential to bring about changes in health behaviours and other aspects of wellbeing. The results also indicate the potential for participants to extend their learning to help others. Particularly useful elements related to the coaching elements and participants reported the programme to be motivating. Participants reported that some modules were more useful than others, although this appears to reflect individual's developmental needs rather than the content of the modules *per se*. Participants also reported an uneven distribution of content across modules and some participants considered an alternative ordering of modules might be useful. Therefore, it may be worth reflecting on whether participants could engage with modules more flexibly on a needs basis.

In general, the technology appeared to work well, although participants did indicate some of the presentational aspects could be developed further.

The main areas for developing the programme relate to: a) integrating techniques to enhance social interaction in group based exercises, particularly for groups with little prior knowledge of each other; b) integrating the coaching more fully with data gathered from exercises; and c) provision of post-programme coaching support. This later suggestion could be offered as an additional, costed add-on to the programme.

Participants reported motivations to engage with the programme were related to individual interest or to development needs in particular workplaces. This may indicate that marketing the programme could reflect both of these reasons.

In relation to further evaluation work using formal quantitative methods, our findings suggest any project would need to consider some of the key mechanisms revealed in this research for programme success, as well as indicators of health, wellbeing and productivity. Our findings indicate these mechanisms could include:

a) Perceived need for and usefulness of specific modules;

b) Motivation to engage with the programme;

c) Health behaviour change;

d) Support and encouragement from the peer group;

e) Support and encouragement from the coach.

Although it appeared that the technology worked well, we also recommend continuing assessment of how well the technology works. Doing so would enable any evaluation team to factor in noise created emergent technological issues as well as gauge the resilience of the programme to technological glitches.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Experiences with the Energise.me programme

[Interviewer, note gender and approximate age of participant]

1. First, we would like to collect some background information.

1a. Could you explain the nature of your job?

1b. How long have you been in this role?

1c. Has the pandemic affected your working patterns? If so how?

1d. When did you take part in the Energise.me programme?

1e. How much of the course did you complete?

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2. Why did you sign up for the Energise.me programme?

       Prompt: What kind of benefits did you expect from participation?

       Prompt: How did you anticipate that the programme would run?

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3. What were your experiences with the programme in terms of meeting objectives?

       Prompt: How did you find the technology?

           Were there any challenges in using the technology?

       Prompt: How did you find engaging with the coaching element?

           Was it helpful or /unhelpful?

           Why?

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4. Did you achieve what you wanted to from participating in the programme?

       Why do you say that?

       What did you achieve and what did you not achieve?

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5. Were there any other unexpected outcomes from participation?

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6. Do you think participation may have helped you to cope better with what has been happening with the pandemic or not?

       Why?

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7. What are the best features of the programme?

       Why?

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8. What would you change about the programme or how do you think it can be improved?