



The Great Dunedin City Council Pedometer Challenge

Entry to:

The New Zealand Post Management Excellence Awards

Award Category – The New Zealand Post People Management Award

Submitted by:

Jim Harland

Chief Executive Officer

Dunedin City Council

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About the project

In late 2006, the Dunedin City Council (DCC) launched The Great Pedometer Challenge for its 700 staff, asking them to count the number of steps they took each day.

The six-week challenge (which consisted of two three week periods spread over nine weeks) offered all staff a pedometer, a pedometer guide, healthy eating tips, activity guidelines and targets for achieving a set number of steps each week.

Of the 700 staff, 462 took up the challenge, with most lasting the distance. Staff submitted their week's pedometer readings into a central collection point and spot prizes from sponsors were drawn each week to keep them on their feet and motivated to keep going.

The Challenge included a competition to create some appropriately named short or long walks in the city that staff can use.

Participating staff members were each given a pedometer with the focus on improving against a personally set goal, rather than competing against others. They were asked to return a score sheet of their number of steps each week and to complete an evaluation at the end of the challenge.

The project was delivered for the DCC by Wellington-based recreation and sports contractor Bruce Stokell of Sportwork Limited.

The need for and expected benefits of the project and how it furthers the Council's vision and strategic direction.

There were a number of expected **benefits** arising from the project.

Healthier, fitter employees have fewer and lower long-term medical claims, they are absent less, their disability costs are lower, and their perceived personal productivity and job/life satisfaction levels are higher.

Swedish researchers have found fit workers make 60% fewer errors on jobs involving concentration and short-term memory.

A report in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1987 reported that vigorous exercise in the middle of the day improved mental alertness and productivity for four to five hours afterwards.

SPARC website 2007

Furthering Council vision and strategic direction

The Dunedin City Council's mission is "to maintain and enhance our community for the long-term wellbeing of our people and our environment."

To develop its thinking about community well-being, the Council implemented the '2002 Choices for the Future' community consultation. This resulted in the seven community outcomes that underpin its vision and strategic direction. These are:

Wealthy community, accessible city, safe and healthy people, sustainable city and environment, supportive community, culture and learning and active city.

The Great Pedometer Challenge fits comfortably within several of these community outcomes; in particular the **supportive community** and **active city** components.

1. Supportive community

Vision: *a city where residents feel included and connected with their wider community.*

Supportive neighbourhoods are great contributors to people's sense of well-being and belonging. Tolerance and acceptance of ethnic, age and other differences helps build or maintain communities that are civilised, positive in outlook and resilient in times of need.

Staff and Councillors at the DCC are part of a "workplace community" as well as being connected to the wider community. Two of the key objectives of *The Great Pedometer Challenge* were to involve all staff and councillors in the Challenge; and to make it easy for DCC staff to take part.

The project reflected the DCC's commitment to the principle that its employees are its most important business asset.

The Challenge aimed to enhance the Council's working environment by encouraging and enabling employees to develop their potential.

2. Active City

Vision: *a city that provides and encourages participation in a broad range of sporting, recreational and leisure activities.*

It is generally understood that an active lifestyle is advantageous to our health and well-being. From swimming pools to bush tracks, Dunedin has a wealth of recreation and leisure facilities enabling its people to lead active lives in an enormous variety of ways.

Four of the key objectives behind *The Great Pedometer Challenge* relate to the importance of physical exercise and a healthier lifestyle.

These were to promote the value of physical activity and diet as beneficial to people's health; to support Council staff in their desire for a more healthy lifestyle; to ensure that key messages regarding physical activity and diet are understood; and to show that walking is an enjoyable and rewarding physical activity which is 'low impact' and accessible to everyone.

The project also aligns with emerging actions and recommendations within the Dunedin Physical Activity Strategy.

Effective project management techniques

The Great Pedometer Challenge was delivered through a comprehensive descriptive plan produced for the DCC by Sportwork Limited. The Plan was constantly updated during the project and was available to and used extensively by the team delivering the project.

The Plan contained key objectives; a printed material plan; a motivation and promotional plan; a communication plan; an organisation and management plan; and outlined other items to be taken into account including how to source the pedometers, what to do about reluctant staff, a policy of including families of staff members in the project and a recommendation for participants to have a fasting blood (lipid) test (from the GP) to enable them to find out and manage their cholesterol and glucose levels.

A detailed timeline was developed as a giant chart.

An Evaluation process was developed which included seeking weekly written comments from participants during the Challenge. Two focus groups of participants were held after the Challenge was finished in order to provide important feedback in producing a final report, and to build on the strengths of the project for next time.

A final report was produced as a result of the project containing recommendations to make the Challenge an ongoing Council project with some alterations and improvements.

A participatory approach to communicating with and getting 'buy-in' from stakeholders

Staff and councillors were invited by the DCC Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to participate in the project. The invitation was issued in a letter and staff invited to a lunchtime meeting to find out more about the project and receive their Challenge Kit.

Leadership and the "practising what we preach" factor was a key factor in attracting such high numbers of participation in the Challenge. Dunedin Mayor Peter Chin, DCC CEO Jim Harland and four senior managers participated in the Challenge until its completion, attending the lunchtime members and some focus groups.

Weekly newsletters were sent to each participant throughout the programme.

The "Every Daily" internal newsletter, which is widely read by staff, was circulated on a daily basis.

Notices on each staff noticeboard provided updates and incentives for staff.

Two lunchtime meetings were held with all DCC staff invited.

Media releases were delivered through DCC media to Dunedin media outlets, covering:

- The initial launch of the programme.
- Photos of staff doing their lunchtime walk, some facts about physical activity.
- The possibility of the challenge being taken to a wider group of the public.
- A staff member who had made the biggest percentage improvement in the number of daily steps they take.

Posters were displayed around the DCC to remind people to record their steps and to keep the project's importance high in people's minds. Posters were placed on noticeboards and next to lifts where staff would see them.

Simple steps and helpful hints were offered throughout the duration of the challenge.

Post challenge participation

Focus groups conducted at the end of the challenge provided important feedback

Innovation and originality

The ability of participants to set their own targets for the number of steps they could achieve was a key point of difference in the Challenge.

Participants were also able to receive one-on-one assistance and advice on exercise and nutrition throughout the Challenge from the Community Development Team.

Perhaps the most significant innovative aspect of the Challenge was the Lunchtime Walks Competition, where participants were asked to find (or create) the best lunchtime walk. The purpose of the competition was to open people's eyes to the many opportunities available for healthy walking during the day. The top prize received a \$100 voucher and \$50 for second prize. Other spot prizes were on offer too.

The competition was hugely popular and received fifteen entries. Many of the walks were creatively named and described, some examples being:

The Heart Pounding Vista Walk – A brisk walk that takes approximately 50 minutes, good for getting the heart rate going.

A Walk Back in Time – Another great indoor/outdoor venue is the Otago Settlers Museum where you can take approximately 3000 steps back in time. There are two sections to the Museum – Transport and Social History so perhaps you could visit twice! There are frequent new exhibitions, a Museum shop, and remember, admission is FREE.

Action Art – If it's wet or cold, why not pop over to Dunedin Public Art Gallery? A brisk trot across the Octagon and a tour around the galleries should add to approximately 1,500 steps and fit into a lunch break quite nicely. Exhibitions change frequently so there's always something new to see. And why not call into the Gallery Shop - remember DCC employees get 10% discount.

That one extra – If you don't mind the steep bit at the end, you haven't earned yourself "that one extra". About 45 minutes and 5,700 steps.

Vintage Vamoose – 2.5km with additional weight training.

Ten Minute Teaser described as a "lovely quick circuit, incorporating a cardio-vascular and lower limb workout and will leave you feeling energized, warmed up and very smug."

Sunshine Walk – described as an interesting walk that involves flat and hills plus wonderful views of the city. You need to keep your head up and your posture good for this walk so you can enjoy all it has to offer. Plus you may have sightings of seals and birds.

The Challenge developed the notion of "togetherness" for those participating. Staff involved formed new friendships with other participants (from other Departments) who they would otherwise not have met, creating common ground and shared interests.

Staff reported a positive atmosphere resulting from the challenge, describing this as a "healthy buzz" and an element of healthy competition.

Successful results

Financial

The Great Pedometer Challenge cost the DCC \$11,000 to undertake. This included the project management and delivery, as well as the cost of pedometers which were given to each participating staff member, and some accompanying materials.

Prizes and sponsorship totalled \$1,500, with the main sponsors being Rebel Sport and R & R Sport.

Non-financial

Non-financial results can be measured in two ways:

1. The total of steps taken during the Challenge and the measurable increase in steps taken by staff as the weeks progressed. While not all staff increased their steps, a significant number did, which indicates that they were exercising more and understanding the benefits of the project.

Of the 462 employees who registered for the Challenge, 194 participants submitted their step count in Week Three and 113 participants at the end of Week Six. This represented 24.5% of the number of employees who started the Challenge who completed and fully documented their results over the 6 Week programme.

However, this was not the only measure.

During Week One the average number of steps by participants was 7,820 per day. By Week Three this had increased to 8,932. By Week Four the average steps were at 9,733 and by the end of Week Six (the end of the project) the average number of steps being recorded by participants was 10,958 per day.

The Challenge ran for two three-week periods from 9-27 October and 20 November to 8 December. The project needed to run for a long period to be truly successful in getting participants to change their behaviours, but a single six week period was considered too long, so it was broken up into two periods.

Project organisers felt that if people were able to continue exercising during the "break" and take up the Challenge again for the second three week period they were more likely to continue with the exercise. There was no dramatic increase or decrease in the numbers of people who participated in the second three week period which indicated that many staff kept going with the Challenge until the end.

2. The second way of measuring success was feedback about the project, in particular feedback, indicating participants had changed their habits in some way to include more exercise and better nutrition in their lives. According to the project team, the true measure of success was whether people were still continuing with their brisk morning or lunchtime walk after the project was completed.

This was largely recorded as anecdotal reaction and gathered through written comments by participants during the Challenge and two focus groups held at the completion of the challenge to gauge staff reaction.

An important success factor anecdotally recorded during the project was the ability to be anonymous throughout while still remaining part of a team within departments and as a whole staff. Staff regularly reported that this allowed them to **not be embarrassed** about their current level of fitness and to take on the challenge. In fact, some joined after the first week once they learned that no-one would know how much exercise they were doing. For those who thrived on competition the inter-department competition of step counts was of interest. These were published weekly and if there was a delay in getting the numbers out, there were multiple phone calls to the organisers as people waited to see where their particular team ranked.

Feedback from the focus groups after the project was completed included the following comments:

The local walks competition was a great hit and sparked off a great deal of enthusiasm among participants, resulting in increased awareness, and encouraging staff members to be more physically active during their lunch and break times.

Ongoing direction, updates and informal colleague support via notices circulated in the Every Daily were encouraging. Updates on the previous week's steps were also a good motivator.

People liked to talk to others about their progress which encouraged communication and productivity among the workforce.

Dunedin Mayor Peter Chin attended one of the focus groups and provided weekly written feedback as part of his participation in the Challenge. He commented at one point that it was "bloody hard" but he was enjoying himself.

That the project was a 'good, sensible and right thing to do'

Commenting on the Project in a newsletter to staff, Dunedin City Council CEO Jim Harland said:

"The initiative shows that we care about the health of our staff. We want staff to be in the best shape possible to ensure they do a good job for our city."

The personal commitment of the CEO, the Mayor and senior managers to the project was a key factor in its success, by demonstrating they believed in the project and truly wanted a happy and healthy staff and were prepared to pay more than lip service to the outcomes.

Many participants reported their pleasure that their employer (DCC) had invested the time, money and resources into their health.

Positive workplace and general health messages were consistently reinforced and introduced to employees throughout the programme.

Being able to participate within a physically active challenge, regardless of individual fitness level was seen as important for many employees. It meant individuals could set personal group or family goals. They could introduce their own elements of competition to suit individual needs, or challenge themselves or their workmates in the course of a normal day at work or during their leisure time.

Opportunities for the future

The project team were astounded at the level of interest in health and fitness that the staff showed. Staff feedback strongly suggests that there is a real willingness to improve personal health and perhaps a lack of knowledge or understanding as to how to go about it.

This opens the door for future projects of a similar nature to assist in increasing health levels of staff and subsequently performance, energy and attendance levels at work. This could result in increased levels of performance and productivity for the Council activities and further role modelling of positive behaviours as leaders in our community.

The DCC is currently considering a proposal to continue and expand the Challenge in 2007 on an ongoing basis.

Attachments

The Plan
The timeline
Letter to staff
Letter to Councillors
Maps and explanations of local walks competition