



WashU Cultivates Community, Fosters Fitness With Custom *Couch to 5K Challenge*

An HES Client Experience

Background

While serving a largely remote workforce, the Human Resources Wellness Team at Washington University in St. Louis (WashU) saw an opportunity: Bring employees together to improve personal well-being and support the common good. Through a partnership with WashU's Physical Therapy (PT) program, they worked with HES to create *WashU Couch to 5K Challenge*, a well-being challenge with custom design and content plus an integrated promotion strategy. The campaign reached 2556 employees and contributed to the Virtual 5K Run4Research in 2021, helping raise over \$10,000 to support The Foundation for Physical Therapy Research.



“ For a while now, we’d been hearing interest in a 5K training challenge. ”

— Nikki Hafner, Wellness Program Lead

Grassroots Design

WashU’s Wellness Team relies heavily on feedback from their Wellness Connection Champion Network participants and members to inform future programs and initiatives. “For a while now, we’d been hearing interest in a 5K training challenge,” recalls Nikki Hafner, Wellness Program Lead and head of the Wellness Connection Champion Network. The team reached out to WashU’s PT school, a long-time partner, for help in designing a pilot. Creating a custom program enabled the team to tailor features to employees’ wellness priorities, collaborate with internal experts, and shape the challenge to reflect WashU’s culture.

WashU physical therapists created a 5K training program delivered in daily segments over the course of *WashU Couch to 5K Challenge*. PT students developed trivia questions used throughout the program.

“Partnering with PT gave recognition to services they provide to employees, and we tapped into their expertise for program content and design,” notes Lauren Buschhorn, Wellness Coordinator. Champions participated in the pilot and offered essential feedback for the design team to personalize and improve the challenge experience:

- More explanation on key concepts and terms (such as Rating of Perceived Exertion)
- Exercises posted in advance so participants can plan for the week ahead
- Daily reminders and occasional tips to maintain motivation.

“PT worked with us to incorporate that feedback before we launched it to the whole university,” Nikki explains.

Champion-Driven Registration

The Wellness Connection Champion Network, about 130 volunteers serving as wellness ambassadors across 6 campuses, was a key driver of participation in *WashU Couch to 5K Challenge*. “Nikki developed a tool kit for the Champions centered around being a team captain and provided communication tools to encourage their departments to join or start a team. Champions could also register early and form a team in advance. Overall, 27% of all the team captains were Champions,” adds Lauren.

Founded in 2015, the Wellness Connection Champion Network has become a signature component of WashU’s wellness team. Nikki keeps these volunteers updated, engaged, and connected year-round through a variety of channels:

- Quarterly 90-minute workshops with training or guest speakers on different wellness programs and breakout rooms so Champions connect with each other
- Online community with files, tool kits, and a chat tool
- Monthly newsletter featuring university resources and partners, wellness programs, plus spotlights on individual Champions and Wellness Connection team members
- Emails, 1:1 communications, and outlets across the institution
- A pilot funding program to support Champions and encourage them to personalize wellness initiatives at the local level.



Built for Everyone

The WashU Wellness Team's primary goal with physical activity challenges is to make them broadly appealing and accessible to every fitness level. "We want to make sure challenges are doable for those who are less active as well as the active employees, like our marathon runners," Lauren confirms. "We really want to reach those who maybe don't know how to build this into their daily lives and help remove some of the barriers," emphasizes Nikki.

The team lowered the daily step threshold for earning points to 4000. In addition, multiple rewards were built in to level the playing field:

- **Extra point awarded each day** for those completing a daily training tip
- **Free Run for Research registration** for those with 80% participation at program midpoint
- **Weekly Wellness Wall challenges** with an alternating focus on physical activity and social connection; those who played along were entered in weekly gift card raffles
- **Personal Best reward** with gift cards awarded to participants increasing their in-program step total from 2020 to 2021.

"We really want to focus on the experience itself versus the reward value," comments Lauren. "We typically provide modest financial incentives because we want employees to have that intrinsic motivation to participate."

"We continue to try and align our challenges within the bigger scope of our programming and in accordance with the university's priorities," affirms Emily Page, Senior Wellness Manager. "What we're finding is though challenges may be focused on behavior change like physical activity or healthy eating, they really are actually more about *bringing people together and creating community*. We want our challenges to help people feel connected and that it's a positive experience for them, even if they don't meet all of the challenge goals and thresholds."

The custom *WashU Couch to 5K Challenge* was well-received. The team looks forward to refreshing the challenge next year and continuing their partnership with PT. In response to feedback, they anticipate adding an in-person 5K race at the end of the next challenge, bringing the WashU community, employees, and families together for fun and physical activity.

“... though challenges may be focused on behavior change like physical activity or healthy eating, they really are actually more about bringing people together and creating community.”

— Emily Page, Senior Wellness Manager

TAKEAWAYS

From the Human Resources Wellness Team



Listen to your people.

Ask them what they want, then evaluate programs and see how you can continue to grow and stay relevant. A real key to success is using participant feedback, even regarding design, to make it more specific to their needs.



Remember connection is essential.

The Wellness Wall has become a favorite feature in developing a sense of community and encouraging participants to get to know colleagues they hadn't met before. People want to post... to share their experiences and ask for advice from others. The Wall drives engagement, shows how participants are doing, and creates connections throughout the program.



Embrace virtual.

Though this can be an adjustment, online workshops and training make it easier for people to attend, especially if they're spread out.



Use your in-house experts.

Partnering with internal resources emphasizes their importance and value in design, content, and guidance for employees.



Don't focus on the individual leaderboard.

Because each participant is on a personal journey throughout the challenge, it's best if they compete with themselves. The Personal Best reward gives everyone an opportunity to win.

TESTIMONIALS



“

I love the WashU Couch to 5K Challenge. It motivated me to move and got me ready for fun summer activities. I saw a difference in my stamina. I can garden longer, paddle my kayak stronger, and take longer hikes. I have a great energetic start to the spring.

”

“

Walking in the community has allowed me to meet so many people that I wouldn't have otherwise! I don't know all their names but their smiling faces, their waves and random chit-chat helped me stay connected in a way that Zoom meetings just couldn't... I'm so glad we had this challenge!



”



“

I was working from home, barely walking 2K steps a day. I went from lots of sitting to walking up to 17K+ steps some days. It was hard, but I got used to the walking. I feel good now to be out and walking — more alive.

”

HIGHLIGHTS

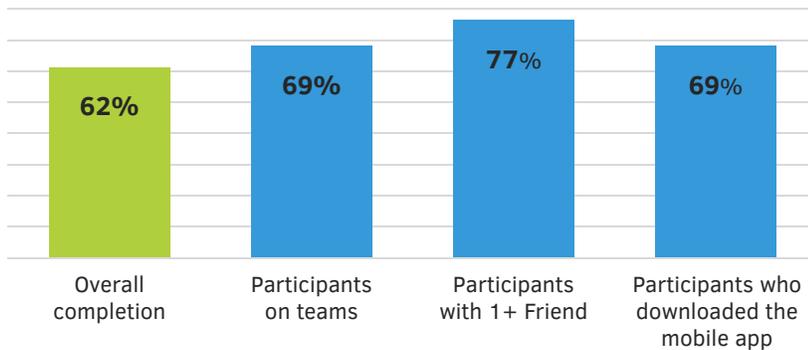


2556
participants



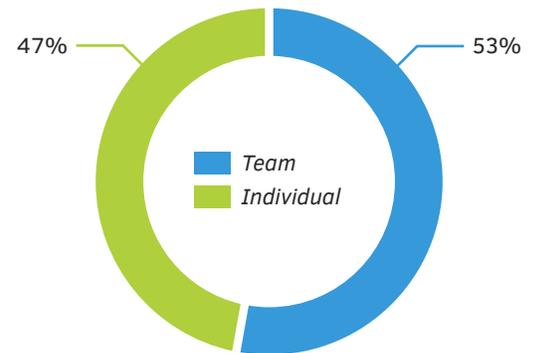
220
teams

Completion Overview

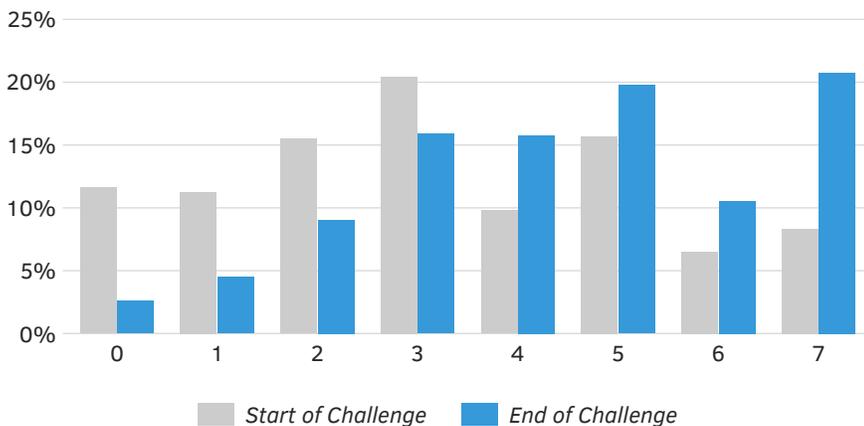


Completion rates are based on the number of participants who achieved the program goal of 120 points.

Team/Individual Participation

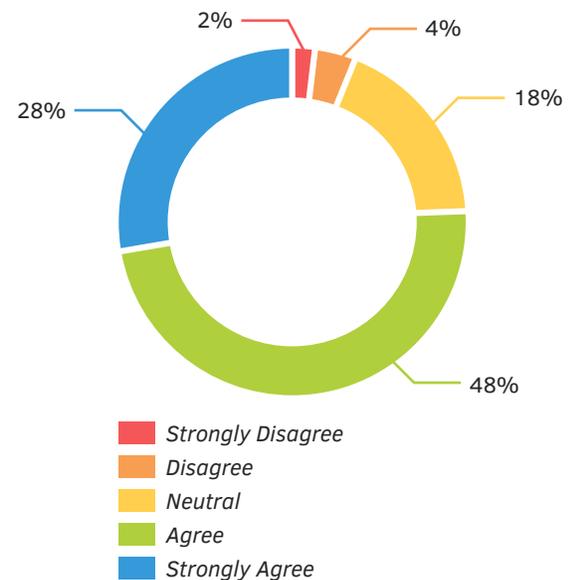


Average number of days a week you are physically active:



Data based on participants who completed the evaluation.

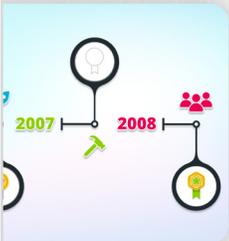
How much do you agree the challenge has increased your daily activity level:



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