

Simple Encouragement Emails Increased Take-Up of Reemployment Program

DOL Behavioral Interventions Final Project Brief

By Matthew Darling, Christopher O’Leary, Irma Perez-Johnson, Jaclyn Lefkowitz, Ken Kline, Ben Damerow, Randall Eberts, Samia Amin, and Greg Chojnacki

Study background

The Department of Labor Behavioral Interventions (DOL-BI) project was launched to explore the potential of using behavioral insights to improve the performance and outcomes of DOL programs. It is sponsored by the DOL Chief Evaluation Office and draws on insights from behavioral economics, psychology, and related fields.

Finding a job after becoming unemployed can be challenging for many individuals. Even as the unemployment rate has decreased during the recovery from the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the average duration of regular unemployment insurance benefits remains high (15.6 weeks as of January 2017).¹

The Department of Labor (DOL) has long sought effective ways to encourage unemployed workers to engage in services that can help them get reemployed. One effective tool for helping unemployed workers find new employment faster and shorten their duration of Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefit receipt is the Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA) program.² The REA program offers mandatory, in-person sessions in which workforce staff complete several activities with participants—assess their eligibility for UI benefits, provide an orientation to the American Job Center and its services, share labor market information, help them develop a reemployment plan, and make referrals to additional services. Claimants who have not yet found a job and continue to receive UI benefits after the first REA session are required to participate in up to two more sessions. Failure to attend these REA sessions may affect continuance of UI benefits.

Unfortunately, many individuals who receive the notification letter from the UI agency (UIA) mandating participation in REA do not schedule or attend their REA sessions. For example, during the first quarter of program operations in 2015, only 43 percent of the UI claimants at Michigan Works! Southwest who received the Michigan UIA notification letter scheduled their first session.

In 2014, DOL’s Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and ideas42 to explore the potential of using insights from behavioral science to improve outcomes in DOL programs. In this study, we collaborated with the Employment and Training Administration, in a partnership that involved the W.E. Upjohn Institute and Michigan Works! Southwest, to assess whether a series of low-cost emails informed by behavioral science could encourage more UI claimants to schedule, attend, and complete their REA program sessions. We tested this approach in four counties in Michigan from the spring through the early fall of 2015. Results from a randomized controlled trial indicate that the emails were effective. This brief describes the intervention context and design, discusses key findings, and identifies lessons learned from this study.

¹ Sources for the research cited in this brief appear in the full report, which is available at www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/BISStudy/.

² In fiscal year 2015, the REA program was replaced with the Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment program (RESEA). RESEA includes the activities initially conducted under REA (summarized on the first page of this brief), as well as increased funding to provide additional reemployment services.

Key findings

Simple encouragement emails resulted in a **15 percentage point increase** in UI claimants **scheduling** their first REA session.

There was a **14 percentage point increase** in UI claimants **completing** the REA program.

Intervention context

Michigan was one of 44 states that received part of \$80 million in REA grants awarded by DOL in 2015. At that time, Michigan began its REA program with plans to target 9,000 UI claimants across five workforce areas between January and September 2015. Michigan Works! Southwest, which serves Branch, Calhoun, Kalamazoo, and St. Joseph counties, was one of the five implementing workforce agencies.

Study goal

Test whether a series of emails can increase participation and completion rates for reemployment programs among UI claimants.

Each week, the Michigan UIA selected approximately 25 current UI claimants who had recently begun receiving UI benefits to participate in the REA program at Michigan Works! Southwest and sent them a notification letter. The letter instructed claimants to contact their local Michigan Works! agency to schedule an appointment for their first REA session. It also told them that their UI benefits could be terminated if they did not contact the agency within 14 days of the date the letter was sent. Despite this warning, 43 percent of the claimants who received the UIA notification letter during the first three months of the REA program failed to schedule their initial session, and 19 percent did not attend their first scheduled session.

Intervention design

Diagnosing behavioral factors. We collaborated with Upjohn and Michigan Works! Southwest staff to diagnose the factors that might deter UI claimants from participating in the REA program. (Exhibit 1 at the end of the brief summarizes our diagnosis.) Three central factors emerged:



Discouragement and avoidance of unpleasant tasks. Claimants may perceive a punitive tone in the UIA notification letter and may respond negatively. They may not read the entire letter or further engage with the REA program.



Inattention, procrastination, or forgetfulness. Claimants may not notice the UIA notification letter, or they may delay and forget to schedule their REA session.



Misunderstanding. Claimants may not understand or may underestimate the potential value of the REA program because the UIA notification letter provides few details about the program.

Email design. We worked closely with Upjohn and Michigan Works! Southwest staff to develop and test a series of up to seven emails that addressed these three factors. The email series (the first of which is illustrated in Exhibit 2 at the end of this brief) included the following design features:



A personal and collaborative tone was intended to foster a positive relationship with claimants, capture their attention, and emphasize the benefits of the REA program. The emails addressed recipients by their first name and signed off with the name of the sender, the REA coordinator, in order to create a personal connection with the program. The emails also emphasized the benefits of participation by highlighting the potential for finding a good job and the benefits of free job-search assistance.



Concise instructions were designed to convey the ease of scheduling a session and to encourage claimants to act right away. A bulleted list at the end of the first email gave claimants clear instructions on what to do next. The email also included links to Google Maps addresses for American Job Centers where they could attend REA sessions.



Reminder emails were designed to reduce the potential for inattention, procrastination, and forgetfulness. Because even motivated people may forget to respond, we sent a follow-up email one week after the first email, prompting claimants again to take action.



Planning prompts gave concrete job-search guidance to reduce procrastination. We sent three more emails to claimants after they completed the REA program. In addition to providing links to the resources available at Michigan Works! Southwest, each email incorporated (1) cues designed to motivate recipients to plan their job-search activities in detail for the week and (2) “fresh start” language that portrayed the beginning of the week as a clean slate for taking action.

All emails included instructions explaining how an individual could unsubscribe from further emails.

Research question

Can a series of encouraging emails informed by behavioral science prompt more UI claimants to begin participating in and complete the REA program?

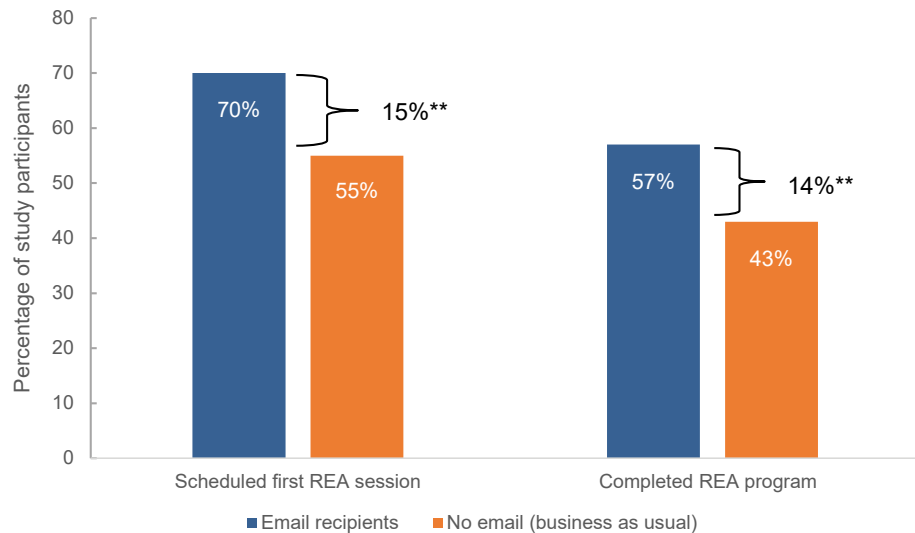
Study design

To test the effectiveness of the email series, we used a randomized controlled trial. Each week, the UI claimants who had been selected to participate in Michigan's REA program were randomly assigned to one of two groups: (1) a treatment group that received the email series from the spring through the early fall of 2015 in addition to the usual UIA notification letter or (2) a control group that received the UIA notification letter only. Our final sample included 372 individuals in the treatment group and 375 in the control group, for a total of 747 participants. We used administrative data from Michigan Works! Southwest to compare how the behavior of the two groups differed and to determine whether the emails worked.

Findings

The email series increased the number of UI claimants who engaged with and completed the REA program. The emails led to a 15 percentage point increase in the proportion of claimants who scheduled their first REA session (Figure 1). There was also a 14 percentage point increase in the proportion who completed the program.

Figure 1. Impact of the email series on the percentage of study participants who scheduled their first REA session and completed the REA program



Most email recipients scheduled their first REA session after the first reminder email was sent. At this point, these individuals could have received two emails from Michigan Works! Southwest: (1) the initial email introducing the REA program and inviting them to schedule an REA session and (2) a reminder email if they had not scheduled their first session by the following Monday. After receiving the first email, the treatment group claimants scheduled their first REA session at a slightly lower rate than that of the control group, although the difference was not significant. We then saw a statistically significant increase in sessions scheduled in the second week, after the reminder email for the first session was sent. Although 33 percent of the control group scheduled a session by the second week, 45 percent of the treatment group scheduled a session by then.

Note: Significance level: **p<0.01. Percentages in the business-as-usual, or control, group are unadjusted; percentages in the group implementing the new process are equal to the control group percentage plus the estimated impact. Asterisks refer to the statistical significance of the estimated impact.

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The emails raised the attendance rates at all three REA sessions. The treatment group’s attendance rate for the first REA session was 14 percentage points higher than that of the control group. Attendance rates for the second and third REA sessions were 13 and 12 percentage points higher, respectively. All of these differences are statistically significant, meaning these results are likely due to the intervention we tested and not to chance. Claimants who began the REA program and did not complete three sessions either failed to attend the second or third session or became reemployed between sessions and stopped collecting UI benefits.

Once individuals attended their first REA session, they were equally likely to complete the program regardless of whether they received emails. In both the treatment and the control group, about 80 percent of the UI claimants who began the REA program completed it. However, this result may reflect two conditions: (1) changes in the program’s participants because individuals who otherwise would not have participated decided to attend and (2) the potential effects of the reminder emails for the second and third REA sessions, which may have brought in individuals who otherwise may not have attended.

Implications and next steps

Our results suggest that sending a series of emails that draw on insights from behavioral science can be a compelling, low-cost strategy for encouraging UI claimants to take advantage of reemployment programs.

Low-cost, behaviorally informed emails generated substantial impacts. The increases we observed in scheduling rates (15 percentage points) and in completion rates (14 percentage points) are substantial, especially considering the modest nature of the intervention.

Email interventions can be effective even if many people do not read or open their messages. The average “open rate” across all emails was 41 percent. This suggests that emails can be an effective intervention even if many people do not open and read them. When designing the email, we considered the possibility that many recipients might not open it but might see the subject line. We composed the subject line and the email content that was likely to be previewed on varied email platforms and mobile devices with this in mind.

Our intervention is broadly relevant and scalable. Our results are especially promising because of the low-touch, low-cost nature of the intervention. Implementing an email intervention like the one tested in this study may be feasible for other providers of reemployment services. Many American Job Centers already have the capability to send mass emails to their customers, and the menu of affordable technology options for improving how these mass emails are managed is growing. This suggests that it may be possible to move forward with this strategy at American Job Centers and to examine the results. More broadly, the findings of this study may be relevant to a wide spectrum of reemployment service programs.

Strategies to get people “in the door” can have a long-lasting effect. The emails increased the number of treatment group claimants who scheduled their first REA session, and those who attended this session continued to participate in the program at the same rate as the control group. This suggests that interventions that prompt a simple, initial behavior, such as scheduling a meeting, may effectively increase engagement with subsequent actions that require sustained effort, such as attending a series of sessions, especially when paired with reminders.

Learn more

In addition to the effort described in this brief, the project team has developed interventions and executed trials in partnership with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to boost workplace safety and with the Employee Benefits Security Administration to help DOL employees save more for retirement. You can access reports, briefs, presentations, and infographics on these trials, as well as additional tools for applying behavioral insights by visiting www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/BISStudy/. This brief is an updated version of an interim brief published in April 2016.

Exhibit 1. Behavioral bottlenecks and email design implications

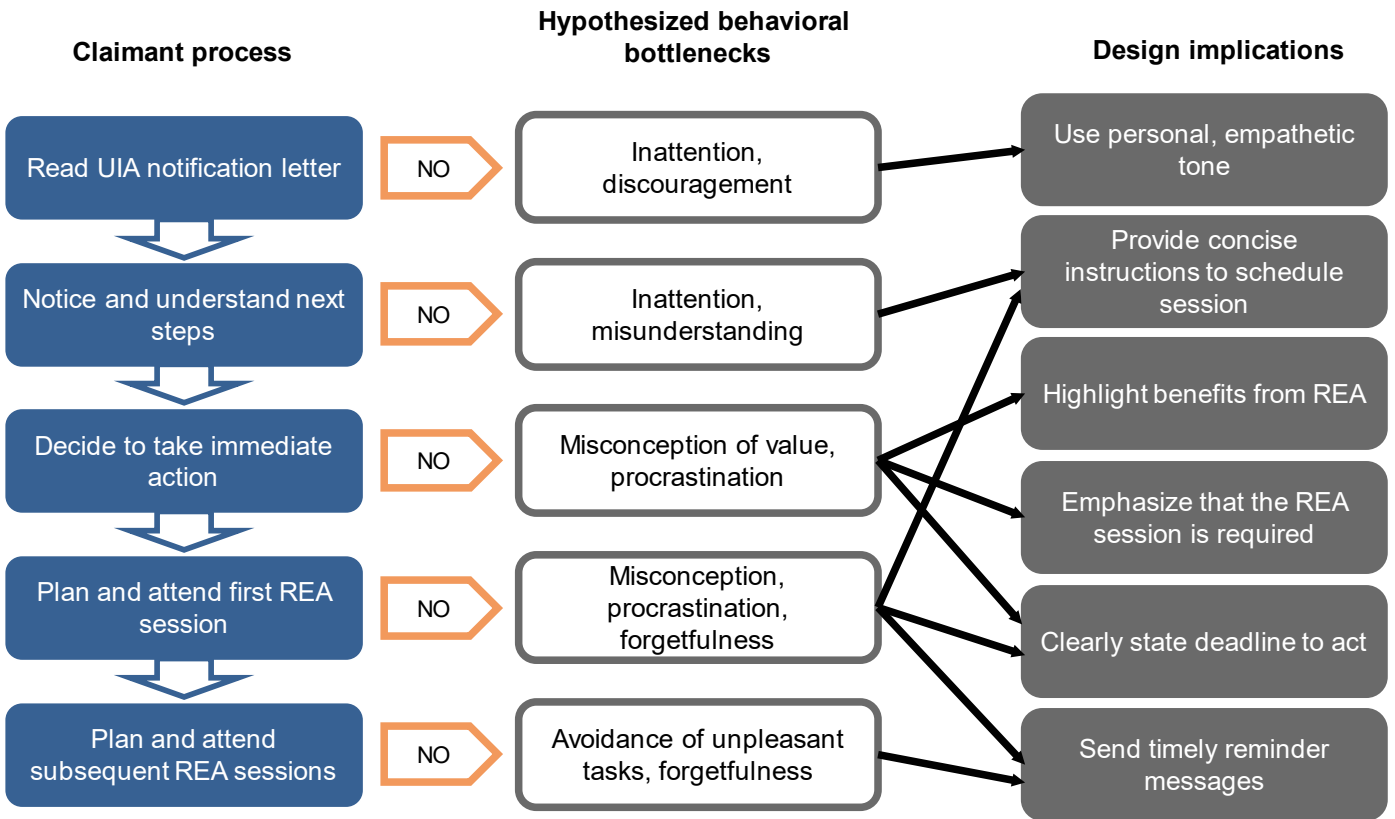


Exhibit 2. Email sent to randomly selected UI claimants

Subject: [Schedule your Michigan Works! assessment](#)
Short preview: [Your personalized Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment](#)

Dear (first name),

Hi, I'm Darlene at Michigan Works! Southwest. Soon, you will receive a letter from the Unemployment Insurance Agency asking you to schedule a Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment within 14 days. The Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency requires your participation in REA to continue unemployment benefits, but we at Michigan Works! Southwest view REA as an opportunity to help you get back to work.

Please call me at [269-488-7619](tel:269-488-7619) for Kalamazoo, [269-592-2049](tel:269-592-2049) for Three Rivers, or [877-256-8294](tel:877-256-8294) for Branch and Calhoun counties (whichever office is more convenient for you) as soon as possible to schedule your Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment.

We will work with you one-on-one to help you get reemployed in a good job. We can provide a variety of effective reemployment services at no cost to you. All our services are always provided free. We look forward to meeting you soon.

Sincerely,
Darlene, REA Coordinator



What to Do Next:

1. Call me today at [269-488-7619](tel:269-488-7619) (Kalamazoo), [269-592-2049](tel:269-592-2049) (Three Rivers), or [877-256-8294](tel:877-256-8294) (Branch and Calhoun) to schedule your REA appointment. I can be reached during regular business hours, Monday through Friday.

2. Bring the following materials to your appointment:
- Your government issued photo identification.
 - Your recent monthly record of work search (UIA form 1583).
 - Your resume (if you don't have one, we can help you write one).
3. Come to your appointment at one of the following locations:

[Michigan Works!](#)
1601 S. Burdick Street
Kalamazoo, MI 49001

[Michigan Works!](#)
16587 Enterprise Dr. #5
Three Rivers, MI 49093

[Michigan Works!](#)
210 Vista Drive
Coldwater, MI 49036

[Michigan Works!](#)
135 Hamblin Avenue
Battle Creek, MI 49017

More Details about Michigan Works! REA:

Our new reemployment services program for REA participants is designed to help easily satisfy your job search requirements and make sure your unemployment benefits are not interrupted. You will meet one-on-one with an experienced reemployment services counselor to review your continued eligibility for UI benefits, discuss your recent job search efforts, and develop a personalized reemployment strategy using variety of employment services available at Michigan Works! Southwest.

Provides a clear deadline

Emphasizes benefits of participation

List resources to facilitate next steps

Provides more information about what to expect

Uses a personal and empathetic tone

Clearly lists next steps

