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Virtual Reality for Probation/Parole Staff

Assessing benefits for staff wellness and satisfaction

Agency: Idaho Department of Correction (IDOC) Probation and Parole Division, District 4 Field Office

Project Duration:
06/04/19–10/24/19

Pracademic*:
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Context
Many agencies recognize the need to optimize staff wellness and satisfaction to reduce turnover and increase job satisfaction and productivity. Although resources for doing so may be limited, virtual reality (VR) offers similar potential benefits to staff as seen with client populations.

Key Finding
No difference was found in perspectives about self and job before and after the introduction of VR to the workplace in this feasibility pilot study.

*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy “Pracademics” who can lead trials.

Background

There is increasing recognition of the benefits of addressing employee needs. Efforts to address staff wellness and satisfaction may vary by resources available. Virtual reality (VR) is a technology that may offer a simple and cost-effective method for increasing staff wellness and satisfaction. VR immerses users in an imagined or replicated world and can provide opportunities that may not be available in the real world. For example, to destress after a hard day, viewers may take a trip to Paris, swim with dolphins, or climb the pyramids. VR may serve as both a way to relax and a method to temporarily escape real-world challenges.

The Idaho Department of Correction (IDOC), Probation and Parole Division, District 4 Field Office tested VR for probation and parole staff members.

Design

Approximately 65 staff assigned to this office on a daily basis or who use it as needed throughout the work week were invited to participate in this project. The VR equipment and recordings were set up in a private space dedicated to this purpose. Staff were informed about the availability of the VR materials and the parameters for use (15 minute “VR breaks” during working hours, frequency of use, use of sign-up sheet, etc.). Surveys were posted online before (Time 1, 05/06–06/03/19) and after (Time 2; 09/09–10/24/19) the VR project was launched to collect information about staff perspectives on work, experience with VR, wellness, and satisfaction.

Lessons Learned

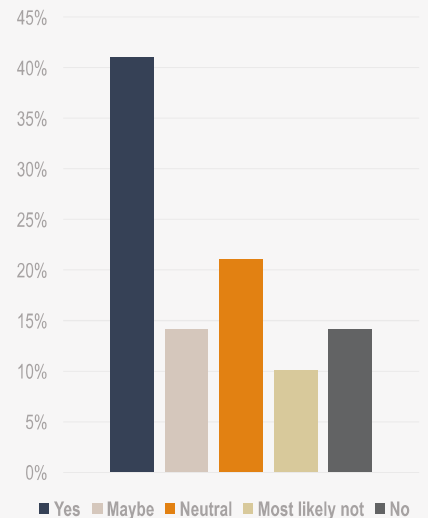
Time 1 responses were submitted by 64 staff, and 29% of them, who used the VR during the pilot, submitted Time 2 responses (n=22). One Time 2 response was received from a staff member who did not use VR and was therefore not used in analysis. It is unknown whether other staff did not use VR or just did not complete the survey. There were no statistically significant differences across time in response to items addressing general themes such as job satisfaction, being anxious or depressed at work, or intent to remain at the job for a year. For example,

at Time 1, 8% stated that they were dissatisfied working for the department and at Time 2, 7% reported the same. Time 2 respondents indicated use of VR between 1 and 10 times. At Time 2, 38% reported that VR was helpful in reducing stress for a few minutes after use, and 14% reported that VR was helpful in reducing stress for the rest of the workday. Nine percent used VR immediately after a stressful event, whereas 73% used it during free time. From the recordings available to view, 41% reported selecting exciting themes, whereas 36% selected serene themes. The figure below shows responses about possible future use of VR.

Next Steps

This was a small pilot to test the feasibility of offering VR recordings to staff as a means to reduce negative moods and increase satisfaction. It would be informative to know if the majority of staff did not use VR or simply did not complete the Time 2 survey. Efforts are underway to develop a similar feasibility trial for use in correctional facilities.

Would you suggest the use of virtual reality as an established stress reduction practice for Probation and Parole staff?



Why BetaGov Spark?

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn't possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What's more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.