



what works centre for  
local economic growth

# Toolkit Employment Training Reminders

## What are they and what do they aim to do?

Reminders provide people with information about available training or forthcoming courses for which they are enrolled. For example, they may remind people about their timetable for the coming week. Reminders may be important because individuals juggle tasks to reach competing objectives and things like training courses may be easily neglected. Sending individuals reminders by text message or email is a very cheap way to potentially increase attendance for training programmes.

## How effective are they?

We only found one study of SMS reminders for an employment training programme. This study finds positive impacts on course attendance and final exam performance.

This finding, on the effectiveness of reminders is supported by strong evidence available from other contexts (such as claiming benefits). The evidence overwhelmingly suggests a positive impact of reminders on behaviours such as attendance. For example, one paper that examines the impact of weekly email reminders sent to gym members finds probability of attendance during the 24 hours after the reminder increases by 5.7 percentage points compared with the control group.

This positive finding is repeated in several other contexts, for example, for low income households in the U.S. reminded (by email) to claim a tax credit, for voters in the U.S. reminded (by SMS) to vote, for patients in Saudi Arabia reminded (by SMS) to attend their hospital appointments, and for households in Bolivia, Peru and the Philippines reminded (by SMS) to save.

## How secure is the evidence?

We found one study on the impact of reminders for employment training and five on the impact of reminders in other contexts.

While limited in number, the studies are of high quality (all six are RCTs). The evidence also relates to relevant countries – the employment training study is from the UK, and three of the five from other contexts are from the OECD.

Nevertheless, more studies on the impact of reminders in the area of employment training are needed. RCT designs for reminders would be easy to set up and low cost.

For a full list of studies and summaries of their findings see the Annex.

## Are they cost-effective?

Reminders are very low cost and the evidence suggests they can be effective.

Studies that compare the effects of SMS and telephone reminders show they are equally effective. However, SMS is cheaper in terms of administration and telephone company fees, plus they can be scheduled to be sent at the most relevant times. Emails are cheaper still, and can provide more content/information than a text message. However, emails may not reach everyone, especially those on lower incomes who may not have easy (or any) internet access.

Overall, in existing (non-training) applications reminders appear to be a very cost effective policy design feature.

## Things to consider

- Reminders that improve training attendance may also have positive effects on performance, as measured by final grades.
- The notice should be as simple as possible and should highlight the benefits.
- Trialling different wording may be a simple way to increase response rates. In our examples, emphasising the size of potential benefits or reminding the individual of their personal motivation for the activity, improved effectiveness. In contrast, in our examples, the tone of the message (warm/personal vs cold/impersonal) and information on time for compliance, made no difference to effectiveness.
- For training programmes aimed at the unemployed, it may be that SMS has a wider reach than email.
- Reminders are often more effective for those least likely to attend.
- Individuals tend to respond quickly to reminders. Therefore, reminders could be used to regulate peak and off-peak times for certain activities by sending them during quiet periods.

# Annex: Evidence on Reminders for Employment Training

## What kind of evidence do we consider?

The aim of our toolkits is to summarise the available ex-post (i.e. after introduction) evaluation evidence on particular aspects of policy design. We consider a wider range of evaluations than for our evidence reviews. But we continue to focus on finding and summarising evaluations that identify effects which can be attributed, with some degree of certainty, to the support provided.

Our objective is to assess the quality of, and summarise the lessons from, the available evaluation evidence in a way that can help inform policy decisions. We focus on summarising the findings from available evaluations, while recognising that additional sources of evidence may play an important role in making good decisions around support provided in any specific context.

This toolkit considers the impact of reminders on employment training. Providing individuals with information or reminders can bring training programmes to their immediate attention. This is important because many employment training programmes are aimed at people with complex lifestyles, for whom course attendance may not always be an immediate priority. Even if they are aware and intend to participate, programme clients may have many other challenges to deal with (or may simply forget to go). Sending individuals reminders is potentially a very cheap way to increase programme attendance.

We looked for evaluations of the impact of reminders or information specifically for training programmes. We didn't specify any particular communication type so the reminder could come via SMS, email or anything else. We focused on evidence from the OECD, in English. We considered any study that provided before-and-after evidence on the effect on participants; or cross-sectional studies that compared effectiveness for individuals or firms receiving different kinds of support. We also included more robust studies that compared changes to participants with a control group. [[link to Maryland Scale](#)].

Our systematic search found only one study of reminders in employment training. However, we did find five studies that examine the effect of reminders in other contexts (e.g. claiming benefits such as tax credits, voter turnout, gym attendance). Both the employment training study and those of reminders in other contexts are implemented as Randomised Control Trials, so high quality evidence (scoring the maximum of five on the Maryland Scale). Our evidence review on employment training [[link](#)] summarises findings from the larger literature that considers overall policy effectiveness.

## The evidence

**One study of SMS reminders finds a positive impact on course attendance and final exam performance.**

Study 425 examines the effectiveness of text messages aimed at increasing course attendance by adult learners at two colleges in the UK. The study is implemented as a randomised controlled trial (RCT). The study finds that sending text messages increases course attendance rates for the three week observation period after the intervention. These positive effects persist up to the end of the year (attendance is increased from 34% to 41%) with further positive effects on the share of students that passed all exams by 7 percentage points from 57% to 64%.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reported in The Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) Update Report 2015-16 which summarises results from several ongoing trials where early findings indicate positive effects on attendance. However, with the exception of Study 425, detailed evaluations for these programmes are to date not yet available and are therefore not reported in this toolkit.

**In other (non-training) contexts, the evidence finds reminders have positive effects on behaviour such as attendance**

Study 420 examines the impact of emails sent to low income households reminding them of their potential eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit in the United States. In a randomised controlled trial (RCT) the authors find that receipt of the mailing increases benefit take-up by 14 percentage points (55%, compared with baseline take-up of 41%). A simplified version of the email increases take-up by 23 percentage points. A simplified version that also reports the size of financial benefits the recipient is potentially entitled to, increases take-up by 31 percentage points. They also find that it makes no difference to response rates if the email (additionally) states that it takes 10 minutes or 60 minutes to complete the application. Neither is there an effect for statements that attempt to reduce the stigma of applying, such as emphasising that the credit is a reward for “hard work”.

Study 421 examines the impact of weekly email reminders to existing members to attend the gym in Italy. In an RCT the authors find that the probability of attendance during the 24 hours following receipt of the e-mail increase by 5.7 percentage points (for the entire population) and 7.8 percentage points (for low-attendance users). They find that on the second day after the reminder the attendance converges that that of the control group, but on the following day it rises again. The effect decreases over time but persists, with low-attendance users still 4 percentage points more likely to attend than control users in the 8 weeks after the reminder is sent.

Study 422 investigates the impact of SMS reminders sent to patients on their attendance for hospital appointments in Saudi Arabia. In a randomised controlled trial (RCT) the study finds that the attendance rate was significantly higher in the reminder group (73.7%) than in the non-reminder group (61.2%).

Study 423 examines the impact of monthly SMS reminders on individual savings at three banks in Bolivia, Peru and the Philippines. In an RCT the study finds that reminders increased the total amount saved by 6%. Reminders that mentioned users’ savings goals (e.g. to be able to pay for school fees) were twice as effective.

Study 424 examines the impact of ‘cold’ (impersonal) rather than ‘warm’ SMS reminders to vote in the United States. Using an RCT, the authors found an effect of 0.72 percentage points for those that received the message compared to the control group. The relative effect is 18.2%, which is at least as large as the effect found by an earlier study that uses ‘warm’ messages.

## Cost effectiveness

**Reminders are very low cost and the evidence suggests they are effective in other (non-training) contexts.**

Study 422 discusses the cost-effectiveness of SMS vs. telephone reminders. Studies that compare the effects of SMS and telephone reminders show they are equally effective. However, SMS is cheaper in terms of administration and telephone company fees, plus they can be scheduled to be sent at the most relevant times.

Emails are almost costless and can provide more content/information than a text message. However, they may not reach everyone, especially those on lower incomes who may not have easy (or any) internet access.

Study 420 discusses the cost effectiveness of email reminders sent to low income households about

a tax credit. The authors argue there are three sources of cost: (i) the administrative cost of distributing and processing mailings, (ii) possible increases in ineligible claiming, and (iii) possible negative externalities or individual disutility to the mailings (for example, emails distracting people from other activities). The administrative costs are thought to be essentially negligible. The increase in ineligible claiming is also likely to be very small. Where examined the rate of disallowed claims for the experiment was comparable to the national average. Finally, the negative externalities of the email, such as distraction, are also likely to be modest.

Overall, in other contexts, reminders are a very cost effective policy design feature.

## Evidence Reviewed

Ref. No	Reference
420	Bhargava, S., & Manoli, D. (2013). Why are benefits left on the table? Assessing the role of information, complexity, and stigma on take-up with an IRS field experiment. <i>Amer. Econ. Rev.</i>
421	Calzolari, Giacomo and Nardotto, Mattia, Nudging with Information: A Randomized Field Experiment (September 10, 2011). <a href="http://ssrn.com/abstract=1924901">http://ssrn.com/abstract=1924901</a>
422	Use of short message service reminders to improve attendance at an internal medicine outpatient clinic in Saudi Arabia: a randomized controlled trial. Youssef, A. // <i>Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal</i> ; May2014, Vol. 20 Issue 5, p317
423	Dean Karlan & Margaret McConnell & Sendhil Mullainathan & Jonathan Zinman, 2010. "Getting to the Top of Mind: How Reminders Increase Saving," NBER Working Papers 16205, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.
424	Malhotra, N., Michelson, M. R., Rogers, T., & Valenzuela, A. A. (2011). Text Messages as Mobilization Tools The Conditional Effect of Text Messages as Mobilization Tools The Conditional Effect of. <i>American Politics Research</i> , 39(4), 664-681.
425	Chande, R., Luca, M., Sanders, M., Soon, X. Z., Borcan, O., Barak Corren, N, Linos, E., Kirkman, E., & Robinson, S. (2015). Curbing adult student attrition: Evidence from a field experiment, CMPO Working Paper Series No. 14/335, University of Bristol.

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