

The Unilever Experiment

The Project

In 2001 Unilever identified a programme that draws on leading edge research, which has been shown in numerous organisational studies around the world to generate rapid and sustained improvements in the performance and health of employees and therefore significantly impact the business. This Peak Performance programme specifically teaches a number of techniques that allow people to consciously alter the quality of the internal electrical signals sent to the brain. Changing these internal signals enables individuals to maximise intellectual ability through a process called cortical facilitation. Cortical facilitation helps individuals to react faster, make better decisions, seize opportunities and be more perceptive and creative. In addition, teaching individuals to consciously control their physiology has been shown to enhance a wide variety of health and well being parameters.

In view of this compelling scientific evidence Unilever organised a pilot study to evaluate the efficacy of the Peak Performance programme in an industrial setting in the Netherlands. This brief report presents the key findings measured before and after the Peak Performance programme.

The Results

This small-scale pilot study involved 40 individuals; twenty received training in Peak Performance and twenty acted as controls, receiving no intervention. A number of health, well-being and performance parameters were assessed before and after training in both groups. The study was conducted with the help of the Unilever Corporate Research "Healthy Ageing" team, who led in the protocol design, conducted the testing of individuals and carried out all laboratory and statistical analyses.

a) Hormonal Function

Levels of cortisol and DHEA were tracked before and, for up to six months, after the training. A significant positive correlation was demonstrated between high cortisol:DHEA ratios and impaired cognitive function, confirming previous research, which demonstrated that impairments in these tasks might be due to the disabling action of cortisol in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex.

A significant reduction in the cortisol:DHEA ratio three months after training in the intervention group was also demonstrated. The control group's cortisol:DHEA ratio increased over the same time period.

Cortisol:DHEA ratio.

	Control	Intervention Group
Cortisol : DHEA Ratio	22	-70

DHEA levels.

Sustained improvements in DHEA levels after training ($p < 0.01$).

	Pre	3 months	6 months
DHEA nmol/L	0.54	.93	1.13

b) Blood Pressure

Significant improvement in blood pressure six months after training ($p < 0.001$).

	Pre	3 months	6 months
Systolic BP	129	127	119

c) Body Fat

Significant reduction in abdominal fat was sustained for up to six months.

	Pre	3 months	6 months
Waist : Hip Ratio	0.952	0.906	0.908

d) Perceived “psychological” benefits

Mental Clarity

One of the instruments we used was the Profile of Mood States (POMS). One of the key parameters measured by the POMS is the degree of perceived “mental confusion”. We demonstrated a near significant reduction in confusion in the intervention group compared to the control group, who deteriorated, three months after training.

	Control	Intervention Group
Increase in confusion	1.39	-0.46

Stress Levels

All participants in the training arm also completed an extensive psychometric questionnaire, the Personal and Business Performance Assessment (PBPA), prior to attending the course. The PBPA addresses individual and business performance issues and also includes the General Hospital Questionnaire (GHQ)-12 and the Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale (HADS). The GHQ has been used to categorise individuals as “stressed” in many research studies. In this study, we demonstrated a reduction in the percentage of “stressed” individuals after training.

	Pre	3 months	6 months
% of attendees	53	21	6

Performance

Although this study did not formally measure the impact on work performance, we demonstrated a subjective improvement in work performance using the PBPA questionnaire. A number of sample questions from this construct are shown below.

% of attendees	Pre	3 months	6 months
“Efficient”	63	74	81
“Accomplish Objectives”	37	68	69
“Complete Tasks”	63	84	94

Conclusion

The Peak Performance programme has been shown to demonstrate a significant and sustained improvement in a wide variety of subjective and objective parameters of personal health and well being in addition to subjective parameters of business performance.

In view of the above evidence it may be worthwhile determining the extent of the benefits of this training when implemented on a larger scale across Unilever.