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Study focuses on strategies for achieving goals, resolutions

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Study focuses on strategies for achieving goals, resolutions

Psychology professor Dr. Gail Matthews has advice for those who put ‘stop procrastinating’ on their list of New Year’s resolutions: Share your goals with a friend.

Matthews, a professor in Dominican's [Department of Psychology](#) in the [School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#), recruited 267 participants from a wide variety of businesses, organizations, and networking groups throughout the United States and overseas for a study on how goal achievement in the workplace is influenced by writing goals, committing to goal-directed actions, and accountability for those actions. Participants ranged in ages from 23 to 72 and represented a wide spectrum of backgrounds.

Matthews found that more than 70 percent of the participants who sent weekly updates to a friend reported successful goal achievement (completely accomplished their goal or were more than half way there), compared to 35 percent of those who kept their goals to themselves, without writing them down.

Her findings are due to be presented in May 2015 at the Ninth Annual International Conference of the Psychology Research Unit of Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER).

Matthews became interested in the study of procrastination about 11 years ago after reading an article in Fast Company magazine about the “1953 Yale Study of Goals.” The premise of the study — that people who write down specific goals for their future are far more likely to be successful than those who have either unwritten goals or no specific goals at all — has inspired the teachings of many self-help authors and personal coaches.

The only trouble is that the study was never actually conducted. The 1996 Fast Company article debunked the Yale study as little more than an often-quoted urban legend. However, Matthews’ research now backs up the conclusions long attributed to the mythical Yale study.

“With the proliferation of business and personal coaching and the often anecdotal reports of coaching success, it is important that this growing profession be founded on sound scientific research,” Matthews said.

Participants in Matthews’ study were randomly assigned to one of five groups.

Group 1 was asked to simply think about business-related goals they hoped to accomplish within a four-week block and to rate each goal according to difficulty, importance, the extent to which they had the skills and resources to accomplish the goal, their commitment and motivation, and whether they had pursued the goal before (and, if so, their prior success).

Groups 2-5 were asked to write their goals and then rate them on the same dimensions as given to Group 1.

Group 3 was also asked to write action commitments for each goal. Group 4 had to both write goals and action commitments and also share these commitments with a friend.

Group 5 went the furthest by doing all of the above plus sending a weekly progress report to a friend.

Broadly categorized, participants’ goals included completing a project, increasing income, increasing productivity, improving organization, enhancing performance/achievement, enhancing life balance, reducing work anxiety, and learning a new skill. Specific goals ranged from writing a chapter of a book to listing and selling a house.

Of the original 267 participants, 149 completed the study. These participants were asked to rate their progress and the degree to which they had accomplished their goals.

At the end of the study, only 43 percent of Group 1 either accomplished their goals or were at least half way there. Sixty-two percent of Group 4 accomplished their goals or were at least half way there. However, 76 percent of those in Group 5 either accomplished their goals or were at least half way there.

“My study provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of three coaching tools: accountability, commitment, and writing down one’s goals,” Matthews said.

[CLICK HERE](#) to see goals research summary.

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