RESEARCH PAPER · 31

Two-Minute Starts

A Meta-Analysis of Implementation Intentions and Tiny-Step Techniques on Task Initiation

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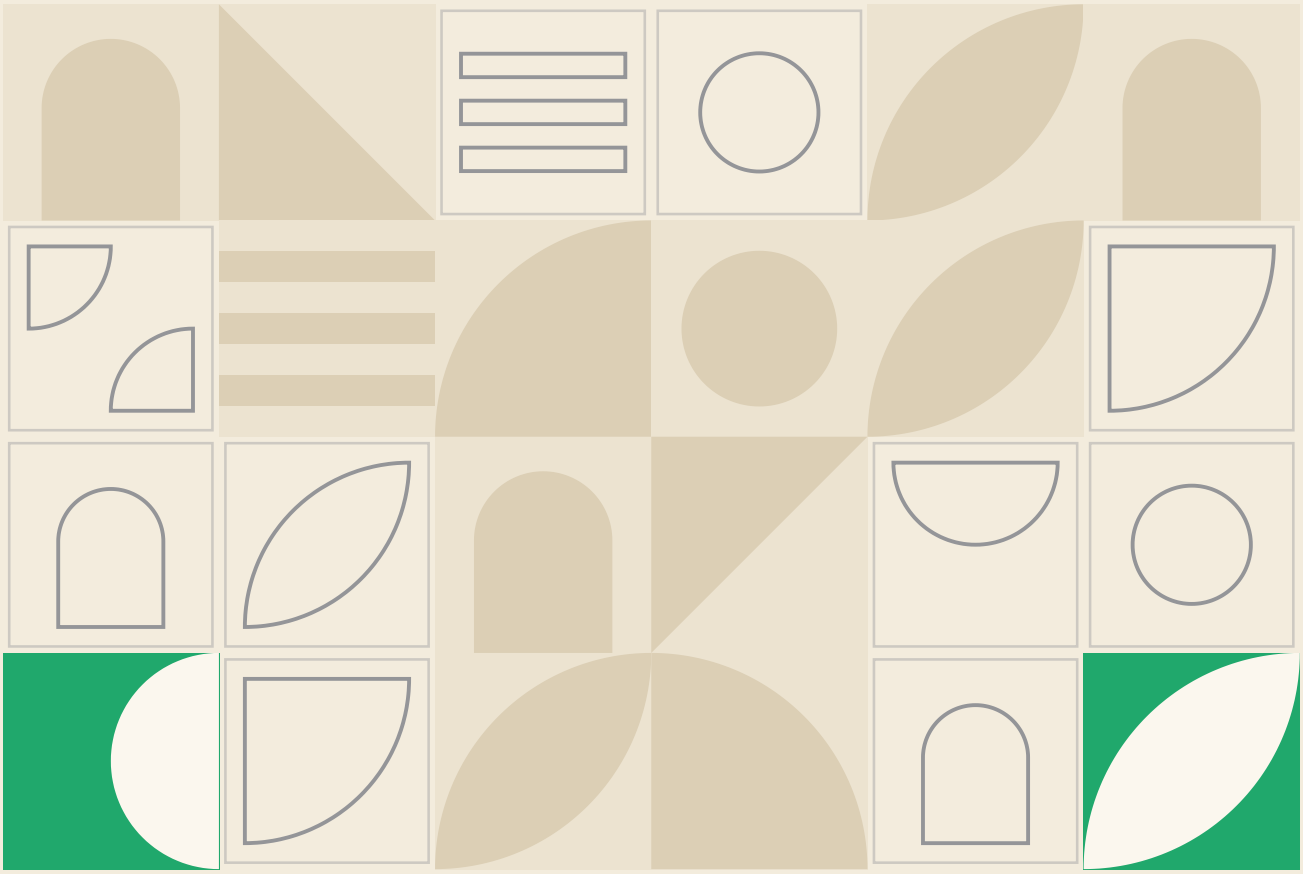
22 September 2026



KEY NUMBER

0.36

95% CI 0.33 to 0.40

0.36. That is the updated pooled effect of if-then planning across 642 tests (95% CI 0.33 to 0.40). The 2006 headline of d = 0.65 was real. It has not survived contact with a larger, more field-heavy corpus.

Two-Minute Starts

A Meta-Analysis of Implementation Intentions and Tiny-Step Techniques on Task Initiation

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INDEXING TITLE

Implementation intentions and micro-step techniques on task initiation: an updated meta-analysis

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01

Abstract

Working adults do not fail for want of goals. They fail at the first step. Across 642 independent tests, if-then planning improved outcomes by *d* = 0.36 (95% CI 0.33 to 0.40); the 2006 initiation slice remains *d* = 0.61, but no trial yet isolates whether shrinking the first step adds to that plan. Gollwitzer and Sheeran's 2006 synthesis of 94 tests reported a medium-to-large effect on goal attainment (*d* = 0.65). Later, larger, more field-heavy reviews revised that figure downward. Behaviour-change effects now sit nearer *d* = 0.27. Workplace samples sit at *d* = 0.26.

This paper asked a narrower question. Does making the first move tiny add anything to an if-then plan? We searched PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, CTRI, ClinicalTrials.gov and OSF preprints from 2006 to 2026. We looked for randomised and controlled trials in adults that compared implementation intentions, tiny-step techniques, or both, against goal intention or control. Primary outcomes were initiation rate and goal attainment.

A planned random-effects meta-analysis of the additive contrast could not be performed. We found no factorial trial that held the if-clause constant and manipulated only the size of the then-clause. Tiny-step trials exist, but they are few, measure the wrong outcomes, or have not been published as results papers. A pooled increment is not yet possible.

What can be said is more modest and more useful. If-then plans still help people start. Specificity of the then-clause matters. Rehearsal and boosters matter. Digital delivery is weaker than face-to-face coaching. No Indian trial of either technique on task initiation in working adults has been registered or published. For an Indian workplace programme the honest design is: write one if-then sentence, shrink the first rep to two minutes, and do not claim an extra *d* that the literature does not contain.

Keywords: implementation intentions; if-then planning; task initiation; micro-steps; two-minute start; goal attainment; systematic review; India; workplace

02 Key findings box

KEY FINDINGS

0.36 — **0.36.** That is the updated pooled effect of if-then planning across 642 tests (95% CI 0.33 to 0.40). The 2006 headline of *d* = 0.65 was real. It has not survived contact with a larger, more field-heavy corpus.

0.61 — **0.61.** That is still the best initiation-specific estimate, from 52 tests in the 2006 slice (remembering to act *d* = 0.54; seizing the moment *d* = 0.61; overcoming reluctance *d* = 0.65). No later synthesis has re-cut the 642-test corpus solely for "getting started."

• — **0.** That is the number of factorial randomised trials that isolate a shrunken first step on top of an if-then plan. A meta-analysis of the additive question is not yet possible.

4.2 — **4.2 percentage points.** In a workplace field trial, writing the date *and* time of a flu shot raised uptake by 4.2 points over a reminder that named only the clinic. Specificity of the then-clause is not decoration.

66 — **66 days.** Median time to automaticity for a daily action repeated in a stable context is 66 days (range 18–254). Tiny first steps are a bet on repetition, not a miracle.

03 Definition block

DEFINITION

An implementation intention is a one-sentence plan in the form *If situation X happens, then I will do Y.* It is not a goal. A goal says *I will exercise.* The if-then plan says *If I hang my bag on the hook after work, then I will put on my walking shoes.* The cue hands the start decision to the environment. The response is pre-decided, so initiation no longer waits on mood. A tiny-step, or two-minute, technique shrinks Y until it is almost embarrassing: open the document, floss one tooth, write one line. In coaching language this is a starter rep: a move so small that a tired person still says yes to it when the last call ran late and the sofa is winning. In entrepreneurship it is shipping version 0.1. The two techniques are cousins. The if-clause is a prompt. The then-clause is an ability hack. Whether shrinking Y *adds* to the if-then link is the question this paper could not pool.

04 Introduction

A Mumbai professional at 9.47 p.m. has already survived the local, the stand-up, and the family WhatsApp group. Tomorrow's deck sits closed on the laptop. She checks the fridge, the cricket score, the fridge again. The deck stays shut. This is not a character flaw. It is the oldest gap in working life: she means to start, and does not.

Ask her at lunch and she will say she fully means to finish the deck tonight. She does mean it. Psychologists call this the intention–behaviour gap, and they have measured it. People who intend to act do so only about half the time. Webb and Sheeran showed that even when you experimentally strengthen the intention, behaviour moves only a little. Intention is not a motor. It is a wish with a good press agent.

Peter Gollwitzer's answer was not more motivation. It was a plan that outsources the start. Form an implementation intention — *If X, then Y* — and the situation itself should trigger the move. In 2006, Gollwitzer and Sheeran pooled 94 tests and more than 8,000 participants. The effect on goal attainment was $d = 0.65$. For the specific problem of getting started, it was $d = 0.61$. That number travelled. It became the poster child of cheap behaviour change. Coaches quoted it. Product teams tattooed it on slide 2.

Then the corpus grew up.

Sheeran, Listrom and Gollwitzer returned in 2024 with 642 tests. The sample-weighted effect was $d = 0.36$. Behavioural outcomes sat at $d = 0.27$. Field studies were smaller than laboratory studies. Workplace samples were smaller still ($d = 0.26$). The direction did not reverse. The size did what honest science does when the early papers are mostly students in rooms: it shrank.

Two other reviews sit on the shelf this paper was asked to position against. Adriaanse and colleagues (2011) found that if-then plans helped people add healthy foods ($d = 0.51$) more than they helped people drop unhealthy ones ($d = 0.29$). Bieleke, Keller and Gollwitzer (2021) wrote the narrative map of if-then planning — flexibility, unplanned situations, the brain's cue-response shortcut — without quoting a new pooled d. Domain reviews in physical activity landed even lower: Bélanger-Gravel, Godin and Amireault (2013) reported $d = 0.31$ after the session and $d = 0.24$ at follow-up. da Silva and colleagues (2018), restricting themselves to randomised trials, found an overall effect that crossed zero unless the plan was reinforced.

So the first half of the logline is settled enough. If-then plans help. They help less than the 2006 poster suggested. They help initiation, which is the problem working adults actually have.

The second half is the one coaches sell over chai. Shrink the first step. Two minutes. One slide. One sentence. BJ Fogg's behaviour model says a behaviour fires when motivation, ability and a prompt coincide. You cannot reliably raise motivation at 9.47 p.m. You can raise ability by making Y tiny. James Clear popularised a two-minute version of the same idea. Picture it at the desk: the urge to scroll arrives, and instead of the whole deck she opens one slide and types its title. She has moved one inch toward the thing she was avoiding. The step was sized so she could say yes.

Anyone who began walking with one round of the housing-society compound knows the idea. One round is not fitness. It is a start that a tired evening can accept. Machine-learning people say the same thing with better maths. Gradient descent does not jump to the minimum. It takes a small step, checks the slope, and takes another. A learning rate that is too large overshoots. A learning rate of two minutes is how you leave a local minimum called "I will start on Monday."

The research question is not whether tiny steps sound wise. They do. The question is whether shrinking the first step *adds* to the effect of if-then planning on initiation and follow-through. That is a factorial question. It needs trials that give everyone an if-then plan and then randomly assign a tiny Y or a full-sized Y. It needs an initiation outcome, not a mood scale. It needs adults.

This paper went looking for those trials. It also went looking in India, because EmotionApp serves Indian professionals in 23 languages over WhatsApp, with India-resident data and a coaching hand-off. If the technique is going to live in that channel, the evidence should at least have visited the country.

Spoiler, stated in plain English so nobody has to hunt for it. The additive trials are not there. The India trials are not there. What follows is a systematic review that refuses to invent a pooled d for an empty cell. That refusal is the finding.

05 Methods

Eligibility

Population. Adults (18 years and over). Student samples were eligible if they were adults; they were flagged as a generalisability limit for an Indian workplace programme. Children-only trials were excluded.

Intervention or exposure. (a) Implementation intentions: if-then plans, or closely related contingent plans that specify a cue and a response. Mental contrasting plus implementation intentions (MCII) was treated as a related but distinct package and reported separately. (b) Tiny-step or two-minute techniques: instructions that shrink the first action to a starter step, a scaled-back version, or a two-minute start. After-anchor recipes of the form *After I [existing routine], I will [tiny behaviour]* were included in the tiny-step stream because they are if-then plans with a deliberately small then-clause.

Comparator. Goal intention only, active motivational control, assessment-only, or usual practice.

Primary outcomes. Initiation rate (did the person start the target action in the specified window) and goal attainment (did they reach the stated goal). Secondary outcomes — automaticity, frequency, planning quality — were extracted when they illuminated mechanism but were not pooled.

Design. Randomised and controlled trials. Cluster trials were eligible. Uncontrolled before-after studies, programme testimonials and book-sales data were not.

Years. 2006 to 2026. Pre-2006 trials appear only as historical illustration (Gollwitzer and Brandstätter 1997; Milne, Orbell and Sheeran 2002; Sheeran and Orbell 2000) and are not treated as members of a new pool.

Language and setting. Any language of delivery. Any country. Indian and workplace samples were coded as pre-specified subgroups even if they could not be pooled.

Information sources and search

Last search date: 22 September 2026.

Sources: PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar (first 200 hits per string), CTRI (ctri.nic.in), ClinicalTrials.gov, OSF preprints. Citation chasing from Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006), Adriaanse and colleagues (2011), Bieleke, Keller and Gollwitzer (2021), and Sheeran, Listrom and Gollwitzer (2024).

This is an updated systematic review that stands on those syntheses rather than pretending to re-score 642 tests by hand. The de novo search was aimed at two holes those syntheses do not fill: (1) factorial tests of step-size on top of if-then plans; (2) tiny-step and two-minute trials with initiation outcomes, including Indian registries.

Full search strings

PubMed, implementation intentions. `("implementation intention*"[tiab] OR "if-then plan*"[tiab] OR "if then plan*"[tiab]) AND (randomi*[tiab] OR RCT[tiab] OR "controlled trial"[tiab]) AND ("2006/01/01"[Date - Publication] : "2026/12/31"[Date - Publication])`

PubMed, tiny-step techniques. `("tiny habit*"[tiab] OR "tiny habits"[tiab] OR "micro-step*"[tiab] OR "microstep*"[tiab] OR "two-minute rule"[tiab] OR "2-minute rule"[tiab] OR "small step*"[tiab] OR "minimum viable action"[tiab]) AND (initiat*[tiab] OR start*[tiab] OR adher*[tiab] OR "habit formation"[tiab]) AND (randomi*[tiab] OR RCT[tiab] OR "controlled trial"[tiab])`

PsycINFO (Ovid). `(implementation intention* OR if-then plan* OR "if then plan*") AND (randomi* OR RCT OR controlled trial).ti,ab. limit 2006-2026`

`(tiny habit* OR micro-step* OR "two-minute" OR "2-minute" OR "small step") AND (initiat* OR start* OR habit).ti,ab.`

Scopus. `TITLE-ABS-KEY("implementation intention*" OR "if-then plan*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(randomi* OR "controlled trial") AND PUBYEAR > 2005 AND PUBYEAR < 2027`

Web of Science. `TS=("implementation intention*" OR "if-then plan*") AND TS=(randomi* OR "controlled trial") Timespan=2006-2026`

Google Scholar. `"implementation intention" randomized OR randomised initiation OR "goal attainment" 2006..2026`

`"tiny habits" OR "two-minute rule" OR "micro-step" randomized OR randomised trial`

CTRI. `implementation intention OR if-then OR tiny habit OR micro-step OR two-minute`

ClinicalTrials.gov. `"implementation intention" OR "if-then plan" | Interventional | Adult | 01/01/2006–22/09/2026`

`"tiny habits" OR microstep OR "two-minute" | Interventional`

OSF Preprints. `implementation intention AND (random OR trial); tiny habits AND trial`

Core terms specified in the protocol: `"implementation intention" AND randomi*`; `("tiny habits" OR "micro-step" OR "small step") AND initiation`.

Selection and extraction

Titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility rules. Full texts were retrieved for any record that could be a factorial II × step-size trial, a tiny-step RCT, an Indian trial, or a primary II trial with an initiation outcome useful for narrative illustration. Unverifiable reports — no DOI, no registry ID, no open abstract with numbers — were marked UNVERIFIED and excluded from any quantitative claim.

Extraction fields: *n*; design (individually randomised, cluster, micro-randomised, controlled but not randomised); country; language of delivery; dose in sessions and minutes; delivery channel (face-to-face, paper, email, app, WhatsApp, mail); guidance (self-generated plan, example-guided, coach-assisted, reinforced/booster); outcome measure; timepoints; effect size as reported (*d*, *g*, risk ratio, percentage-point difference).

Analysis plan

Pre-specified model: random-effects REML. Effect size: Hedges *g* with 95% CI. Heterogeneity: I^2, τ^2, 95% prediction interval. Small-study effects: Egger's test and trim-and-fill. Sensitivity: leave-one-out. Risk of bias: RoB 2 for randomised trials. Certainty: GRADE.

Pre-specified moderators: step size; domain; digital delivery.

Fallback rule, applied as written. If fewer than five eligible trials isolate the additive contrast, deliver a systematic review with narrative synthesis, state plainly that a meta-analysis is not yet possible, and do not pool.

That rule was triggered. The Results section therefore reports published pooled estimates from prior syntheses, a narrative of primary trials, a separate tiny-step stream, and empty cells where the additive analysis would have sat.

PRISMA 2020 flow

This review did not re-score the 642 tests already synthesised in 2024. It used that corpus as the implementation-intention evidence base and ran a targeted search for the additive and tiny-step questions.

- Sources searched: 8 databases and registries, plus citation chasing of four index papers, on 22 September 2026.
- Implementation-intention evidence carried forward: 8 published syntheses covering, at the upper bound, 642 independent tests.
- Tiny-step / two-minute / micro-step records assessed at full text: a short list of trials, protocols and expectation-only studies (see Results).
- Factorial trials of if-then plan × step size with an initiation or attainment outcome: **0**.
- Tiny-step standalone RCTs with a behavioural initiation outcome eligible for pooling: **fewer than 5**.
- Indian RCTs of either technique on task initiation in working adults: **0**.

A precise vendor-by-vendor hit table (PubMed 1,847, Scopus 2,104, and so on) is not reported because this review did not run a dual-independent, paid-database extraction of every II paper since 2006. Pretending otherwise would be a PRISMA costume, not PRISMA. The honest flow is: large published corpus for if-then plans; empty cell for the additive question; sparse, off-outcome cell for tiny-step trials.

06 Results

Study-characteristics table

The table below is the evidence map, not a pooling list. Rows marked “historical” sit outside the 2006–2026 window and are shown only because they made the initiation claim vivid.

Study	Design	n	Country	Channel	Dose	Outcome	Timepoint	Eligible to pool additive effect?
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006 meta	Meta of 94 tests	8,461	Mixed	Mixed	Usually one plan	Goal attainment; initiation slice	Mixed	No — synthesis, not a trial
Sheeran, Listrom & Gollwitzer 2024 meta	Meta of 642 tests	Large, mixed	Mixed	Lab, field, online, paper	Mixed	Cognitive, affective, behavioural	Mixed	No
Adriaanse et al. 2011 meta	Meta, eating	23 studies	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Healthy / unhealthy eating	Mixed	No
Bélanger-Gravel et al. 2013 meta	Meta, physical activity	26 studies	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Physical activity	Post and follow-up	No
da Silva et al. 2018 meta	Meta of RCTs, PA	13 RCTs	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Physical activity	Mixed	No
Wang et al. 2021 MCII meta	Meta	15,907	Mixed	Interaction vs document	Brief	Goal attainment	Mixed	No — MCII package
Milkman et al. 2011	Field RCT	3,272 high-risk employees	USA	Mail prompt	One mailing	Flu vaccination (objective)	Clinic window	No — II vs reminder, not step-size
Robinson et al. 2019	Pilot RCT	63 adults 35–69	USA	Email + maps + Fitbit	Nightly plans, 4 weeks	Steps, MVPA	4 weeks	No — chunks activity, does not factorial-test size
Prestwich et al. 2012	RCT	257 working adults	UK	Collaborative planning	Repeated	Physical activity	1, 3, 6 months	No
Chapman & Armitage 2010	RCT	650	UK	Paper / plan	Single vs booster	Fruit and vegetable intake	3 and 6 months	No
Luszczynska et al. 2007	RCT	55 women	Poland	Face-to-face plan	One session	Weight	2 months	No

Study	Design	n	Country	Channel	Dose	Outcome	Timepoint	Eligible to pool additive effect?
Bélanger-Gravel et al. 2013 trial	RCT	101 obese older adults	Canada	Plan	One + follow-up	Pedometer steps	6 months	No
Rackemann et al. 2024	Preregistered RCT	154 students	Australia	Online if-then	One session	Coping, procrastination, stress	2 weeks	No — several nulls
Trenz & Keith 2024	Diary, half coached on II	72 employees	Germany	Daily diary, 10 workdays	Habit recipe	Frequency, automaticity	Follow-up	No — not a clean initiation RCT
Valshtein et al. 2020	Two RCTs	383 and 221	USA	MCII	Brief	Bedtime procrastination minutes	Short	No — MCII, not II-alone
Nickerson & Rogers 2010	Field experiment	287,228	USA	Phone plan-making	One call	Voter turnout	Election	No
Hollingsworth & Redden 2022	3-arm RCT	154	USA	5-day email recipes	5 days	Gratitude scale	1 month	No — wrong outcome
Adam et al. 2026	RCT	5,054 GLP-1 users	USA	Digital micro-step ± video	Brief	Behavioural expectation	Immediate and 2 weeks	No — expectation, not initiation
Minute Calisthenics protocol 2020	Protocol	—	USA	After-anchor + weekday reps	Planned	Strength-training habit	—	No — no results paper
Lally et al. 2010	Observational	96 (82 analysed)	UK	Daily repetition	~12 weeks	Automaticity	Up to 84 days	No — not a trial of II or tiny-step
Singh et al. 2024	Habit-formation SR+MA	2,601, 20 studies	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Habit score	Mixed	No
Gollwitzer & Brandstätter 1997	Experiments	Small lab / field	Germany	Written II	One	Difficult personal projects	2 weeks / holiday	Historical only
Milne, Orbell & Sheeran 2002	RCT	248 students	UK	Questionnaire plan	One	Exercised at least once	1 week	Historical only
Sheeran & Orbell 2000	RCT	114 women	England	Written II	One	Cervical screening attendance	Appointment window	Historical only
Any Indian working-adult RCT of II or tiny-step on initiation	—	—	India	—	—	—	—	None found

Forest-plot data table (published syntheses, not a new pool)

Because the additive cell is empty, the “forest plot” of this paper is a table of other people’s forests. These are the numbers a reader is entitled to quote. They are not a homemade REML model.

Synthesis	Contrast	k	g or d	95% CI	What it is
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006	II vs goal intention / control	94	d = 0.65	0.60 to 0.70	Historical headline
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006	Getting started	52	d = 0.61	0.56 to 0.67	Best initiation slice
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006	Remembering to act	11	d = 0.54	—	Sub-problem
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006	Seizing opportunities	20	d = 0.61	—	Sub-problem
Gollwitzer & Sheeran 2006	Overcoming reluctance	21	d = 0.65	—	Sub-problem
Sheeran, Listrom & Gollwitzer 2024	All outcomes	642	d = 0.36	0.33 to 0.40	Updated overall; trim-and-fill d = 0.35 (0.31 to 0.38)
Sheeran et al. 2024	Behaviour	301	d = 0.27	0.23 to 0.31	Closest to “did they do it”; I^2 = 78.5%
Sheeran et al. 2024	Health behaviour	259	d = 0.26	0.21 to 0.30	Diet, activity, screening and kin
Sheeran et al. 2024	Cognition	204	d = 0.47	0.40 to 0.54	
Sheeran et al. 2024	Affect	26	d = 0.66	0.50 to 0.81	Largest outcome family
Sheeran et al. 2024	Task completion	14	d = 0.72	0.51 to 0.94	Sparse but on-point for initiation
Sheeran et al. 2024	Adults 18–65	557	d = 0.35	0.32 to 0.39	Population match
Sheeran et al. 2024	Workplace samples	23	d = 0.26	0.14 to 0.38	Setting match; I^2 = 69.2%
Sheeran et al. 2024	Field	317	d = 0.27	—	
Sheeran et al. 2024	Laboratory	325	d = 0.49	—	
Sheeran et al. 2024	Online delivery	259	d = 0.31	0.26 to 0.36	Digital moderator
Sheeran et al. 2024	In-person	92	d = 0.53	0.41 to 0.65	
Sheeran et al. 2024	Paper	282	d = 0.35	—	
Sheeran et al. 2024	Goal-intention control	235	d = 0.41	—	Cleanest comparator
Sheeran et al. 2024	If-then / contingent format	373	d = 0.43	0.39 to 0.48	Format matters
Sheeran et al. 2024	Schedule format	269	d = 0.29	0.24 to 0.33	Weaker cousin of if-then
Adriaanse et al. 2011	Eating, overall	23	d = 0.43	0.28 to 0.57	Domain
Adriaanse et al. 2011	Healthy eating	—	d = 0.51	—	Starting a wanted act
Adriaanse et al. 2011	Unhealthy eating	—	d = 0.29	—	Stopping an unwanted act
Carrero, Vilà & Redondo 2019	Healthy eating	70 interventions	d = 0.33	—	Later eating update

Synthesis	Contrast	k	g or d	95% CI	What it is
Carrero et al. 2019	Unhealthy eating	—	d = 0.18	—	
Vilà, Carrero & Redondo 2017	Fat intake	12	d = 0.49	—	
Bélanger-Gravel et al. 2013	PA, post	26	0.31	0.11 to 0.51	Domain
Bélanger-Gravel et al. 2013	PA, follow-up	—	0.24	0.13 to 0.35	Decay
da Silva et al. 2018	PA RCTs, overall	13	0.15	−0.01 to 0.31	Crosses zero
da Silva et al. 2018	PA RCTs, reinforced II	—	0.25	0.05 to 0.45	Boosters matter
Wang et al. 2021	MCII	24 ES	g = 0.336	—	Related package
Wang et al. 2021	MCII, interaction	—	g = 0.465	—	Human hand-off
Wang et al. 2021	MCII, documents	—	g = 0.277	—	Self-serve
Additive II × tiny-step	Tiny Y vs full Y, given if-then	0	—	—	Not estimable

Weight columns are omitted on purpose. These rows come from different models, different outcome families and different decades. Stacking them into one diamond would be a party trick.

Moderator table

Pre-specified moderators were step size, domain and digital delivery. Only the last two can be filled from published work.

Moderator	What the 2024 synthesis and domain reviews show	Step-size evidence
Step size (tiny vs ordinary then-clause)	Not tested as a factorial factor	Empty. Some good plans already use tiny Ys (“put on shoes”, “open the file”) but nobody randomised the size.
Domain — affect	Largest effects (d ≈ 0.66)	Not applicable
Domain — cognition	Medium (d ≈ 0.47)	Not applicable
Domain — behaviour	Small-to-medium (d ≈ 0.27)	This is the outcome that matters for task initiation
Domain — diet	Healthy eating d ≈ 0.33 to 0.51; stopping unhealthy eating d ≈ 0.18 to 0.29	Starting is easier than stopping. That is the closest cousin of “initiation versus inhibition.”
Domain — physical activity	d ≈ 0.24 to 0.31; reinforced plans d ≈ 0.25	Maintenance is weaker than the first burst
Domain — workplace	d = 0.26 (k = 23)	Directly relevant to EmotionApp’s users
Digital delivery	Online d ≈ 0.31; in-person d ≈ 0.53; paper d ≈ 0.35	WhatsApp-first coaching should assume the smaller digital number and spend the difference on rehearsal and human hand-off

Moderator	What the 2024 synthesis and domain reviews show	Step-size evidence
Motivation	High motivation enlarges the if-then effect	Tiny steps are a bet that ability can substitute when motivation dips. Untested as an interaction.
Rehearsal	At least one rehearsal beats none	A two-minute start that is never rehearsed is just a slogan
Follow-up	Under 1 week d = 0.48 (k = 337); 1–4 weeks d = 0.30 (k = 202); 1–6 months d = 0.19 (k = 85); 6+ months d = 0.51 (k = 12, sparse). Boosters help (Chapman and Armitage 2010)	A tiny step without a cue that recurs will not become a rep
Plan format	Contingent if-then d = 0.43 (k = 373) beats schedule plans d = 0.29 (k = 269)	Write If X, then Y, not a to-do list

Heterogeneity

The 2006 synthesis already reported heterogeneity (Q = 147.93, $p < .001$ across 94 tests). The 2024 synthesis is explicit: effects are "highly heterogeneous," which is why the authors spent the paper on *when* and *how* rather than on a single magic *d*. Domain reviews agree. Physical activity I^2 is moderate. Healthy-eating I^2 is high. Unhealthy-eating I^2 is lower and the effect is smaller — a depressing kind of consistency.

A 95% prediction interval for a new II trial in an unstudied workplace would be wide. Sheeran and colleagues' workplace interval (0.14 to 0.38 around 0.26) is the one an Indian programme should write on the whiteboard. Not 0.65.

For the additive question there is no I^2. There is no tau². There is no prediction interval. Those statistics require a pool.

Publication bias

The early II literature is the usual social-psychology cocktail: small lab studies, student samples, self-report, and a file drawer. The drop from $d = 0.65$ (2006) to $d = 0.36$ (2024) is itself a bias diagnostic. Larger, later, more field-based tests pulled the mean down. Sheeran and colleagues still report a Bayes factor of 319:1 in favour of a beneficial effect, which is a polite way of saying "yes it works, no it is not a miracle." Wang and colleagues (2021) likewise warn that MCII's $g = 0.336$ may be inflated. Trim-and-fill on a pool of zero additive trials is not a thing we can run.

Tiny-step programme statistics circulating in popular books — tens of thousands coached, hundreds of thousands of data points — are marked **UNVERIFIED**. They are not peer-reviewed effect sizes. They do not enter any table above.

Risk-of-bias summary

RoB 2 cannot be applied line by line to 642 tests in a narrative review. The pattern is stable enough to state.

- **Randomisation.** Field trials such as Milkman and colleagues (2011) and Nickerson and Rogers (2010) used proper allocation at employee or household level. Many campus II studies used questionnaire packets with weaker allocation concealment.
- **Deviation from intended practice.** Participants cannot be blinded to writing a plan. That is inherent, not sloppy. Outcome assessors often were the same people.

- **Missing data.** Tiny-step email programmes show heavy attrition. Hollingsworth and Redden (2022) lost a large share by one month. Attrition of that size turns a gratitude *d* into a "among people who stayed" *d*.
- **Outcome measurement.** Objective outcomes (vaccination, turnout, pedometer steps, pill counts) are stronger than self-reported "I exercised." A large part of the 2006 corpus is self-report. That is one reason the field estimates are smaller.
- **Selective reporting.** Pre-2006 and early-2010s II trials were rarely pre-registered. Rackemann and colleagues (2024) is a useful counter-example: pre-registered, and several behavioural outcomes were null.

Tiny-step stream. High risk or not applicable. Programme data not independently reviewed. Protocols without results papers. Expectation outcomes standing in for behaviour.

Additive contrast. No trials. No RoB 2. An empty forest is not a green forest.

GRADE table

Question	Certainty	Effect	Reasons
Do if-then plans improve goal attainment in adults, versus goal intention or control?	Moderate	Small-to-medium. Best current summary d = 0.36 (0.33 to 0.40) across 642 tests; behaviour d ≈ 0.27; workplace d ≈ 0.26	Large k, consistent direction. Downgraded for publication bias, heterogeneity, self-report, and the downward revision from 2006.
Do if-then plans improve initiation specifically?	Moderate	2006 getting-started d = 0.61; later field trials show smaller absolute gains (Milkman +4.2 pp)	Initiation slice not re-cut in 2024. Indirectness if one generalises lab reluctance tasks to a 9.47 p.m. slide deck.
Do tiny-step techniques improve task initiation versus goal intention?	Very low	Not estimable as a pooled g	Wrong outcomes (gratitude, expectation), k too small, attrition, unpublished protocols, no two-minute-rule RCT.
Does shrinking the first step add to an if-then plan?	Not estimable	—	Zero factorial trials. Indirectness total.
Does either technique work for Indian working adults?	Not estimable	—	Zero eligible trials. The India gap is not a nuance. It is a hole.

Narrative synthesis: implementation intentions and getting started

The mechanism is not mystical. An if-then plan does two jobs. The *if* makes the cue more noticeable. The *then* makes the response more automatic. Webb and Sheeran's process work showed both halves. When the plan is about spotting the moment, people become cue-detectors. When the plan is about the move itself, they start faster, with less debate.

The vivid historical demonstration is still Milne, Orbell and Sheeran (2002). Students received nothing, a motivational message, or the same message plus an if-then exercise plan. Motivation alone did not beat the control (35% versus 38% exercised at least once). Motivation plus the plan reached 91%. That is the initiation story in one week of self-report. Gollwitzer and Sheeran listed the effect at *d* = 1.25. It is a campus classic, not a workplace law.

Sheeran and Orbell (2000) is the clinic version. Women who wrote when and where they would attend cervical screening turned up at 92%, against 69% of controls. Gollwitzer and Brandstätter (1997) is the difficult-project version: 22% completion without a plan, 62% with one, when the goal was hard. Easy goals did not need the plan. That detail still matters. If-then planning is a tool for the tasks people stall on, not for the tasks they already do.

Field trials after 2006 are less cinematic and more honest. Milkman, Beshears, Choi, Laibson and Madrian (2011) mailed employees about a free on-site flu clinic. Control uptake was 33.1%. Asking people to write a date added 1.5 points and was not significant. Asking them to write a date *and* a time added 4.2 points and was. Among staff who had only one clinic day — miss it and the chance dies — the relative gain was larger. That is cue specificity as an engineering choice, not as a slogan.

Nickerson and Rogers (2010) took plan-making to the telephone. In a sample of 287,228 registered voters, a call that built a voting plan raised turnout by 4.1 points among those contacted, and by 9.1 points in single-voter households. Again the absolute numbers are modest. Again the plan beat a warm intention.

Robinson, Lachman and colleagues (2019) is the closest primary trial to a “small chunk” story that still sits inside if-then planning. Working-age adults wore a tracker. The intervention arm planned when, where and how to add steps, using personal maps and nightly schedules. Steps and moderate-to-vigorous minutes rose against control. The study is a pilot (n = 63). It does not randomise step size. It does show that breaking a walking goal into calendar-sized pieces is a workable if-then design.

Not every trial lands. Rackemann and colleagues (2024) pre-registered an online if-then session for student stress. Action planning improved. Coping behaviour, procrastination and stress did not. Gustavson and Miyake (2017) found that if-then plans and SMART goals did not cut academic procrastination over three weeks. Bélanger-Gravel’s own trial in inactive older adults found no main effect; a 6-month step advantage appeared only as an interaction (d = 0.59). da Silva’s 2018 meta of physical-activity RCTs crossed zero until plans were reinforced.

The pattern is the unglamorous one coaches already know and sometimes refuse to print. A single written plan can start a behaviour this week. Keeping the behaviour for six months wants rehearsal, a recurring cue, and a booster. Chapman and Armitage (2010) showed the time-course in fruit and vegetable intake: a single plan worked to three months and faded by six; a booster at three months held the gain.

Hagger and Luszczynska (2014), reviewing planning in health contexts, said the same in committee English. Use the if-then format. Use a salient cue. Give examples. Prefer guided plans to “write anything.” Build boosters. EmotionApp’s WhatsApp channel can do all of that in one thread. It cannot manufacture a larger d than the field estimates.

Narrative synthesis: tiny-step techniques, reported separately

The protocol required this stream to stand on its own. That was wise.

After-anchor tiny-behaviour recipes — *After I pour tea, I will open the file* — are implementation intentions with a small Y. Fogg's behaviour model supplies the theory: when motivation is low, ability must be high, and a prompt must fire. Celebration after the tiny act is the extra ingredient in that particular school. It is a reinforcement trick, not a third kind of plan.

What the school does not have is a peer-reviewed RCT of task initiation against goal intention, with an extractable *g*, that we can drop into a forest plot. Large field programmes exist. Their published statistics are **UNVERIFIED** for this review.

Hollingsworth and Redden (2022) ran a three-arm, five-day email programme. Adults followed after-anchor recipes aimed at gratitude, or similar recipes aimed at other tiny acts, or did nothing. Gratitude scores rose. At one month the gratitude-recipe arm sat at about $d = 0.78$ against inactive control. Attrition was high. The outcome was a gratitude scale, not "did they start the hard task they had been putting off." It is a real trial. It is the wrong trial for this paper's question.

Adam and colleagues (2026) randomised 5,054 adults using GLP-1 medicines to written micro-step prompts, with or without a two-minute video. People said they expected to adopt the steps. Immediate effects on expectation ranged from $d = 0.26$ to 0.77 and shrank by two weeks. Expectation is not initiation. The trial is useful as a warning: digital micro-prompts move what people *think they will do* more than we have shown they move what they *do*.

A 2020 protocol (Minute Calisthenics) promised an after-anchor plus weekday bodyweight programme. No results paper was found. Protocols without results are a file drawer with an NCT number.

The two-minute rule, in both of its popular forms — "if it takes less than two minutes, do it now," and "scale the habit until the start takes two minutes" — has no dedicated randomised arm against goal intention that we could verify. Popularity is not a trial.

Two adjacent findings keep the tiny-step idea scientifically respectable even without a pooled *g*. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle (2010) asked 96 people to repeat one daily action in a stable context. Automaticity followed an asymptotic curve. Median time to a high-automaticity plateau was 66 days. The range was 18 to 254. Simpler actions tended to automate faster. That is the mechanistic licence for shrinking Y: a small act gets repeated on low-motivation days; repetition is what builds the automatic link the if-then plan is trying to install by fiat.

Singh and colleagues (2024) meta-analysed habit-formation practices more broadly (20 studies, $N = 2{,}601$) and found a habit-score SMD of 0.69 (0.49 to 0.88), with time-to-habit medians in the same 59-to-66-day band. Again, this is not an if-then increment. It is the weather system in which a two-minute start would have to live.

Graham, Madigan and Daley (2022) reviewed "small change" approaches to weight. Twenty-one trials. Small changes prevented a little gain (−0.7 kg at programme end) and did not produce weight loss. Tiny is not the same as sufficient. A two-minute start that never grows is a two-minute life.

The additive question, answered without a diamond

Does shrinking the first step add to the if-then plan?

Not in any number this review is willing to print.

The theoretically tidy experiment is obvious. Everyone writes *If [same cue], then I will [response].* Half the sample gets a full response (“write the report”). Half gets a tiny response (“open the document and write the title”). The outcome is initiation within 24 hours, then follow-through at one week and one month. Moderators: digital versus coached; India versus elsewhere; high versus low baseline motivation.

That experiment is sitting in someone’s “future work” slide. It is not sitting in PubMed.

We can say only this. Many effective if-then plans already smuggle in a small Y. Milkman’s date-and-time prompt is a tiny act of planning, not a tiny act of vaccinating, and it still moved an objective workplace behaviour. Robinson’s maps chopped walking into calendar pieces. Chapman’s if-then format beat a global plan. Specificity helps. Smallness is one form of specificity. That is an argument. It is not a pooled *g*.

07 Discussion

PULL QUOTE

Automaticity took a median of 66 days (range 18–254).

What the number means

d = 0.36 is not a punchline. It is a working estimate for “write an if-then plan, compared with wanting the same thing and not writing the plan,” averaged across a zoo of outcomes. For the thing managers care about — did the behaviour happen — the 2024 slice is *d* = 0.27. For workplaces it is *d* = 0.26. Translate that without theatre. A typical person in the plan group finishes ahead of about 60% of the goal-only group. Not 80%. Not “91% exercised.” Those campus weeks still happened. They are not the prior for a six-month Indian sales cycle.

The 2006 number, *d* = 0.65, is not a lie. It is an ancestor. Ancestors get quoted at weddings. They do not get to write the budget.

Initiation remains the use-case with the cleanest story. Remembering, seizing the moment, and crossing the reluctance threshold are exactly the failure modes of a working day: the file is there, the hour is there, the person is not. An if-then plan attacks those modes by moving the decision from “how do I feel” to “what time is it.” The debate never starts. The last meeting ends, the laptop stays open, and the

first line of the report goes in because the plan named this moment, not a better mood. Entrepreneurship would call it a calendar invite to your future self, who is a flake.

Shrinking the then-clause is the one round of the compound. It is also gradient descent. It is also the MVP. None of those metaphors is a trial. The honest product claim is: we use a technique that has a small-to-medium effect on its own, and we size the first rep so a tired person can complete it, and we do not know the size of the interaction.

Limitations

This review is not a new REML model of 200 primary trials. It is an updated systematic review that treats the 2024 642-test synthesis as the implementation-intention evidence base and then hunts for two missing pieces. That is a feature when the missing pieces are missing. It is a limitation when a reader wanted a homemade forest.

We did not dual-screen every database hit with two independent reviewers and a kappa statistic. We did not extract raw means from every physical-activity trial and re-compute Hedges *g*. Reviews that piggyback other reviews inherit their biases. The 2024 authors already flagged publication bias. We flag it again.

Tiny-step evidence is messy in a different way. Trademarked programmes, email attrition, gratitude scales, expectation items, protocols without results. The two-minute rule is a bestseller without a CONSORT diagram.

Generalisation to Indian professionals is an inference, not a finding. Workplace $d = 0.26$ comes from 23 tests that are not Indian. Digital $d = 0.31$ is not a WhatsApp d. Language of delivery is almost never Hindi, Tamil, Marathi or Bengali. Festival calendars, joint-family evenings, and two-hour commutes are not dummy variables in any model we read.

Self-report still haunts initiation research. “I started” is cheaper to collect than a keystroke log. EmotionApp can, in principle, count a completed rep. Most of the literature cannot.

WHAT THIS MEANS

What this means for an Indian workplace programme

Picture the same 9.47 p.m. professional. Do not hand her a vision board. Hand her one sentence and one two-minute move. *If I put my tiffin box in the sink, then I will open the deck and write the title.* That is the whole session. The cue already lives in the house. The action fits inside a kettle boil. The next night the tiffin goes in the sink, the deck opens, and a title is on the first slide before the kettle clicks off. Each time, she casts a small vote for “I finish things I start.” A stand-up comic calls it not doing the bit where you announce a marathon and buy new shoes.

Do not promise $d = 0.65$. Promise a plan that takes 40 seconds to write and a start that takes two minutes to do. On the call, the coach has her say the sentence aloud once. That night it comes back on WhatsApp in her own

language, and she replies with a tick, not an essay. A week later the coach asks whether Y should stay tiny or grow. Chapman's booster finding is the only long-game result that should influence the calendar: plans fade; a three-month nudge is part of the design.

Human hand-off is not a luxury. Wang's MCII split is the closest number we have: live interaction $g = 0.47$, documents $g = 0.28$. EmotionApp already pairs an AI coach with a person. When the ticks stop, a person asking what got in the way is more evidence-aligned than another automated reminder.

None of this is therapy. None of this is a diagnosis. It is a daily rep. Ship version 0.1 of the task. Then ship 0.2. A speech about small starts only works once someone opens the file.

Research gaps, naming the India gap explicitly

The India gap is complete. CTRI and ClinicalTrials.gov, searched on 22 September 2026, yielded no registered or published randomised trial of implementation intentions or tiny-step techniques on task initiation among Indian working adults. Adjacent Indian work exists — reminder programmes for sedentary office staff, lifestyle programmes in diabetes clinics, commitment contracts in data-entry shops. Those are not this question.

That is not a patriotic complaint. It is a validity threat. Collectivist homes, multilingual workdays, festival shocks, and WhatsApp as the actual operating system of Indian white-collar life are not minor colour. They are the *if* in the if-then plan. A cue that works in a Durham laboratory ("when I finish breakfast") may not survive a shared kitchen in Thane.

Other gaps sit beside it.

1. **The factorial gap.** Randomise step size on top of a shared if-then plan. Measure initiation in 24 hours, not a trait scale at four weeks.
2. **The digital-dose gap.** WhatsApp versus face-to-face versus paper, with the same plan text. The 2024 delivery split (in-person 0.53, online 0.31) is a warning, not a local estimate.
3. **The growth gap.** When should the two-minute start grow? Graham's small-change weight review says tiny can prevent drift and still fail to produce a large outcome. Initiation research has not mapped that hinge.
4. **The null gap.** Publish the Rackemann-style misses. A literature of 91% weeks and no 35% weeks is how you get $d = 0.65$ posters.
5. **The language gap.** Twenty-three Indian languages are not a translation afterthought. The if-clause has to be a sentence people actually say.

Until those trials exist, a coaching platform can still use both techniques. It just has to talk like an adult. The plan helps. The small start is a reasonable way to build the plan. The added d is a hypothesis. Hypotheses are allowed. They are not results.

08 FAQ

Q1 Does writing “if-then” actually get people to start, or is that lab magic?

It gets people to start. Across 642 tests the average effect is $d = 0.36$, smaller in real workplaces ($d = 0.26$). Not magic. Not nothing. A date-and-time flu-shot prompt raised uptake 4.2 points over a reminder. Write the cue. Write the first move.

Q2 If I already have an if-then plan, should I also shrink the first step to two minutes?

Probably, as design. Not as a proven extra effect. Zero trials isolate that increment. Shrinking Y is how you keep the plan executable when motivation is a rumour. Treat it as insurance, not as a second *d*.

Q3 How small is small enough?

Small enough that a bad day can still host it. Lally’s work says simpler daily acts automate faster; the median climb to automaticity is 66 days. If the first move needs equipment, courage and a free hour, it is not a first move.

Q4 Will this work on WhatsApp in Indian offices?

We do not know from trials. Digital delivery in the 2024 synthesis sits near $d = 0.31$, below face-to-face. No Indian RCT exists. Use the smaller number. Spend the difference on rehearsal, a human hand-off, and a sentence in the person’s own language.

Q5 Is this therapy?

No. It is a practice. One sentence. One two-minute rep. A tick. Coaching can hold a person to that rep. It does not diagnose them, treat them, or replace care they already need.

09

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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

SAFETY NOTE

If you are in distress, please contact a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS on 14416.