Mindfulness in the Workplace
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Abstract

Mindfulness is not a new concept as it has been practiced for centuries, but the increase in mindfulness training within organizations and in research demonstrates its usefulness and applicability to workplace dynamics. Rooted in Buddhism, there is consensus in the literature that mindfulness involves attention to and awareness of present-moment experiences. Mindful behavior also entails acceptance of an event or experience. Implementing mindfulness training interventions in workplace settings has been shown to improve organizational behavior regarding perception of issues, employees, and work productivity. This review of mindfulness explores its historical tenets, benefits for individual and organizational health, and outcomes of mindfulness practices. Furthermore, the module covers the relationship of mindfulness to cognitive processes, psychological and physical health-related components, and distinguishes mindfulness from other related states, such as workplace satisfaction and workplace engagement. The practice of mindfulness can propel an organization by moving beyond workplace engagement, solidifying interpersonal relationships between employees. Mindfulness is no longer a nice-to-have quality but rather is a must-have quality, thus mindfulness, or lack thereof, in the workplace impacts the entire organization on a micro and macro level.

Key words: mindfulness, workplace engagement, mindful cognition, emotional regulation

What is Mindfulness?: Definition and Background

In recent years, the concept and practice of mindfulness has emerged within research and organizations. Organizations such as Mayo Clinic, Goldman Sachs, and the United States Marine Corps, amongst others, implement mindfulness training to improve workplace dynamics. From Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness is defined as
“presentcentered attention and awareness”.

In Buddhism, mindfulness emphasizes intentional attention to and awareness of the present moment. Thus, attention and awareness are central to mindfulness as integrating the two helps to distinguish between mindfulness and other related states. Although attention alone may be focused, it becomes mindful when attention combines with awareness; awareness is the current state of the mind that monitors the focused attention.

As mindfulness is an internal state that can be challenging to observe or operationalize, the concept has been elusive. In this module, mindfulness is defined as “receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience”. A centuries-old mental training in Buddhism, mindfulness training received increased attention in the late 1970s as a therapeutic tool for medical patients to manage chronic illness. Building upon the research of Ellen Langer, who studied mindfulness across disciplines, researchers later introduced mindfulness in management literature; however, their conception of mindfulness as cognitive flexibility and attention to novelty is different from Buddhism’s formulation of mindfulness as attention to and awareness of the present. It is the underlying intention in mindfulness practice that is the primary factor differentiating mindfulness teachings between mindfulness-based interventions and traditional Buddhism. In Buddhist teachings, the general purpose of practicing mindfulness is for longterm spiritual development rather than psychosomatic symptom relief.

Mindfulness is often viewed as either a “fluffy” business trend or a useful management tool that can rejuvenate a workplace. However, comprehensive research on mindfulness supports the latter, indicating that cultivating a corporate culture of mindfulness improves focus as well as stress management and team cohesion, which are essential to workplace dynamics. Attention and awareness are the hallmarks of mindfulness, thus application of mindfulness coaching in business settings maximizes human and professional capital.

How Mindfulness Works

The brain, which is at the center of the nervous system, is responsible for the body’s functions and abilities. Plasticity is a term neurologists use to describe the brain’s ability to change. For example, as a new skill such as mindfulness is acquired, the brain develops new connections in a gradual change of the brain cells to expedite the growth and efficacy of the newly learned skill. Therefore, when learning to be mindful, it literally changes the brain.

Recent research confirms that the practice of mindfulness – the non-judgmental, present-moment awareness – not only changes the brain but does so in ways that organizational leaders especially, but anyone in general, should learn. There are several ways to practice mindfulness, including meditation, introspection, psychotherapy, and journaling, to name a few. Neuroscientists around the world have examined ways that
meditation, a major mindfulness practice, changes the brain, and researchers from the University of British Columbia and the Chemnitz University of Technology gathered data from over 20 studies to determine the brain areas that are often influenced. Identifying a minimum of eight brain regions that mindfulness, specifically meditation, impacts, the two brain regions of particular interest for business professionals are the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and the hippocampus as they shape reasoning, judgment, and in turn, interpersonal relationships.

Located behind the brain’s frontal lobe deeply inside the forehead, the ACC is associated with self-regulation, which means the ability to direct attention and behavior purposefully, suppress inappropriate reactive (as opposed to proactive) responses, and flexibly change strategies. However, people with damage to the ACC demonstrate impulsivity and aggression, and those with impaired connections between the ACC and other brain regions show poor mental flexibility as they may continue with ineffective problem-solving strategies rather than adapting their behaviors to a given situation. Contrarily, those who meditate exhibit superior self-regulation, resist distractions, and respond appropriately more often than those who do not meditate. The mindful practice of meditation allows individuals to navigate stressful scenarios with exploring effective alternative solutions and doing so with calmness. In addition to self-regulation, the ACC relates to learning from past experiences to apply to present decision-making. In complex business environments or uncertain and fast-changing circumstances, the ACC may be of particular importance as it is responsible for adapting behaviors and strategies flexibly in such conditions. As mindfulness reduces stress-related functions of connectivity with the ACC, it suggests that mindfulness training interventions could reduce the strength of the connectivity of the brain regions responsible for stress.

Inside the temple on each side of the brain is the hippocampus that is part of the limbic system, which is a set of inner structures linked to emotion and memory. This region of the brain contains receptors for cortisol, the stress hormone, and research shows that chronic stress can damage the hippocampus, affecting the entire body, and thus the output of performance and behaviors within the workplace. Additionally, those with stress-related health issues such as depression and PTSD typically have smaller hippocampi, emphasizing the importance of the hippocampus in resilience, which is another crucial skill in the high-demand business culture.

As the mind and body are intertwined, the body experiences emotions that the mind processes, thus learning mindfulness exudes through the body via inner physiological responses as well as external actions and behaviors. A Finnish research team studied the body’s emotional experiences based on environmental stimuli and produced body maps (Figure 1) to indicate where the body feels a particular emotion. With the emotion of anger, for example, the body experiences it in the head, face, chest, shoulders, and arms,
hence elevated activity appearing in red/orange color that indicates an active response for this emotion. As the body is preparing itself for action, to release the emotion of anger in some manner, it advances the heart rate, speeds thought patterns, clinches the hands, and so forth. In a neutral state, such activity in the body appears differently as it does with other emotions as well. When utilizing the skill of mindfulness, it does not denote that an individual does not or cannot experience emotion but rather that the activity of emotions experienced in the body is managed for a healthier release of an emotion.

**Figure 1.** Adapted from Nummenmaaa L, Gleriana E, Harib R, Hietanend JK. Department of Biomedical Engineering and Computational Science and Brain Research Unit, O. V. Lounasmaa Laboratory, School of Science, Aalto University; 2013.

**Benefits of Workplace Mindfulness**

Philosophers across cultures have proclaimed the benefits of mindfulness for centuries, but studies on mindfulness has burgeoned in literature in recent years. Nonetheless, there is minimal empirical research on mindfulness from a workplace perspective. Typically, mindfulness is associated with philosophical traditions more than with scientific ones. The recognition of the benefits of mindfulness, however, has risen in multiple fields, including psychology, neuroscience, medicine, and education. Mindfulness is conducive to each of these disciplines for the physical and mental health of individuals working in any industry.

**Figure 2.** Benefits of Mindfulness in the Workplace
Enhances cognitive flexibility
Positively relates to insightful judgement
Improves attention and productivity
Strengthens emotional regulation and employee relationships
Reduces stress-reactivity responses
Improves employee health by reducing anxiety, blood pressure, and physical pain

Cognitive Flexibility

Much of the current research on mindfulness focuses on the relationship between mindfulness and psychological and physical well-being. Research suggests that mindfulness positively relates to life satisfaction, vitality, and interpersonal relationship quality and negatively relates to anxiety, depression, and stress. 9 Thus, scholars have contended that mindfulness allows for objectivity and calmness in perception of an event and enables effective regulation of emotions, thoughts, and physiological responses. 10 In the workplace, cognitive flexibility, emotion-regulation, and calmness are necessary when communicating issues, needs, desires, and/or potential threats between and within all levels of an organization for the flow of clear information, expectations, and respectful interactions. In regards to effects of mindfulness on task performance, which is limited but expanding in research, scholars have demonstrated that mindfulness positively relates to insightful judgment, problem solving, and academic performance, 11 all of which exemplify cognitive processing. Such findings support the research that mindfulness enhances cognitive flexibility as well as executive functioning, which are essential qualities for task performance. For example, if an individual is entering data or delivering mail through a postal service and not giving attention to and awareness of the present task, then data would be entered erroneously or mail would be delivered to inaccurate addresses. Thus, such issues must then be resolved, and regulating emotions during conflict or potential conflict requires mindfulness of all parties involved, the present task, and potential outcomes. Thinking, analyzing, and problem-solving are cognitive functions regarding workplace dynamics.

A growing area in the management literature indicates that mindfulness relates to better workplace functioning. There is a plethora of benefits associated with mindfulness, which coincides with the historical claims of its advantages for focusing on the present. As Case Western Reserve University reported, 12 these benefits include:

- Mindfulness positively impacts overall human functioning. Research in disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and medicine demonstrates that mindfulness improves attention, cognition, emotions, behavior, and physiology.
• Mindfulness may improve relationships through greater empathy and compassion, suggesting mindfulness training could enhance workplace processes that rely on effective leadership and teamwork.

• Mindfulness has shown to improve three qualities of attention: stability, control, and efficiency. It can stabilize attention in the present because the human mind is estimated to wander for roughly half of the waking hours. Individuals who completed mindfulness training remained vigilant longer on both visual and listening tasks.

• Although mindfulness is an individual quality, research suggests that it affects interpersonal behavior and workgroup relationships.

Many other advantages of mindfulness exist as Ellen Langer demonstrated in research. Such advantages entail: easier to pay attention, enhances memory, increases creativity, able to take advantage of opportunities when presented, averts potential danger, "like people better and are liked by people better" due to being more charismatic. Additional benefits of mindfulness are that procrastination and regret subside because mindfulness fosters decision-making, short or long term, with present attention and awareness, and understanding the rationale for such decisions. Finally, mindfulness also aids in being less judgmental toward others. There is a mindless tendency to typecast people as rigid, emotional, impulsive, tough, incompetent, and so forth. However, when viewing someone in this way, it prevents the opportunity to gain a full perspective of a person's whole being, to have a meaningful relationship together, and to leverage their skills and talents, which is crucial in workplace settings. In a work environment, these views may decrease team/company morale, cohesion, and motivation or increase hostility. On the other hand, mindfulness allows for appreciation and understanding of the reason people behave as they do and to see the behavior from their vantage point. Perhaps their decision or action was logical or practical to them at the time, thus remaining mindful about others' experiences or viewpoints can limit judgment or criticism of them.

*Emotional Regulation*

Emotions are natural and significant parts of life, and even if unnoticed or unaware of them, they can have profound effects on thoughts and actions. Regulating internal personal emotions in any setting is essential to maintain tact, respect, and clarity in interpersonal relationships. Practicing mindfulness supports healthy *emotional regulation* (ER) to call awareness to the emotions, reduce negative self-talk, thought processing, and distress, as well as enhance emotional recovery and goal-oriented conduct. Emotion regulation is an understanding and balancing of emotions. ER is a general term encompassing components such as awareness of and attention to emotions,
labeling emotions, allowing the body to experience emotions without acting on or reacting to them, and managing or modifying emotional reactions towards a goal.

Pertinent to mental health, academic achievement, and healthy social relationships, emotion regulation is strengthened with the practice of mindfulness. With more organizations seeking to improve communication, processes, and operations, emotion regulation helps in conflict-resolution, idea-creation, and bridging gaps between and amongst employees and supervisors. Contrarily, poor emotion regulation, or emotional dysregulation, is central to emotional issues and maladjustment, which affect communication and operations, in turn declining productivity and an organization’s reputation and financial bottom-line. Emotional dysregulation is associated with depression, substance abuse, self-mutilation, poor performance, aggression, amongst others. 14

Furthermore, emotional regulation refers to the “process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them” with emphasis on modulating instead of eliminating emotional responses to environment stimuli.13 With direct attention to and awareness of emotions from moment to moment demonstrates the relationship between mindfulness and emotional regulation. In workplace environments, this may appear in meetings, electronic communicative methods, performance evaluations, interviews, events, or trainings. The objective is to monitor and evaluate one’s own and others’ emotions to respond – if a response is necessary – in an informed, professional manner that still expresses rather than suppresses emotions.

**Figure 3. Emotional Regulation vs. Emotional Dysregulation**

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<tr>
<th>Emotional Regulation</th>
<th>Emotional Dysregulation</th>
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<td>• an understanding and management of emotions towards a goal; helps in conflict-resolution, idea-creation, and bridging gaps between individuals.</td>
<td>• central to maladjustment and affects communication and operations between individuals and systems; difficulty in modulating emotions.</td>
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**Workplace Mindfulness and Productivity**

Organizations such as Google and Aetna use mindfulness training to improve workplace functioning. 15 Part of the excitement for mindfulness training in work settings is due to research evidence that mindfulness can improve a wide range of mental and physical health concerns, such as relapse reduction in major depression and substance abuse, delay in HIV pathogenesis, amongst several others. 16
Thirteen percent of U.S. workers report engaging in mindfulness-enhancing practices, signifying its growth amongst professionals. Mindfulness requires intentional effort and is not something mastered overnight. Furthermore, even if not being mindful in a particular situation, it does not mean mindfulness cannot still be experienced in future situations. Rather, once the absence of mindful behavior is noticed, then individuals can bring attention and awareness to the present moment of mindlessness, the current situation, and other parties involved.

A way to understand mindfulness in work environments is to contrast conceptual and experiential processing. The former, conceptual processing is central to organizational life, whereas the latter, experiential processing, is central to mindfulness. Input of mindfulness in the workplace relates to employee output. In conceptual processing, thought leads attention in that given the daily stimuli from the environment, thoughts quickly evaluate and interpret an event or experience, thus the perception of the event or experience. Although there are different perceptions for any occasion, in mindless thinking and behavior, only a self-serving perception is at the forefront. Henceforth, turning thoughts inward to operate upon itself, known as metacognition, it is common to ruminate on aspects of an event or experience in an effort to process or resolve the thoughts because self-concern is a hallmark in conceptual processing for interpreting anything of personal importance. 


Contrarily, experiential processing embodies mindfulness. Experiential processing is attention to internal (e.g., thoughts and emotions) responses and external stimuli in registering the facts – observed not interpreted – in an event or experience. It is natural to attempt to make meaning of an event or experience, however, experiential processing allows individuals to observe stimuli as is without concluding a meaning or interpretation as positive or negative for the self. Experiential processing, also referred to as decentering, involves a broader context of awareness in that thoughts are viewed as thoughts as opposed to how the thoughts about an event or experience affect the self. The psychological content (e.g., mental images, self-talk, emotions, and impulses) is common to the conscious mind, but observation of such psychological content remains in observation mode to be aware of the present moment rather than interpreting and deriving meaning from an event or experience.

Figure 5. Experiential Processing
Awareness of and attention to these reactions affords a degree of mental distance or disengagement from self-relevant evaluations. With the capacity to witness events, thoughts, and emotions as they play out comes an ability to attend to occurrences as concrete phenomena rather than interpreting them in ways biased by personal memories, learned associations, or future projections (e.g., 'Here we go again. He is overly emotional and overreacts to everything. I wonder what I did today to set him off. I might as well leave because this is just going to escalate.'). Importantly, mindfulness does not oppose evaluation or judgment. Rather, in the state of alert attentiveness that characterizes mindfulness, evaluations, judgments, and associated memories can be closely attended to by a mind that is aware of what is happening moment to moment.

For example, in encountering a threatening stimulus, such as a rude colleague, inept superior, or demanding client, individuals enacting experiential processing observe their internal experience of anger, fear, or other feelings through cognitive, emotional, and somatic expressions – awareness of interpretations, physiological responses such as heart racing, or desire to respond, respectively. As noted, the cognitive processing of an event relates to the way in which the body experiences an emotion, thus preparing the body to react in some way to release the emotions.

**Stress and Work Output**

The stress hormone, cortisol, can impact cognitive processes such as memory, judgment, and attention, weaken the immune system, and increase blood pressure, all of which may impact an organization’s bottom line if its healthcare costs are rising and productivity is declining. The prefrontal circuitry, which helps the mind to focus, also calms the body from stress arousal. Stress can result from and lead to health (e.g., mental and physical) and non-health-related (e.g., problem-solving) issues in a reciprocal cycle. It is challenging to focus or be motivated when stress negatively affects individuals in the workplace, thus supporting both mental and physical health through mindfulness training interventions can positively impact individuals and organizations for a healthy lifestyle.

The mindfulness stress buffering account postulated that mindfulness affects health, and one way is that it reduces stress-reactivity responses. The mindfulness stress buffering account, which derived from the stress buffering hypothesis, contains two predictions. The first is that major effects of mindfulness on health will be observed in those who have high stress (e.g., unemployed adults, employees in high chaos industries, and those with high psychological distress) and that mindfulness interventions may not have significant impact on the health of those with low stress. The second prediction is mindfulness aids the health outcomes for those in whom stress may trigger the onset or exacerbation of a disease developing or alters one’s health (e.g., alcohol consumption or smoking) that could impact a disease. In fact, some health conditions, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and depression, are sensitive to stress and thought to exacerbate the
pathogenic processes in HIV, inflammatory and cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, cancerous tumor growth, and skin disorders. 19

Mindfulness Interventions

There are several mindfulness practice interventions, including, but not limited to, meditation, psychotherapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction program (MBSR), prayer, journaling, painting, amongst others. Regular engagement in mindfulness practices improves personal and organizational health through reducing stress, anxiety, blood pressure, physical pain, and others as well as increases focus and insight, emotion regulation, and impulse-control. The physical and mental benefits from mindfulness interventions are plentiful, thus implementing mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) can assist in organizational operations. As awareness of and attention to present-moment experience, and acceptance of such experiences, mindfulness opens the brain to both observe and perceive an event or experience in varying ways as opposed to a single viewpoint.

Workplace Engagement vs. Workplace Mindfulness

As mentioned, attention and awareness are hallmarks of mindfulness because integration of these concepts helps distinguish mindfulness from other related states, one such being engagement. Workplace engagement is referred to as involvement and investment in the work beyond the minimum or surface-level aspects that retain an employee (e.g., salary and schedule as in work satisfaction). An individual can be satisfied with a workplace but not engaged in the workplace.

In comparison to similar work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction, workplace engagement extends beyond with additional value to organizations, employees, and communities. 20 Engagement in the workplace occurs regardless of its shortcomings for personal and professional development, needs, or desires. There is personal investment to the actual organization and its mission. Workplace engagement involves transformational facets (i.e., growth), whereas workplace satisfaction is about the transactional processes (i.e., payment for work). Satisfaction with work may be an entry point for workplace engagement, but workplace engagement does not necessarily equate to workplace mindfulness.

Mindfulness is directly making notice of that which is happening in the current moment despite whether an experience is (or perceived to be) positive, negative, or neutral. In a mindfulness state, individuals are open to experiences with both curiosity and interest. Furthermore, monitoring a present-moment experience with acceptance are two important features of mindfulness (monitoring and acceptance). 2
Workplace engagement is a state of mind about an organization, thus influencing organizational behavior. Engagement is conducive to dedication and support for an organization, but if not managing the engagement or work energy well, or rather not mindful about the effects on personal life and social relationships within and outside of work, then such engagement may limit other areas of work and life. As mindfulness practices aim to call attention and awareness to the present, mindless engagement can limit internal growth, thus external work output. Many strive for work/life balance, but perhaps work/life integration, as Langer suggested, is an essential component to increase mindfulness. As balance, in work/life balance, suggests that the two are opposite either with nothing in common or a sense that a scale is needed to split resources (e.g., time, talent, and treasure), work and life both involve people. Thus, integrating the two rather than balancing them could not only relieve stress and improve psychological and physical outcomes but also enhance workplace processes. As there exist stresses and responsibilities in both, keeping work and life separate prevents the transfer of resources and successful activation of skills in one domain to the other domain. People construct categories, but categories do not need to be limiting, thus knowledge and skills can be shared and transferred for mindful integration of work and life. Furthermore, as mindless work engagement can sometimes become stressful, remaining cognizant that stress is a function of the view of an event or experience and not a function of the actual event or experience demonstrates mindfulness in action.

Mindfulness practice benefits individuals and organizations socially, economically, and in health, thus implementation of mindfulness interventions may generate growth for both. As output is generally determined by the input of work, if an organization fosters a mindfulness culture, then it could influence the productivity and interpersonal work relationships. Intentional awareness of and attention to present-moment experiences embodies mindfulness, which has the potential to change the behavioral patterns, psychological and physical facets, and perceptions of the self and others, all of which are benefits of mindfulness in the workplace.

References


Glossary of Terms

- **Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC)**- Located behind the brain’s frontal lobe inside the forehead; associated with self-regulation, meaning the ability to direct attention
and behavior purposefully, suppress inappropriate reactive as opposed to proactive responses, and flexible with change; relates to learning from past experiences to apply to present decision-making.

- **Conceptual processing**: thoughts rapidly evaluate and interpret events or experiences, thus thought processes lead one’s attention.

- **Emotional regulation**: a general term encompassing components such as awareness of and attention to emotions, labeling emotions, allowing the body to experience emotions without acting on or reacting to them, and managing or modifying emotional reactions towards a goal; understanding and managing emotions.

- **Experiential processing**: also referred to as decentering and is a broader context of awareness in that thoughts are viewed as thoughts only rather than how the thoughts affect the self; attention to internal thoughts and emotional responses and external stimuli in registering facts instead of perceptions of an event or experience.

- **Hippocampus**: Inside the temple on both sides of the brain and part of the limbic system; considered as the center of emotion, memory, and the autonomic nervous system.

- **Limbic system**: a set of inner structures linked to emotion and memory.

- **Metacognition**: turning a thought inward to operate upon itself (i.e., the thinking about one’s own thinking); the processes used to plan, monitor, and assess one’s own understanding and performance.

- **Mindfulness**: receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experiences; integration of both intentional attention and awareness for the present moment (e.g., here-and-now vs. then-and-there).

- **Workplace engagement**: involvement and investment in the work beyond the minimum or surface-level aspects that retain an employee (e.g., salary and schedule as in work satisfaction); involves transformational facets, such as personal growth.

- **Workplace satisfaction**: involves transactional processes (i.e., salary for work); satisfaction with work or the workplace could lead to workplace engagement, but not necessarily.
Biography

Dr. Latrice Annette Drain is an international psychologist, author, and professor. As the founder of L3 Group, LLC, she works with individual and organizational clients on improving personal and workplace wellness through mindfulness practices for healthy coping mechanisms and effective communication skills. Her experience ranges from counseling individuals through anxiety and depression, coaching professionals on soft skill development such as emotional intelligence and business ethics and etiquette, and consulting small, military, and international companies on human behavior, cultural relations, and employee wellness. With a PhD in International Psychology and an MA in Clinical Counseling, she is licensed and nationally certified, has taught courses in several graduate psychology academic programs (e.g., Clinical Psychology, Forensic Psychology, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, and Masters of Psychology), serves on dissertation committees for students at various universities, a reviewer and board member for peer-reviewed journals, and authored publications, including “Every Body is Talking: Building Communication Through Emotional Intelligence and Body Language Reading” and SIGH: Managing Anxiety, a 4-step method she developed.