

15 Jun 2016

# Mindfulness at work

Sets out some perspectives on mindfulness and how it can benefit organisational well-being and performance

There is an abundance of publications available on mindfulness in the workplace. They deal with topics as wide-ranging as wellbeing and stress reduction, performance effectiveness, transformational leadership and mindful coaching. Everywhere we look, there is something new being written. This article sets out some information about mindfulness and how it can benefit organisations and employees, and will help orient you around this fascinating area.

## What is mindfulness?

A useful starting point is to understand what the term mindfulness means. One of the best-known definitions comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, credited as the founder of modern mindfulness. He describes it as: “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” When mindfulness is talked about, the word is sometimes used to refer to a practice like mindful movement or mindful meditation, and sometimes to describe a type of behaviour or disposition.

The origins of contemporary mindfulness lie in Buddhism, Yoga and other traditional Eastern practices, and today, programmes based on these practices focus on improving a person’s well-being and performance. Typically, work-based mindfulness programmes consist of a series of group-based sessions conducted over a period of 6 or 8 weeks, led by a trained facilitator. The content for these is generally made up of some combination of:

- Practices, such as sitting meditation, mindful movement, and body scan
- Psychology, usually based on a positive psychology or cognitive-based therapy framework
- Practical guidance on how to apply mindful techniques in a work-based context, such as time management, email use, meeting skills and so on

## Performance

Research on the performance-related effects of mindfulness on individuals is gaining momentum, and suggests that even short-term mindfulness interventions can lead to performance-oriented improvements including improved decision-making, task performance, safety performance, group performance and critical thinking. Studies conducted among service workers, for example, show that mindfulness relates positively to job performance, emotional regulation and job satisfaction, and negatively to turnover intention (Dane and Brummel 2013, Taylor and Millier 2016). Commentators propose that mindfulness enables adaptive performance in dynamic, changing work environments, by enhancing employees' resilience (MAAPG 2015). The investment by major global companies in mindfulness-based training for their employees is evidence of a belief in the business case for mindfulness to enhance resilience, emotional intelligence and other performance mechanisms in demanding work-based situations.

From an inter-personal perspective, evidence is also emerging that leaders who behave mindfully can be more effective in bringing about organisational change due to an enhanced ability to persuade and motivate, while mindful front-line managers can influence employee outcomes such as reduced emotional exhaustion, and increased work-life balance and job performance (Reb et al 2014).

In this way mindfulness helps to tackle the negative outcomes and high human costs associated with workplace stress and employee burnout, manifest in the form of reduced productivity, increased health and safety incidents, absenteeism and presenteeism. Organisations recognise the importance of ensuring the well-being of their workforces for a range of reasons, including to protect and promote employees' health, to minimise costs associated with their failure to protect employees' health, and importantly to harness the positive organisational outcomes of a healthy workforce such as performance and productivity. Research evidence suggests that mindfulness can make a difference at all of these levels (MAAPG 2015)

## What mindfulness does

Such research has helped build the general consensus that mindfulness can be developed and can lead to enhanced well-being and personal effectiveness. Here's how it works: mindfulness training helps to improve attention and awareness, enabling people to become skilful at:

- Increasing self-awareness

- Increasing self-transcendence (that is, recognising that our thoughts are just thoughts and don't necessarily reflect reality)
- Increasing self-regulation

With these skills, mindfulness can change the way in which people process and respond to information, emotional states and thought patterns.

From a well-being and stress reduction perspective, these abilities allow us to recognise our habitual ways of responding, and enable us to regulate and discern how best to act. Mindfulness has been shown to be effective in the treatment of depression, anxiety and stress because the skills of mindfulness help people to break unhealthy patterns of behaviour. It helps them to recognise their thoughts as thoughts, avoiding rumination and a consequent negative downward spiral. As one commentator put it, mindfulness: "enables recognising the "spark" of emotion before the "flame" of reaction occurs" (McWilliams 2014).

We know that workplace stress can impact employees on two levels, emotional and physical, potentially leading to burnout. Schaufeli and Maslach describe burnout as having three negative outcomes, namely exhaustion, cynicism or indifference, and reduced professional efficacy. Recent research from Australia suggests that employees who have high levels of dispositional mindfulness – which can be developed through training - are less likely to encounter any of these burnout outcomes, a positive result (Taylor and Milllear 2016).

## Organisational considerations

There is still some debate about the role of mindfulness in the workplace, not least in trying to understand how best to implement mindfulness-based interventions given the time and financial constraints typically experienced in busy organisations.

Mindfulness is a deep and powerful practice, and organisations that offer mindfulness training have a responsibility to ensure that the quality of training and the qualifications and experience of the trainer, are appropriate. Mindfulness, particularly meditation, may not be for everyone. Most organisations that offer mindfulness training to their employees make it available on a voluntary basis.

Similarly, mindfulness may not be appropriate for every organisation. Some researchers believe that business culture and commercial priorities, particularly in highly competitive workplaces, may be in fundamental conflict with the kind of behaviours that can develop as a result of mindfulness training, such as empathy and compassion. Wider organisation change may be needed to create the right culture where mindfulness interventions will

thrive.

While the research evidence is, on the whole, compelling, it is still early days in our understanding of mindfulness in organisations. What is clear is that mindfulness ought not to be regarded as a quick fix or panacea and research is needed to understand its longer-term effects.

## References

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