



EFFECT OF MINDFULNESS ON EMPLOYEES WELL-BEING AND PERFORMANCE: A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

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Abstract

Within the past few decades, the number of researches in the field of mindfulness has been sharply increased. The present article reviews the empirical literature on the effects of mindfulness on employees well-being and performance. Mindfulness is an intentionally focused awareness—a way of paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally. In present, organizations are confronted by challenges brought by continuous change, globalization and a constant need for efficacy and efficiency. Therefore, mindfulness practice has increasingly been incorporated into work environment. Although, there is a paucity of theoretical reviews that integrate the existing literature into a comprehensive theoretical framework. There is growing evidence that cultivation of mindfulness, the nonjudgmental awareness of experiences in the present moment, produces positive effects on employees well-being and performance. The present paper has three major sections. First, we present a brief history of mindfulness and its definition. Second, we provide a broad overview of the literature regarding the effects of mindfulness on employee well-being and performance. Finally, third section providing suggestions on how to begin developing mindfulness through a series of simple and quick exercises for healthy growth of the employees.

Keywords: *Mindfulness, Employee Wellbeing, Performance, Organization.*

Introduction

Mindfulness is a state of mind that cultivated regularly promotes the experience of the present moment in an inclusive and authentic way. Its applications and benefits have been the subject of research for thirty years and there is growing evidence of the positive effects across a multiplicity of domains.

The work environment is an often fast-paced, dynamic and challenging. Therefore organizations constantly face challenges such as competition, technological and informational change, globalization and cultural diversity (Fries, 2010; Marianetti and Passmore, 2010; Van den Heuvel et.al, 2010). These and other factors contribute to the ever increasing pace at which organisations operate to remain competitive in a difficult market place. This trend is challenging the well-being and performance of the employees and indirectly of the economy itself.

In recent years, issues related to well-being and happiness and their possible correlates have drawn considerable attention and interest of researchers. However, at this point, the construct of mindfulness is of great interest which may enhance health /well-being. Several research suggests that mindfulness is associated with increased health, well-being, and functioning (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Eberth and Sedlmeier, 2012). Encouraged by clinical and non-clinical findings, organizational scholars have started to explore the role of mindfulness in organizations (e.g., Dane, 2011; Glomb, Duffy, Bono and Yang, 2011; Weick and Putnam, 2006). However, little research is available regarding the effects of mindfulness in a work setting but gradually the occurrence of mindfulness in the work context is increasing (Hunter and McCormick, 2008): Fortune 500 companies, for instance Proctor and Gamble, offer mindfulness training for their employees (CNN money, 2010). Highly successful managers such as Bill Ford Jr., chairman of Ford Motors, and Michael Rennie, managing partner of MC Kinsey, are committed practitioners of mindfulness (Carroll, 2007). Research on the construct of mindfulness continues to increase (Brown et al., 2007; Shapiro,et.al, 2006). Scholars are now asking, how would a mindful approach to work affect one's work life and work outcomes? Kabat- Zinn (1990) foreshadows the possibilities:

“When you begin to look at work mindfully, whether you work for yourself, for a big institution, or for a little one, whether you work inside a building or outside, whether you love your job or hate it, you are bringing all your inner resources to bear on your working day....In all likelihood, if we saw work as an arena in which we could hone inner strength and wisdom moment by moment, we would make better decisions, communicate more effectively, be more efficient, and perhaps even leave work happier at the end of the day.”

The present paper has three major sections. First, we present a brief history of mindfulness and its definition. Second, we provide a broad overview of the literature regarding employee well-being and performance that have been associated with mindfulness. Third, we discuss skills which help in developing mindfulness.



Mindfulness and its Perspectives

The concept of mindfulness has been adapted by modern psychology from Eastern religions. Mindfulness is typically described as a form of nonjudgmental, nonreactive attention to experiences occurring in the present moment, including cognitions, emotions, bodily sensations and surrounding environment.. In simple words, mindfulness as “a state of mind that cultivated regularly promotes an inclusive and authentic experience of the present moment”. This can be achieved by purposely focusing our attention onto the present moment in a non-judgemental way. Mindfulness has been defined by several researchers: Kabat-Zinn (1994) calls it simply “the art of conscious living” ; *Bishop et al., (2004)*; *Kabat-Zinn, (1990)*, “Mindfulness consists of a purposeful attention to and awareness of the present moment, approached with an attitude of openness, acceptance, and nonjudgement”; *Brown & Ryan, (2003)*, “ mindfulness is the process of paying attention to what is happening in the moment – both internal (thoughts, bodily sensations) an external stimuli (physical and social environment) – and observing those stimuli without judgment or evaluation, and without assigning meaning to them.”; *Brown et.al., (2007a)* “awareness and attention are at the heart of mindfulness, but mindfulness also involves attending to stimuli without imposing judgments, memories, or other self-relevant cognitive manipulations on them”.

Therefore Mindfulness

- is an integrative, mind-body based training that enables people to change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences.
- pays attention to thoughts, feelings and body sensations to become directly aware of them, and better able to manage them;
- has deep roots in ancient meditation practices and also draws on recent scientific advances;
- is of potential value to everybody to help find peace in a frantic world.

There are two perspectives or schools of thought on mindfulness: *Eastern and Western perspectives* on mindfulness. The *Eastern view of mindfulness* is at the core of Buddhist teachings (Gunaratana, 1992) and has been referred to as “the heart” of Buddhist meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Thera, 1962). This view of mindfulness is exemplified by the research stream of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed the MBSR program (to self-regulate chronic pain of the patients) in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn (2003) points out, “mindfulness...being about attention, is also of necessity universal. There is nothing particularly Buddhist about it. We are all mindful to one degree or another, moment by moment. It is an inherent human capacity”. While the capacity to be mindful may be inherent in all humans, mindfulness is viewed as a skill that can be cultivated with practice (Bishop et al., 2004). What the Buddhist tradition has provided are ways to develop this capacity for mindfulness and use it in all aspects of life (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

The *Western perspective of mindfulness* (Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006) is best exemplified by the work of Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer (e.g., 1989, 1997). Langer’s conceptualization of mindfulness shares some commonalities with the Eastern perspective. Both perspectives emphasize awareness, attention, and engagement in the present moment that allows one to respond effectively to a situation rather than reactively or reflexively based on automatic habit (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007b; Langer, 1989). The Western view of mindfulness, directs greater attention to *external* situations as well as the *contents* of the mind, including past associations and concepts (Bishop et al., 2004; Weick & Putnam, 2006). In particular, Langer states that mindfulness is “best understood as the process of drawing novel distinctions” (Langer and Moldoveanu, 2000). Langer (1989) notes that mindlessness occurs when we are “trapped by created categories” (p. 27), relying on distinctions created in the past rather than continually creating new ones based on present experience. Sternberg (2000) has characterized Langer’s mindfulness as a “cognitive style,” or preferred way of thinking, while Weick & Sutcliffe, (2006) has referred to her conceptualization as rooted in an information-processing perspective. Thus, mindfulness consists of a purposeful *attention* to and *awareness* of the *present moment*, approached with an attitude of *openness*, *acceptance*, and *nonjudgment*.

Effects of Mindfulness

- First, a burgeoning body of research has reported clear links between mindfulness meditation, mindfulness treatment, and improved physical health (Grant and Rainville, 2009; Perlman,et.al 2010).
- Second, mindfulness and mindfulness-based practices have been clearly linked to reduced symptoms of mental, psychological, and psychiatric conditions. (Biegel,et.al 2009; Foley et al., 2010)
- Third, mindfulness based practices promote well-being and human flourishing. In nonclinical populations, positive effects of mindfulness meditation include reduced negative affect (Sears & Kraus, 2009), increased hope of goal achievement (Sears & Kraus, 2009), positive emotions and life satisfaction (Fredrickson et al., 2008), overall well-being (Falkenstrom, 2010), and social connectedness (Hutcherson, et.al , 2008).



- Finally, neuroscience research has focused explicitly on the effects of mindfulness-based practices on changes in the brain's activity and structure. This line of research has important implications as it suggests neurobiological changes in the brain as the mechanism by which individuals experience improved well-being and reduction of mental and physical distress as a result of mindfulness (Cahn and Polich, 2006; Chiesa and Serretti, 2009; Treadway and Lazar, 2009).

Employee Well-being and Performance

Wellbeing is the state of being of an individual that is characterized not only by good health or wellness, but also by comfort, satisfaction with one's work and home life, personal prosperity and some measure of happiness. In simple words, wellbeing is a state of being that can be affected by changes in the individual's conditions or circumstances, including their work context.

In the 20th century world of occupational health and safety, emphasis was placed on illness and injury and their prevention or cure. With the rise of the concepts of 'wellness' and 'wellbeing', attention has shifted to the idea that an acceptable and stable level of functioning is not enough, that in fact individuals are capable of attaining much higher levels of physical and mental functioning, with significant implications for individual and organizational performance. The emphasis now is not on the absence of something (e.g. health) but on the achievement of a positive state of being variously described as 'thriving' or 'flourishing'.

Employee wellbeing is a positive state in which the individual is able to function at or near their optimal level, whether defined and measured in terms of physical, mental, emotional and/or social functioning, with significant implications for the individual, their family and community, the organisation and society at large.

Employee wellbeing is a key factor in determining an organization's long-term profitability. Employee wellbeing at work is paramount to achieving higher levels of performance and competitiveness for organisations. Employee wellbeing can play a huge role in staff engagement, productivity and absenteeism. Research shows that healthy staff will perform at higher levels and take fewer sick days. People with higher levels of psychological well-being learn and solve problems more effectively, are more enthusiastic about change and relish new challenges.

There are several important implications of employee wellbeing for productivity and work relationships. Satisfied and happy employees are more likely to trust their supervisors, comply with company rules and regulations, provide suggestions to improve the organization, help their co-workers, and work cooperatively as a team to achieve group goals. Such behaviour contributes to a high-performing organisation that is productive and innovative, with employees who are socially integrated. Therefore, it is not surprising that research has also shown that employee well-being is positively associated with customer satisfaction.

Employee well-being involves:

- maintaining a healthy body by making healthy choices about diet, exercise and leisure
- developing an attitude of mind that enables the employee to have self-confidence, self-respect
- and to be emotionally resilient
- having a sense of purpose, feelings of fulfillment and meaning
- possessing an active mind that is alert, open to new experiences, curious and creative
- having a network of relationships that are supportive and nurturing (Canadian Centre for Management Development, 2002).

Several researches found positive relationship between employee well-being and performance. There is extensive evidence showing that people with higher levels of wellbeing perform better. Employees with higher levels of wellbeing actually become more positive, focused, energetic, resilient and resourceful in the way they work. These positive wellbeing effects have been found to produce significant performance gains on all sorts of measures. From productivity and profitability to resilience, engagement and effort, higher levels of wellbeing consistently predict higher levels of performance.

According to the organizational health framework, it is important for researchers and practitioners to be concerned with the occupational well being of employees and organizational performance (Cox, 1988). In a recent empirical study, for e.g, it was found that satisfaction among employees led to greater discretionary effort that, in turn, contributed to the satisfaction that was being experienced by customers of the organization (Harter,et.al, 2002). In other words, it is not sufficient to be



concerned with employees well-being in itself, but instead, wellbeing must be linked to outcomes that affect organizational performance.

Effect of Mindfulness on Employee Wellbeing and Performance

The central purpose of the present paper is to link mindfulness and mindfulness-based processes to employees' performance and well-being at work. Mindfulness as an eastern construct connotes non-judgmental and nonreactive acceptance of emotional states. Eastern traditional knowledge base and theoretico-religious understandings of it advocated the association between mindfulness and positive health/well-being since very long past. But, recently researches have begun to reveal the benefits of applying mindfulness and other meditative practices to a wide range of interventions in the organizational context. The findings suggest that meditation, including mindfulness, can contribute to physiological, psychological and transpersonal well-being and it may help identify and actualize human strengths (Shapiro, Schwartz, and Santerre, 2005). Now the highly beneficial effects of mindfulness practices on human well-being have been confirmed in several empirical studies of both east and west (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is theoretically well-known that mindfulness is the attribute of consciousness, which promotes optimal health and well-being. Mindfulness play a big role in making human being free from automatic thoughts, habits and unhealthy behaviors and thus it enhances self-regulated behavior which is related to enhancement of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extensive research evidence shows that mindfulness has positive effects on mental health and psychological well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress), physical health (e.g., pain, physical impairment), and quality of intimate relationships (Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Cresswell, 2007b; Grossman, et.al 2004).

Mindfulness benefits both the physiology and the psychology of individuals. Physiologically it has been shown to positively impact a large variety of factors like blood pressure (McCraty, 2003) and the immune system (Rein & McCraty, 1995) Perhaps more relevant to the workplace are the numerous aspects of one's psychology that can also be improved through mindfulness, including: job strain (Cropley & Purvis, 2003), job satisfaction and vision (Kriger & Hanson, 1999), self-compassion (Neff, et.al, 2005; Shapiro, et.al 2005), emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity (Shefy & Sadler-Smith, 2006) and learning (Yeganeh, 2006) among others. These factors can in turn contribute to improving health and well-being in the workplace and foster more effective skills in managing conflict, stress, personnel and improving performance.

Mindfulness shows positive impact on several areas that are directly responsible for business performance i.e. safety culture (Hopkins, 2002), conflict resolution (Riskin, 2004), creativity (Langer & Piper, 1987) and decision-making (Fiol & O'Connor, 2003). Further evidence suggests that the practical implications for mindfulness in the workplace are far reaching and have the potential to improve general well-being, create a healthy and safe environment and foster an organisational culture that is open to change, learning and growth (Kriger and Hanson, 1999; Duerr, 2004).

Theresa and Colleagues (2011), examining the cognitive, emotional, and neurobiological processes linking mindfulness with improved self-regulatory capacity in the workplace and found three central themes i.e. mindfulness is associated with factors expected to influence *relationship quality*. Second, mindfulness is linked to processes *indicative of resiliency*. Third, mindfulness is linked with processes expected to *improve task performance and decision making*. These three themes clearly explains that how mindfulness practice influence work related outcomes-

-Increased Resiliency- The capacity to harness positive emotion in daily life may be a key ingredient to resilience, helping individuals to persevere in the face of challenge and sustaining quality of life in the face of more chronic stressors. Mindfulness not only allows us to approach others it also protects us from other's negative emotional states and agitation through appropriate regulation of affect and decreased reactivity.

-Improved Task Performance - The effects of the attentional component of mindfulness on task performance have been thoughtfully considered by Dane (2010). Dane suggested that maintaining a wide external attentional breadth is useful in dynamic task environments whereas in fairly static environments, wide external attentional breadth might inhibit performance as one loses focus on their tasks. Herndon (2008) found that trait mindfulness was associated with fewer cognitive failures (i.e., forgetting, distraction, blunders), which suggests that if mindfulness is associated with greater attention to external stimuli, and therefore, fewer cognitive failures, then a variety of favorable work outcomes are likely to follow including increased performance and fewer accidents. Mindfulness also attunes individuals to internal processes such that an individual is more attentive to their nonconscious or automatic thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, often in the form of gut feelings or reactions. Mindfulness is also expected to impact job performance through improved decision making. When heuristic processing is reduced and attention to internal and external stimuli is increased, decision biases such as anchoring and fundamental attribution error should be decreased (Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 2006).



Developing Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the gentle effort to be continuously present with experience. It can be developed by anyone through training and practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), determination, patience and, almost paradoxically, a mindful approach. The practical implications for mindfulness in the workplace are far reaching and have the potential to improve general well-being, create a healthy and safe environment and foster an organisational culture that is open to change, learning and growth.

Passmore (2009) proposed a four-step model of developing mindfulness. The first important step is *Knowledge*. This may appear an obvious choice; however we have yet to find in the literature an explicit attempt to include learning mindfulness knowledge as a central step into the journey to becoming more mindful. We feel it is crucial to developing this state of mind that one understands its concepts, its benefits and the rationale behind its adoption.

The second step is *Purposeful Awareness*. This is the part of the process that is most difficult to commit to a description, as it is pre-verbal. Awareness is the collection of all present sensory inputs; imagine it to be a radar that constantly scans the environment, internally and externally to you, consciously and sub-consciously. Attention is focusing the cognitive efforts on one specific target that the radar presents on screen. Purposeful Awareness is the appreciation for the complexity of reality and the vast range of stimuli it provides. It is at this stage that one learns to be mindful about being mindful and expands their perception of “what is” to the present moment. It is at this stage that one remembers to remember.

The third step, *Inclusive & Authentic Attention*, aims to develop the ability to observe and focus attention on the: who, what, when and where; the why is excluded to emphasize the non-judgemental nature of this process. This skill should be approached with a sense of deep curiosity, as if we were engaging in that observation for the very first time. There is no goal in the process of awareness and attention; one should immerse themselves in the present moment “as is”, without a desire to experience more. Our brain is not designed to process all that reality presents, one should trust the process and realise that what is important and relevant will emerge from the background.

The fourth and final step is *Non-judgemental Acceptance*. The aim is to observe the stimuli, internal and external, for what they are: thoughts, emotions or physical sensation; at this stage there is no intention to seek meaning. The only interest is in experiencing the events as they unfold. Thoughts, emotions and physical sensations are not necessarily facts and can be experienced without an intention to change them, approve or disapprove of them, like or dislike them.

Developing mindfulness takes practice. It is crucial to get into the habit of practicing some form of mindfulness every day. This can include a formal eyes-closed meditation, along with other practices such as bringing awareness to routine activities (e.g., brushing one’s teeth, or travelling to and from work). There are essentially three ways of developing mindfulness skills:

- a) **Formal mindfulness meditation** -This involves closing your eyes and placing awareness on current sensations in the body (e.g., noticing the sensations of breathing). These practices can be performed lying down on a bed or mat, or sat upright in a chair.
- b) **Brief mindful practices** - This practice can be performed with eyes open such as mindful breathing exercise. In these exercises you bring awareness to current bodily sensations at frequent points during your day.
- c) **Mindfulness of daily activities** -This third type of practice involves becoming more aware as you perform daily activities such as eating, drinking, showering or bathing, driving, washing up, exercising and so on. We perform many activities on ‘automatic pilot’; mindfulness encourages you to be present to each moment much more frequently.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is a state of mind that cultivated regularly promotes the experience of the present moment in an inclusive and authentic way. Previous researches appear to suggest that mindfulness has a positive influence on well-being and better performance of the employees. The application of mindfulness to the workplace has enormous potential, there are however important obstacles to overcome. The evidence is mounting strongly, and mindfulness continues to prove beneficial across many domains, but more research is needed to measure the impact that mindfulness has on the health and well-being in the workplace. Bringing Mindfulness Training into Work Organizations might also be beneficial for organizations during periods of large-scale change. Before organizations adopt existing mindfulness training programs, they should carefully consider their goals. If the goal is to develop mindfulness among employees, they should consider multiple techniques for training employees to be more mindful.



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