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Citation

Singapore Management University. Switching Off the Auto Pilot. (2014).

Available at: <https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/pers/76>

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Switching off the auto pilot

Published: 22 Jan 2014.



By Jochen Reb

A recent study uncovers the link between mindfulness and employee performance

My colleagues* and I recently examined the causes and consequences of mindfulness - a relatively new construct in organisational research -, in our paper “Mindfulness at Work: Antecedents and Consequences of Employee Awareness and Absent-mindedness”. I’d like to share with you some of the exciting discoveries we made. Not only did we find that mindfulness—a state of engaged, open attention to and awareness of the present—was related to job performance, but we also found that it can be increased through organisational work conditions.

People routinely work long hours and often switch between multiple tasks to get work done in organisations. These conditions place heavy strains on employees’ attentional and self-regulatory resources and can make it difficult for employees to remain productive and healthy.

Mindfulness is widely considered to be an inherent quality of human consciousness. It has been defined as, 'paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally' or even 'waking up from a life lived on automatic pilot and based in habitual responding'.

A relatively new area of research, it is only in the last decades that researchers have focused on the empirical study of mindfulness. In fact, only with the development of validated measures of dispositional mindfulness, such as the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), published in 2003, did mindfulness research in the behavioural sciences really "take off".

Mindfulness has been found to be associated with better emotional regulation and reduced rumination or mulling over the negative aspects of a decision or course of action. Mindfulness is associated with increased health, well-being and functioning. It is also being increasingly used to improve performance and find solutions for workplace challenges. Cultivating mindfulness is emerging as a promising solution for both the organisation and its employees.

Our research

In two studies, we examined the antecedents and consequences of two aspects of mindfulness in a work setting: employee awareness and employee absent-mindedness.

At the workplace, mindful awareness allows employees to be aware of their thoughts and feelings, without necessarily reacting upon them, even in challenging situations, such as when interacting with a difficult customer or colleague. It also enables employees to remain in touch with their work and the tasks that arise throughout the workday, fully paying attention to one task at a time. In contrast, absent-mindedness disconnects employees from their work, their colleagues, and their customers. When being absent-minded, one performs tasks, such as having a conversation, on "auto pilot".

We used emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and psychological need satisfaction to assess different dimensions of employee well-being (with emotional exhaustion indicating a lack of well-being, of course). Emotional exhaustion, the central aspect of job burnout, is a major cause of lack of well-being at the workplace. It is commonly defined as depletion in emotional energy to an extent that people fail to meet job demands.

We examined task performance, organisational citizenship behaviours and deviance to assess different aspects of employee performance (with deviance being a form of negative performance).

We found that mindfulness was beneficially associated with changes in employee well-being, as measured by emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, and psychological need satisfaction. In other words, the more mindful employees were less likely to feel burnt out, and they were happier with their job. They also felt that their psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relationships were better met at the workplace.

We also found a beneficial relation between mindfulness and job performance, as measured by task performance, organisational citizenship behaviours, and deviance. Thus, not only did mindful employees

perform better on tasks that were part of their job description, but they also were more likely to go beyond the call of duty and, for example, help their colleagues, and less likely to engage in deviant behaviours, such as acting rudely towards colleagues, or intentionally working slower than they could have.

Nurturing mindfulness

Mindfulness may be influenced not only by personal factors such as mindfulness practice or genetic factors, but also by environmental or situational variables. To get at the situational causes of employee mindfulness, we examined several organisational factors. Organisational constraints and task routineness were used to assess different aspects of organisational constraints. Finally job autonomy and supervisor support were used to assess different aspects of organisational support.

We found that organisational constraints and organisational support predicted employee mindfulness, pointing to the important role that the organisational environment may play in facilitating or hindering mindfulness at the workplace.

When employees were constrained they were less mindful. This may have been because they experienced more stress and higher negative effect, using more of their mental energy to deal with the constrained situation and as a result had little resources left at their disposal to perform their work mindfully. When employees had greater organisational support, employees were more aware and less absent-minded.

Why mindfulness matters

The findings provide considerable support for the idea that employee mindfulness is beneficial for both employee well-being and performance. The findings may be at least partly explained by mindfulness leading to more skilful emotion regulation when interacting with others and being associated with better interpersonal relationships. In a related research project, we have found substantial evidence for the interpersonal benefits of mindfulness. Specifically, employees of mindful leaders turned out to be more satisfied with their jobs as well as performing at higher levels.

Mindfulness allows employees to be aware of their thoughts, without necessarily reacting upon them, which can help mindful employees reduce the potentiality of stressful situations.

Also, performing well not only requires paying attention to the here and now, but also requires actively implementing one's plans and intentions into action. Research suggests mindfulness may facilitate the implementation of intentions into action.

Clearly, mindful awareness can enable individuals to be more receptive to changes in their environment, allowing them to respond more effectively to challenging and changing situations.

Given the current corporate environment, mindfulness may play a prominent role in the organisational policymaking of the future.

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