

Meditating at Work: A New Approach to Managing Overload

by Wendy Woods

Today's employees and managers are deluged with an unprecedented amount of information and distraction. If it's not emails, texts, and instant messaging, then it's phone calls, coworkers, and constantly changing demands and deadlines. Basex research found that 50 percent of a knowledge worker's day is spent "managing information" and that an excess of information results in "a loss of ability to make decisions, process information, and prioritize tasks." In fact, research shows that constant information overload sends the brain into the fight-or-flight stress response, originally designed to protect us from man-eating tigers and other threats.

According to Dr. Edward Hallowell, the prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain responsible for executive functions such as decision making, problem solving, and planning) cannot execute properly when it is in stress mode. Instead, the "lower part" of the brain, which is responsible for dealing with survival, takes over. The prefrontal cortex then waits for a signal from the lower brain that the stressor has disappeared. Until then, the prefrontal cortex still functions, but poorly. Intelligence declines, and flexibility is minimal.¹ The result of this information and distraction overload is wreaking havoc with both employees' and managers' mental and physical health, as well as with productivity. As Jonathan Spira notes in *Overload! How Too Much Information Is Hazardous to Your Organization*, this problem has been estimated to cost the U.S. economy \$900 billion per year in "lowered employee productivity and reduced innovation."² This figure also includes recovery time, which can be ten to twenty times greater than the time lost from the interruption itself.

While organizations have addressed these challenges with a variety of stress-management solutions, until recently meditation was not among them. It still had a reputation for being flaky and unfit for corporate consumption. However, scientific studies that have proven the value of meditation in changing the brain point to meditation's practical application in the workplace. Meditation is now gaining acceptance and being used in established American companies such as General Mills, Google, and Prentice Hall.

What Is Mindfulness Meditation?

In order to understand mindfulness meditation, it helps to understand mindfulness. Jon Kabat Zinn, former executive director of the Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Basically, mindfulness is a focus on the current moment without the stress and anxiety of judging it. But as many employees know, work is all about the future and constant evaluation—the next item on the to-do list, the misinterpreted email, or the endless losing battle to accomplish more with less. A relentless focus on productivity has resulted in corporate environments that are more about mindlessness than mindfulness.

In essence, mindfulness is a state of being where you experience life more fully, change your relationship with your problems, cultivate personal strengths, and better manage self-limiting thoughts and behaviors. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, here is a simple way to differentiate them: mindfulness is the goal, while mindfulness meditation is a process for accomplishing that goal. Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness meditation doesn't involve incense, chanting, adopting a religion, or clearing your mind of all thoughts. The practice involves focusing on the breath or bodily sensations and nonjudgmentally acknowledging distracting thoughts and feelings as they occur. You then gently return to the object of

focus, whether it's your breath during formal meditation practice or an everyday activity like drinking a cup of coffee.

Connecting Scientific Research to Workplace Benefits

A growing body of scientific research highlighting the impacts of mindfulness meditation on personal health and the chronic problems of overworked employees is part of the reason corporate America is investing in a practice long associated with hippies and free love. In addition to more immediate positive outcomes, research shows that because the brain also changes structure as a result of meditation, its effects are lasting.

Stress Reduction

One obvious benefit of mindfulness meditation is stress reduction. According to the American Institute of Stress, this problem currently costs the United States “over \$300 billion annually due to increased absenteeism, employee turnover, diminished productivity, medical, legal, and insurance expenses, and Workers' Compensation payments.”³ Its impact on individual employees can be paralyzing, with 68 percent reaching the “point of feeling extremely fatigued and out of control.”⁴

Numerous studies have demonstrated the relaxation effects of meditation. Dr. Herbert Benson, founding president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Harvard Medical School, discovered that meditation triggers physiological changes of relaxation, such as lower heart and respiratory rates, lower blood pressure, and lower oxygen consumption. Meditation was also found to lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.⁵

A recent study found that mindfulness meditation actually decreased the size of a part of the brain associated with the stress response.⁶

What's even more incredible about these results is that the change happened in the brains of novice meditators. Participants took an eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course in which they meditated for an average of 27 minutes a day. Brain scans taken before and after MBSR revealed decreased grey matter in the amygdala, the part of the brain that senses threats and triggers the fight-or-flight response. While a half hour may seem like an eternity in a corporate environment, one study found that as little as ten minutes of meditation a day five days a week for four weeks could result in "lowering symptoms of burnout, enhancing relaxation, and improving life satisfaction."⁷

Concentration

Another area where mindfulness meditation has proven to have concrete benefits in the workplace is focus and concentration. A 2011 study with researchers from Harvard, MIT, and Massachusetts General Hospital found that after an eight-week MBSR program, participants had better regulation of alpha rhythms, a brain wave that screens out distractions.⁸ An earlier study found that as little as twenty minutes a day for four days resulted in a sustained ability to maintain attention.⁹

Empathy

According to a Hay McBer® study, 80 percent of workplace success is attributed to emotional intelligence (the ability to manage oneself, relate to others, and deal with life's pressures).¹⁰ Empathy is an important competency of emotional intelligence (EI). Having the capacity to step into someone else's shoes by acknowledging and understanding his or her perspective is essential to developing and maintaining healthy and productive working relationships. Yet in the deadline-driven workplace, it's the first thing to go as the focus narrows from people and relationships to task completion.

Studies have found that compassion meditation, where you focus on compassion and empathy for others, increases empathy. In a 2008 study, Richard Davidson and his colleagues found that compassion meditation activated the limbic system, the brain's emotional network, in both novice mediators and monks.¹¹ In another study that same year at Stanford, just four minutes of loving-kindness meditation proved to result in increased feelings of social connectedness and positivity toward strangers.¹²

Decision Making

While decision making is believed to be a purely rational process, it is also a highly emotional one. Antonio Damasio discovered that cognitive decisions could not be made without also incorporating feelings regarding that decision.¹³ This has huge implications for the workplace. Choices, once thought to be made on a purely economic or rational basis, incorporate emotions that may run counter to logic.

A study did find, however, that experienced meditators could better separate their emotions from their decisions when they were faced with seemingly unfair choices, in the form of different "offers."¹⁴ As a result, meditators accepted a greater number of offers based on their actual merit compared to the control group. Why? Apparently, control group members more often accessed a part of their brain associated with disgust, rejection, and betrayal, which led to a higher likelihood of their rejection of offers. The meditators, on the other hand, were not limited by that part of the brain. Mindfulness meditation training seems to improve decision making by minimizing or removing emotional components that may cloud clearer thinking.

Self-Awareness

According to emotional intelligence experts, "All of the EI competencies build on self-awareness."¹⁵ Essentially, self-

awareness provides the insights to identify and improve upon areas of weakness while further capitalizing on strengths. This is important in any capacity but especially within a leadership role. Bill George, former CEO of Medtronic and currently a professor of management at Harvard Business School, found that meditation helped him to be more “self-aware and more compassionate toward [himself] and others.” In a 2011 study, the role of mindfulness meditation in increasing self-awareness was shown to lead to an increase in the part of the brain associated with self-awareness.¹⁶

Positive Emotions

The concept of mood and “emotional contagion” has important implications for the workplace. Both good and bad moods move quickly throughout an organization, though bad moods travel faster. While staff members need to be aware of the impact of their moods on others, Daniel Goleman feels that this is especially important for leaders because their moods tend to “go viral” the fastest. “Being in a good mood . . . helps people take in information effectively and respond nimbly and creatively.”¹⁷

Richard Davidson and his colleagues found that after an eight-week MBSR program, study participants showed greater activation in their left prefrontal cortex.¹⁸ The left prefrontal cortex is associated with positive emotions and a more adaptive response to negative or stressful events, while activation in the right prefrontal cortex is associated with response inhibition and more negative emotions.

How the Corporate World Is Using Meditation

Although more and more organizations are opening up to the benefits of this ancient practice, there is no standard for meditation in the workplace. At one end of the spectrum, companies offer “meditation rooms” (where employees can actually meditate) or the more

innocuous “quiet” or “recovery rooms” (where workers can simply take a break from stress). These areas often double as prayer rooms. Prentice Hall, eBay, and GlaxoSmithKline fall into this category.

A little farther along the spectrum are the companies that provide meditation classes and retreats, in addition to meditation spaces. Green Mountain Coffee Roasters has an onsite meditation center where classes are provided; they also regularly offer free retreats to employees as well as their families and friends, and even to members of the community. Google brings meditation to its employees through the Search Inside Yourself (SIY) program. It mixes science, meditation, and business expertise. According to Chade Meng Tan, founder of SIY, emotional intelligence provided the “vehicle for aligning meditation with real life”—Daniel Goleman helped to develop the program.

Sounds True, a Colorado-based multimedia publishing company, provides a meditation room and an optional daily 15-minute period for group reflection or meditation, as well as a minute of silence before company-wide quarterly meetings. Daily meetings begin with other mindfulness exercises, such as a check-in from each person in attendance.

Genentech and General Mills have made the most advanced commitment to the benefits of meditation. A biotechnology company owned by Roche, Genentech went from offering meditation and mindfulness classes in 2006 to a more comprehensive program called PEP (Personal Excellence Program) that uses the insights of mindfulness and meditation to fuel personal development and innovation. PEP is a ten-month journey comprised of three phases: selecting a topic for personal development, observing for greater self-awareness, and practicing new habits for greater effectiveness. Though the second phase involves mindfulness and meditation, Pamela Weiss, PEP creator, steers clear of specific beliefs and

religions. A third-party review of the program revealed the following results:

- a 10 to 20 percent increase in employee satisfaction
- a 12 percent increase in customer satisfaction
- a 50 percent improvement in employee communication, collaboration, conflict management, and coaching
- 77 percent reporting a “significant measurable business impact” as a result of PEP participation (the norm is 25 to 30 percent)

More than 800 people have participated in the PEP program, now in its sixth year, and a graduate program has been added.

In 2006, General Mills began offering The Mindful Leadership Series—which combines mindfulness meditation, yoga, and dialogue—to get its leaders to be more mindful of both themselves and others and to tap into their internal capacities. More than 140 officers and directors participated in the four-day Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness, while another 150 participated either in Catching Lightning: Innovation and Mindfulness or in Mindful Leadership at Work. Follow-up research in 2009 on the Mindful Leadership at Work course revealed the following:

- 83 percent of participants said they often “take time each day to optimize my personal productivity” (up from 23 percent before taking course)
- 82 percent said they “make time on most days to eliminate some tasks/meetings with limited productivity value” (up from 32 percent before the course)

Research on those participating in the Cultivating Leadership Presence through Mindfulness program found that

- 80 percent reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity, and
- 89 percent reported enhanced listening capabilities, to both others

and themselves

A seven-week program is now available for all levels within the organization, and the four-day program has been expanded beyond General Mills to other organizations.

Although the benefits of workplace meditation are clear for a growing number of organizations, leaders, and teams, more comprehensive and widespread integration is still needed. Perhaps one day, mindfulness meditation will be as essential to the workplace as the technology that is creating a need for it.

Notes

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