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# MINDING WHAT MATTERS: INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS TRAINING AT WORK

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Does your workplace have a meditation room yet? Do you provide break time for employees to engage in mindfulness training? If not, you may want to consider the benefits of mindfulness not only to your employees' health and well-being, but to your company's bottom line.

According to a recent [survey](#) conducted by the National Business Group on Health and Fidelity Investments, 35 percent of employers offered mindfulness classes or training, and an additional 26 percent were considering adding programs in the future. Why are so many companies incorporating mindfulness into their workplace wellness programs? The benefits of mindfulness training are certainly worth giving some thought.

## I'VE HEARD OF MEDITATION—BUT WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Most people have heard of meditation, and may even have tried to meditate at some point in their lives. Though growing in popularity, mindfulness training is less well known.

Mindfulness training broadly refers to exercises designed to become more aware and focused on the present. Mindfulness exercises include meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga. If you have an Apple Watch and you've used the Breathe app, you've practiced mindfulness, even if only for a few minutes.

Practitioners of mindfulness and meditation are likely familiar with the fully body scan, a technique used to become more aware of your body and how it feels. Have you recently considered how your workforce is doing—both

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physically and mentally? If not, you may be surprised to find that a high percentage of your employees struggle with workplace stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. And these issues affect their productivity at work.

A recent [survey](#) by the American Psychological Association Center for Organizational Excellence reported that 35 percent of working Americans reported experiencing chronic work stress, and less than half said their employer provides sufficient resources to help employees manage their stress. It was also found that 16 percent of employees reported that in the past month mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues kept them from achieving their goals at work.

The Mental Health Foundation found in a recent [survey](#) that work-related stress accounted for an average of 23.9 work days lost for every person affected. Stress, depression, and anxiety were the fourth most common reasons for absence. Another [survey](#) found that 56 percent of employers include mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, among the top three causes of long-term absence. Stress has also been [linked](#) to autoimmune diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and Crohn's disease.

In another [study](#), Mental Health American found that 46 percent of workers reported "always" or "often" having difficulty concentrating in the workplace and being distracted from their work. More than 77 percent stated that they "always" or "often" spend between 31 to 40 hours a week distracted at work. It has been [estimated](#) that workplace stress is responsible for up to \$190 billion in annual U.S. healthcare costs. These statistics directly correlate to increased costs and lost productivity for your company.

## **"VISUALIZING" A HEALTHIER WORKFORCE**

Visualization is a technique used to improve focus and avoid distraction. Can you picture a healthier and happier workforce? What does it look like? Take a moment right now and pause reading the rest of this article to give it some thought.

Did your mind wander to the things on your to-do list, to your children's after-school activities, to that project you

have been putting off, to...it's hard to do, isn't it? It takes practice to maintain focus.

Mindfulness and meditation are increasingly being used to improve focus, battle anxiety and depression, reduce stress, sleep better, and for many other reasons. There are numerous apps available to practice meditation and mindfulness, including Insight Timer, Headspace, Calm, and Aura. Insight Timer alone touts over 4 million users. So, do mindfulness and meditation actually make a difference?

Numerous [studies](#) have found that mindfulness-based techniques are a viable method for managing stress. Not only can mindfulness reduce stress, recent [studies](#) have found that mindfulness-based stress reduction training can reduce emotional exhaustion (a dimension of burnout), psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and occupational stress. Improvements were found in terms of personal accomplishment, self-compassion, quality of sleep, and relaxation.

In fact, meditation has [long been credited](#) with health benefits such as reduced blood pressure, heart rate, and brain activity. Harvard Medical School has reported that mindfulness meditation can change the brain's gray matter and brain regions linked with memory, the sense of self, and regulation of emotions. And research is being conducted into how mindfulness can help depression.

## **“NOTING” WHAT OTHER COMPANIES ARE DOING**

Meditation practitioners are familiar with the concept of mental noting, which helps us maintain awareness and being in the present by “noting” when we are feeling distracted. You should take note of what some companies are doing to implement mindfulness and meditation training in the workplace.

Apple, Google, Nike, Facebook, Twitter, General Mills, and Goldman Sachs are just some of the large companies that have incorporated mindfulness training in the workplace. Apple even offers employees an on-campus meditation room and half an hour a day to meditate, while cloud computing company Salesforce opened meditation rooms on every floor of its corporate office in 2016. Whether and how companies decide to incorporate mindfulness and

meditation training in the workplace varies, but the investment of large companies in these strategies indicate the benefits to productivity and profitability.

## **BUT WHAT CAN YOU DO?**

There are many ways to promote mindfulness and meditation in the workplace, including:

- Providing employees with **paid break time** during the workday to practice mindfulness or meditation—think of this as the flip-side of the decades-long practice of allowing smoking breaks, but with a much more positive health benefit. Even a 10-minute break can provide employees with some mental clarity that will allow them to productively tackle the remainder of their workday.
- Taking this concept one step further, your company could provide a **dedicated space** for meditation or a mindfulness/meditation **“guru”** who could provide training sessions throughout the day. Based on the popularity of meditation, you may already have a “guru” working for you that would love this opportunity to teach others.
- Offering to pay for or subsidize monthly or annual subscriptions to **mindfulness and meditation apps**. Many companies already promote physical health through paying for or subsidizing gym memberships—this would be a complementary offering to promote mental health among your workforce.
- **Talking to your employees** about workplace stress and the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. Just starting the conversation regarding workplace stress and its impact on health could help your employees who may be struggling to remain focused and productive at work. Educating employees about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation will provide them the tools to reduce stress and improve health.

If your company is like most in America, your workers are likely feeling the effects of workplace stress and it is impacting their mental and physical health, as well as their productivity. Promoting mindfulness and meditation in the workplace may help reduce the prevalence of these unwanted consequences of workplace stress and increase your company's productivity and profitability. Think about it.

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