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Mindfulness in the corporate jungle

Companies that undergo a transformation through mindfulness are seeing positive returns both on an individual level and on an organizational level. As leaders and employees develop the open-mindedness and clarity required to navigate through unpredictable environments, the organization becomes well positioned to unlock the full potential of agility.

Volatile markets, challenging consumer demands, and the technological disruptions resulting from digitization and Industry 4.0 are producing unprecedented rates of change. In response, companies have worked to increase organizational agility, hoping to foster innovation and shorten go-to-market cycles. Yet organizational experiences and sociological conditioning often impede true agility. As a result, many of these efforts fall short of their objective to manage the uncertainty generated by change.

Mindfulness is a centuries-old idea that has been reinvented to address the challenges of our digital age. In essence, mindfulness describes a state of being present in the moment and leaving behind one's tendency to judge. It allows one to pause amid the constant inflow of stimuli and consciously decide how to act, rather than react reflexively with ingrained behaviour patterns. Mindfulness, therefore, is perfectly suited to counterbalance the digital-age challenges of information overload and constant distraction.

Not surprisingly, interest in mindfulness is growing, especially among digital natives. In the past decade, the rate of increase in Google searches for mindfulness has outpaced that of all Google searches by a factor of four. Furthermore, years of scientific research and modern forms of teaching have fuelled its popularity. Now, mindfulness apps even come pre-installed on smartphones and tablets.

Yet integrating mindfulness in the corporate context can be challenging. Some companies encounter vocal sceptics; others struggle with entrenched ways of working. Even leaders and employees who are eager to try out mindfulness find it hard to get started. To unleash the power of mindfulness, companies will have to embrace a holistic approach to corporate agility.

Agility requires coping with uncertainty

To support their agility efforts, many companies have applied "cosmetic" digital-age solutions, such as hackathons, agile meetings (for example, short daily stand-up meetings to discuss progress and obstacles), and new visualization techniques and creativity tools.

Mindfulness programs help leaders and employees reflect effectively, focus sharply on the task at hand, master peak levels of stress, and recharge quickly.

However, most companies have not yet created an environment that truly prepares them to reap the rewards of agility. Often, their ways of working have been shaped by a tradition of emphasizing functional excellence over agility, as well as systems that favour expertise over open-mindedness. Two inhibitors stand out:

Resistance to change: As the pace of change increases, employees will have to continuously adapt to evolving circumstances. In most organizations, however, the existing ways of working leave employees unprepared to do so. They may therefore respond with reflexive resistance, a defence mechanism to avoid the discomfort of psychological uncertainty. Organizational politics and poor communication about the purpose of making changes only strengthen this resistance.

Overvaluing expertise: Many employees think and interact at work by applying expertise that they gained before the digital age, when efficiency, not agility, was the overarching objective. Such an approach

encourages closed-mindedness.

Mindfulness facilitates navigation through uncertainty

Mindfulness enables people to radically strengthen their ability to adapt quickly to evolving circumstances and ambiguous situations and to increase the speed with which they learn new things. It creates mental agility and helps people look inward to find answers.

In their recent book, *Altered Traits*, Daniel Goleman, a Harvard psychologist, and Richard J. Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin, provide a scientific view of personal mindfulness benefits. They synthesize three proven benefits of mindfulness that, in combination, allow people to act more effectively in unpredictable environments:

Staying calm and open-minded: Mindfulness practices such as breathing meditation are associated with decreased volumes of grey matter in the amygdala, the region of the brain that initiates response to stress. This reduces the inclination to interpret an uncertain environment as a threat and thus react defensively. In this way, mindfulness improves mental agility, allowing attitudes to shift from "but we have always done it like that" to "let's see what happens if we try a new approach."

Cognitive ability: Mindfulness improves short-term memory and the ability to perform complex cognitive tasks. It also frees people to think outside the box, which helps them cut through complexity. In the context of workplace performance, proven results include a higher quality of strategic decision making and more effective collaboration.

Focus and clarity of thinking: As Nobel laureate Herbert A. Simon observed, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." This insight, first articulated in 1971, is more accurate today than ever before. Maintaining a strong focus in this time of digital information overload, therefore, is essential. The regular practice of mindfulness routines can reduce mental wandering and distractibility. Mindfulness strengthens the awareness of both one's activities in the present moment and one's mental processes and behaviours (known as meta-awareness).

By delivering these individual benefits, mindfulness boosts the

potential of corporate agility initiatives and agile transformations. It helps people to inspect and adapt their behaviours in short cycles, relax so that they can rewire established attitudes, and think clearly in the midst of overwhelming digital stimuli. In short, mindfulness facilitates navigation in the context of uncertainty and ambiguity.

How companies can instil mindfulness

To fully capture the benefits of mindfulness, companies should customize their mindfulness programs. While it is valuable to begin by determining the objective of mindfulness interventions, many organizations have also achieved good results by starting with a small pilot program, such as providing a mindfulness course to senior leadership.

For some companies, mindfulness will become a paradigm for organization design and employee well-being. In terms of adopting mindfulness generally, organizations can start by experimenting with four types of interventions: leadership training, meditation training, mindfulness micro practices and mindfulness coaching.

Leadership training: As management guru Peter F. Drucker observed, leaders need trained perception fully as much as analysis. Well-designed leadership courses address this need by combining actionable mindfulness and emotional intelligence practices.

Even customized mindfulness leadership courses share common elements. Leaders should learn how to integrate formal and informal mindfulness practices into everyday life. Formal practices are often guided meditations, while informal practices include mindful listening exercises and simply paying attention to the task at hand.

By instilling self-awareness, self-regulation and compassion, mindfulness courses address the psychological root causes of multiple leadership problems. And because these courses also encourage the natural development of skills for managing time, change and conflict, training programs dedicated to establishing these skills might become obsolete.

At Bosch, a one-year agile leadership-training curriculum involves three modules: leading oneself, leading teams and leading the organization. The self-leadership training focuses on mindfulness and involves regular guided meditations, conscious-communication exercises and courses to help leaders avoid the pitfalls of multitasking.

At a multinational engineering company, some leaders openly expressed scepticism about the value of mindfulness. The company converted these sceptics into believers by explaining the concept in layman's terms, sharing scientific research about its effectiveness and inspiring senior leaders to become change agents.

Today, mindfulness is the new normal for the company, and leaders pause for meditation in the designated silent room before making major decisions or having difficult discussions.

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Mindfulness micro practices: Repetitive practice of basic skills is essential to promote mastery. Think of pianists playing scales throughout their careers or baseball players taking batting practice before every game. Similarly, employees who complete a meditation program need to continue practicing, through micro practices, to truly master mindfulness. Seasoned meditators report transformative mindfulness benefits once they have mastered the seamless integration of mindfulness practices into everyday life.

Organizations should invest in creating a culture in which meditation micro practices are not just tolerated but are actively disseminated by mindfulness change agents. Small workshops can also help to integrate mindfulness in a nonintrusive way.

Mindfulness coaching: The principles of mindfulness can also help teams collaborate more effectively. For example, if team members master the ability to listen to one another with undivided attention and without interruption, they promote freer and more creative thinking. And a team culture that values appreciation over criticism helps to build transparency and openness.

Facilitation by a coach is essential to capture the benefits of mindfulness in teamwork. Agile teams typically already have scrum masters or agile coaches, and these individuals can become mindfulness coaches as well. Similarly, executive teams could benefit from mindfulness coaches to enable authentic communication and effective teamwork

According to an emerging body of research, when companies invest in mindfulness, they are likely to experience the following five benefits.

1. Mindfulness reduces employee stress and mitigates the risk of burnout

Despite the obvious advantages of our faster, more connected world, our current age also comes with a powerful challenge. We now live in an "always on" state of perpetual stress and technological distraction. Mindfulness works as a powerful counterbalance to this ordinary state. Numerous studies suggest that mindfulness practice helps employees reduce stress and build what just might be the most valuable capacity in the digital age.

2. Mindfulness reduces unwanted turnover

The workforce has become increasingly transitory, and unwanted turnover poses a threat to most businesses. Experts estimate that unwanted turnover can cost up to 200 percent of an employee's annual salary. So how can we keep high-value employees from leaving? In one recent study, researchers examined the relationship between company mindfulness programs and retention. They found a significant relationship between mindfulness and higher levels of commitment among employees to their current employer.

3. Mindfulness increases productivity and engagement

Mindfulness training also has powerful effects on productivity. Researchers studying the effects of workplace mindfulness programs found that this training led to greater vitality, enhanced focus, and higher levels of engagement in the task at hand.

4. Mindfulness works as a powerful tool for recruiting top talent

In a tight labour market, where many companies struggle to attract top talent, mindfulness programs give companies a competitive edge. This is perhaps why leading companies like Google, Nike, Apple and Goldman Sachs are all heavily invested in mindfulness training. And it makes sense. If given the choice between a firm that invests in the well-being and resilience of its employees and one that doesn't, most savvy applicants will choose the company that is more invested in its employees' success.

5. Mindfulness boosts creativity and innovation

With the nature of industry and work continuously changing and with new disruptive technologies like Artificial Intelligence, creativity and innovation are essential business assets. Researchers at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, Netherlands, wanted to understand the impact of mindfulness training on creativity. They found that just a few minutes of mindfulness practice led to statistically significant increases in "divergent thinking" and also increased the range of ideas, subjects were able to generate.

The key upshot of this emerging research is that mindfulness is a sound investment – one that pays out on a variety of different levels. At the level of social responsibility and doing well, investing in the well-being and resilience of employees is simply the right thing to do.

Transforming employees' levels of productivity

Meditating, over time, will help you regulate yourself when you aren't

focused. Multitasking is better in theory than in execution. Ideally, multitasking makes us a better worker, but in actuality, it makes us more prone to mistakes. We only have so much bandwidth and cognitive capacity to execute tasks swiftly and error-free. A more precise level of focus will help you complete assignments more efficiently. The practice positively alters your mind. Improved focus is among the chief advantages that meditation brings the practitioner.

The calming effects of connected breathing and deep inner thoughts alleviate stress and anxieties. By not preoccupying yourself with the pressures of work and obligations that will ultimately pass, in meditating, you can think both inside and outside the box. The tranquillity that meditation can bring allows you to make judgments quicker and easier. And if an issue requires an inventive approach, sitting with yourself in a quiet atmosphere, you can push yourself towards imaginative solutions.

Mindfulness leads to better decision making and being less reactive. Meditation is about observing rather than forcibly participating. Once utilizing the practice becomes second nature, the meditator will see failures in a positive light. Introspection will manifest all shortcomings as teaching moments and lessons. The focus won't be on what was lost, but what was gained.

While meditation is proven effective in employee performance enhancement, it's not a cure-all. Conflicts will arise, and issues out of anyone's control will persist. Meditation will better prepare you to navigate yourself through hardships and aide in maintaining a balance in a healthy way of self-sustaining. If the arena of business is all about an edge, meditation is the blade's handle.

Unleashing the Power

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