

Mindfulness has big impacts for performance, decision-making and career longevity

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Mindfulness has become the rage these days, from [Wall Street](#) to [Westminster Hall](#). The surge has inspired major organisations like Google, Virgin Atlantic, Barclays Bank, British Telecom, and UK Parliament to invest in employee mindfulness training. Some people think mindfulness may be a fad, and who could blame them? Imagining monks running board meetings sounds like the start of a joke, not serious management advice. Yet we believe this to be a mistake; mindfulness has the potential to upgrade the hardware (brains) and software (minds) in our heads in ways that make us work better.

Will mindfulness be another passing management fad? In a word, no! Our recently published [article](#) in the *Journal of Management* answers this question, based on review of the 4,000-plus scientific papers on mindfulness. We integrate research evidence to show how mindfulness impacts our work lives. Below we share some of the most surprising and interesting findings.

Put plainly, mindfulness is accepting present moment attention and awareness, often cultivated through meditation. If you are like most people, you don't experience this very often. In fact, research suggests your mind wanders [about 50% of the time](#). We are often stuck 'in our heads' – replaying our to-do lists or stewing over an unpleasant email exchange. Mindfulness has been shown to significantly reduce this common incessant mind wandering. Meditation [lowers activity](#) in the brain region responsible for attention lapses, [cutting](#) these by up to 50%. Ask yourself, how might the focused attention that results from mindfulness help you at work?

In our research, we found that being present has big impacts for performance, decision-making, and career longevity. One study found that just [six hours](#) of mindfulness training led to big improvements in standardized graduate school entrance exam scores; this gain was due to avoiding mistakes from inattention. Mindful people may effectively get smarter, just by having greater focus.

Mindfulness may also help us make better decisions. While we often see ourselves as rational decision-makers, we

make most decisions without much thought. Mindfulness guards against the unconscious reactions that produce irrational decisions. Indeed, meditators make more rational decisions and avoid common decision errors, such as continuing to spend money on [losing projects](#) or [reacting emotionally](#) to unfair situations. Imagine how much better decisions you could make if you were not subject to the same biases and errors that plague most people!

These cognitive upgrades – better attention, greater focus, and reduced bias – may result from brain changes [caused by mindfulness](#) practices. Amazingly, one common mindfulness program ([Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#)) has been linked to shrinkage of the [amygdala](#), the brain region triggering flight-fight response. This region can get “hijacked” by threats and resulting emotional reactions, disrupting emotional and behavioral control. Can you imagine, with a brain less reactive to threats, how much calmer (and happier) you will be when facing workplace challenges?

Mindfulness may even allow us to have longer careers. Internationally-recognized research teams have shown mindfulness slowing biochemical aging, including [reducing inflammation](#) and [preserving DNA health](#). Other studies show mindfulness may [strengthen disease resistance](#) and [immune system functioning](#). Remarkably, mindfulness may even slow the decay of [brain tissue](#) connections from aging. Like a road with fewer potholes, [meditators have younger-looking brains](#) with fewer gaps between neurons that may interrupt effective focus and thought. This may explain why expert meditators show greater intelligence, focus, and cognitive flexibility than non-meditators, allowing them to stay sharp and continue learning later into their careers. One study found that [older meditators](#) exhibited smaller attention lapses than individuals half their age. As their careers progress, most people trade their youthful energy and flexibility for expertise. These remarkable studies suggest that meditators may avoid this tradeoff. Envision a career in which you maintain your youthful energy and mental flexibility as you gain expertise and reach senior leadership.

These are only a few of the many intriguing studies we reviewed. We found that mindfulness beneficially impacts the full spectrum of human workplace functioning, from how we think, feel, and act, to the quality of our performance, relationships, and well-being. With such broad effects, it is exciting to imagine how mindfulness might transform organisational functioning.

A key outstanding question is how should managers harness the power of mindfulness to benefit their careers, employees, and organizations? We are still discovering how to effectively bring mindfulness into organisations. Offering mindfulness training for employees is a good starting point. Yet there remains much opportunity for innovation in cultivating mindfulness in organisations. For example, we are studying a hospital in New York City that is experimenting with having nurses begin shifts with one-minute meditations. We anticipate such ongoing experimentation and collaboration between organisations and scholars to discover the optimal management of this powerful capacity. The evidence suggests that mindfulness is a simple tool with deep impacts, and a free practice bringing great value to our work lives and workplaces.



Notes:

- *This article is based on the authors' paper [Contemplating Mindfulness at Work: An Integrative Review](#), co-authored with Kirk Warren Brown, Michelle K. Duffy, Ruth A. Baer, Judson A. Brewer and Sara W. Lazar, in *Journal of Management*, December 7 2015, 0149206315617003*
- *This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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Darren J. Good is an Assistant Professor of Applied Behavioral Science at the Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University, serving as core faculty in the MBA and Masters of Organization Development programs. He researches the intersection of mindfulness and leadership. Over the past decade, Good has regularly coached executives and consulted as a trusted advisor to organizations. He was named a 2014 Ascendant Scholar by the Western Academy of Management. Good holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University.



Christopher J. Lyddy is a doctoral candidate in Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, and will join the faculty of the Providence College School of Business as an Assistant Professor in August 2016. His research explores the integration and impacts of mindfulness at work, with current projects exploring how the quality and practice of mindfulness intersects managerial cognition, loss of self-control, and organizational routines. He previously earned degrees in Economics and City Planning at the University of Michigan and MIT, and worked as a researcher at the Brookings Institution and MIT-Sloan School of Management.



Theresa M. Glomb is the Toro Company-David M. Lilly Chair in the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. Her research examines the important role of work events, mood, and micro-interventions in predicting on the job behavior and employee well-being. She has conducted field research in dozens of companies, including several Fortune 500 firms, with thousands of workers as participants. Theresa is trying to help others create positive experiences at work through growth, happiness, and satisfaction. Ultimately, she's trying to make work great (or at least a little better).



Joyce E. Bono is the Walter J. Matherly Professor of Management at the Warrington College of Business, University of Florida, where she teaches organizational behavior in the professional MBA and DBA programs. Her primary research focus is on employees' quality of work life, including the effects of leadership, workplace relationships, personality traits, and interventions that build positive resources.



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