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.

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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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