



MICHAEL CHASKALSON

The  
Mindful  
Workplace

Developing Resilient Individuals  
and Resonant Organizations  
with MBSR

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



# The Mindful Workplace



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## Developing Resilient Individuals and Resonant Organizations with MBSR

Michael Chaskalson

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Foreword

We are entering a world of work where the combination of ever increasing globalization and technological advances are breaking our work up into ever smaller fragments. Faced with a continuous barrage of emails, constantly ringing phones, ever more demanding Twitter feeds and insistent Facebook updates, it's easy to let the instant, the pressing and the immediate overwhelm the important and the longer term. We are becoming overwhelmed by the sheer size of connectivity: over five billion people will soon potentially be connected to each other.

It's no surprise that, for many of us, three minutes is about as long as we can concentrate before being interrupted, and our relationships are becoming increasingly virtual and alienated. The results can be devastating. Skills become denuded as less time is spent in precious concentration, anxiety rises as the immediate overwhelms any sense of boundaries between us and our work, and loneliness becomes the central motif of much of our working lives. Faced with the sheer

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volume of stimulation, we are living our working lives on automatic pilot.

Yet, faced with the challenge of fragmentation and loneliness, what we need is not yet more careful time-management skills to eke out every last second; it is not the future promise of cognitive assistants capable of managing our inboxes; it is not even another programme to network and influence people. No: what we need is a way of thinking more mindfully about ourselves, our work and our companies. This message of mindfulness becomes ever more insistent when we consider the potential joy that longevity will bring to our working lives. The 50 years that many of us can expect to work could be a period of great meaning and satisfaction. But it also has the possibility of simply elongating what is already an energy-draining activity. Our working lives are rapidly shifting from a race to a marathon. Burnout for peak performance may have worked for a race – but it does not provide the resilience that a marathon takes.

The forces of technology, globalization, connectivity and demography together are creating an increasingly urgent need to shift the way we think about work and the skills and competencies we develop to build resilience. These mindful habits, skills and techniques will be crucial to navigating the road ahead.

It is these habits of mindfulness, the skills of self-awareness and the practices of meditation that Michael describes with so much wisdom and clarity. When we understand ourselves more profoundly, accept ourselves more fully and give ourselves an opportunity to reflect, then we build resilience for the path ahead.

The simplicity of Michael's message is underpinned by profound thought, insight and wisdom. Resilient lives are not made from grand gestures and the construction of grandiose

theories. Resilience is built through the everyday, every-minute habits and exercises that punctuate our daily lives. When we consciously and mindfully choose to change the way we work and live, and consciously and mindfully build the habits of meaning into our lives, then we have the chance – the promise – of working with the forces that will shape our lives, rather than working against them.

Lynda Gratton

Professor of Management Practice

London Business School

Author of *The Shift: The Future of Work Is Already Here*



# Preface

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention, in the present moment, to yourself, others and the world around you. It is a skill that you can train in, using techniques like meditation and yoga. As we'll see, research shows that people who do that are more aware of their thoughts and feelings and better able to manage them. Mindfulness training boosts your attention and concentration, raises your level of emotional intelligence, increases your resilience and improves your relationships.

This book makes the case for mindfulness training in the workplace. Put simply, its hypothesis is that people who are better at working with their minds and mental states will be more productive than those who are less skilled in these areas. Based on the emerging research evidence around the value of mindfulness training, the book discusses the relevance of that research to the world of work. It also tells the story of how mindfulness emerged from the Buddhist monasteries in which it was cloistered for 2500 years and is now being adopted as a mainstream health-care intervention.

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Recommended as a frontline treatment by the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), mindfulness is now also being used as a means of increasing resilience and enhancing emotional intelligence and overall effectiveness in a wide range of organizations: banks, media companies, industry, law and accountancy firms, the police, government and the military.

When I first began to practise mindfulness and meditation in 1975, sitting in patched jeans in draughty meditation rooms with my scruffy, enthusiastic companions, I never dreamed that I'd one day be wearing a suit and teaching it in corporate meeting rooms to senior partners in a global law firm. Nor could I ever have imagined that an organization like the US Marine Corps would adopt mindfulness training. But they have. A study conducted in the Corps found mindfulness training to be an effective means of helping combatants resist the various functional impairments associated with high-stress challenges. Marines who completed an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course showed raised levels of cognitive control, increased self-awareness, more situational awareness and improved emotional regulation.

Studies like that were unthinkable in 1975. At best, it was a kind of fantasy. Wouldn't it be wonderful, my companions and I dreamed, if society at large could share in the benefits we were finding in our own mindfulness practice?

There are two key factors that seem to be driving the wider adoption of mindfulness. The first is its secularization. Thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (of whom more later), mindfulness, which for thousands of years had been preserved almost exclusively in Buddhist contexts, is increasingly being offered as a purely secular form of



mental training. Today you don't have to be a Buddhist to practise it and it is freely available to people from any religious background and to those with none.

Then, there is the science. When I first began to study mindfulness academically around 2003, there were a handful of respectable academic papers to refer to. Most of us in the field had read these and could refer to them easily. Now, that is impossible. There are thousands of papers out there and the volume of publications is increasing exponentially. From what we now know, based on published studies, mindfulness appears to be effective in reducing levels of stress and increasing levels of resilience and emotional intelligence. It raises the level of self-awareness and awareness of others; it increases interpersonal sensitivity and communication skills. It lowers rates of health-related absenteeism, leads to increased concentration and extends one's attention span. It reduces impulsivity and improves one's capacity to hold and manipulate information. It lowers levels of psychological distress and raises levels of well-being and overall work and life satisfaction. More and more of this kind of evidence is coming out each month.

But perhaps the most dramatic illustrations of the beneficial changes brought about by mindfulness training come from the field of neuroscience. Taking just one example, a study recently published<sup>1</sup> investigated pre- and post-changes in brain grey-matter concentration attributable to participation in an MBSR programme. It showed that after just eight weeks of mindfulness training there were significant increases in grey-matter concentration in brain regions involved in learning and memory processes, emotion regulation, self-referential processing and perspective-taking.

Evidence showing the clear benefits of mindfulness training increases every day and the uptake of mindfulness

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practices across the board in our culture is growing steadily. This book aims to show the relevance of this evidence and this training to today's rapidly changing, uncertain and often stressful workplace. I hope it will play its own small part in helping to make these remarkable techniques more widely available.

## **Reference**

- 1 Hölzel, B.K., Carmody, J., Vangel, M., *et al.* (2011) Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 191 (1), 36–43.

# Introduction

## *The Business Case for Mindfulness Training*

In a conference room on the edge of London 15 employees of one of the world's largest online retailers sit in a circle. The room is normally used for PowerPoint presentations of strategy options or market-research data, but today is different. One of the company's legal counsellors is here, as are the managers of various divisions. There are strategists present, HR people and a small cluster of people concerned with new-business development. It's not been an easy time for the firm. They have had their world more or less to themselves for almost a decade, but rival companies have recently been eating away at their market share. A series of high-profile litigation cases have begun to affect crucial public perceptions of a company once thought of as hip, radical and somehow friendly. Some think their approach is beginning to look a

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little tired. And the market is beginning to turn – it seems we may be on the brink of a deep recession.

It is the final session of an eight-week mindfulness course that the company has laid on for anyone who wants to attend. The participants are discussing what they have learned: ‘It’s been life-changing for me’, the legal counsellor tells the group.

You all know what’s been going on in my corner of this world these past weeks. The stress levels have been immense but the work we’ve been doing in the mindfulness group has made such a difference. Not just at work . . . I’ve been, I guess, somehow more *human* at home too. Not so snappy, more available. Of course it’s impossible to evaluate how I’d have been if I’d not done it, but my sense is that I’ve been sharper, more creative, and certainly less difficult to be around.

It’s not been easy for the group to follow this programme. Among other things, it has involved a daily meditation practice of 20 minutes or more at a stretch. Some participants were new to meditation and all of them have very full lives. Their work, family and social lives make huge demands on their time and, prior to the course, their minds were constantly and very actively preoccupied. Just fitting in the taught, group-based part of the course for two hours a week over eight weeks was a challenge, to say nothing of the home-practice requirement. Yet attendance on the course was voluntary and each person had a sense, from the introductory taster session they attended, that there were real benefits on offer. Having persisted with the programme they are now reporting the benefits.

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme they have been attending has its origins at the Stress

Reduction Clinic that was founded by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. The term ‘mindfulness’ points to an idea or approach that is said to have first been described by the Buddha over 2500 years ago. It is a form of sustained present-moment awareness – of yourself, others and the world around you. The UK Mental Health Foundation’s 2010 *Mindfulness Report* describes mindfulness in the clinical context as:

an integrative, mind-body based approach that helps people change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences. It involves paying attention to our thoughts and feelings so we become more aware of them, less enmeshed in them, and better able to manage them.<sup>1</sup> (p. 6)

Since its inception, the eight-week MBSR programme that Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues developed – as well as variants upon it – has been subject to considerable research. There have been thousands of peer-reviewed papers<sup>i</sup> published that speak of its effectiveness in a wide variety of applications. Comparative studies of some of the primary peer-reviewed empirical literature about the course have judged the programme and its variants to be effective.<sup>2-4</sup> Based on a review of this literature, the Mental Health Foundation’s report suggests that evidence coming from mindfulness and well-being research shows that mindfulness confers significant benefits on health, well-being and quality of life in general. Each of the benefits that the report draws attention to has significant implications for people’s performance in the workplace – either in terms of their levels of stress and productivity or in terms of the qualities of their interpersonal relationships, as leaders or team members. According to the report:

- People who are more mindful are less likely to experience psychological distress, including depression and anxiety. They are less neurotic, more extroverted and report greater well-being and life satisfaction.
- People who are more mindful have greater awareness, understanding and acceptance of their emotions, and recover from bad moods more quickly.
- People who are more mindful have less frequent negative thoughts and are more able to let them go when they arise.
- People who are more mindful have higher, more stable self-esteem that is less dependent on external factors.
- People who are more mindful enjoy more satisfying relationships, are better at communicating and are less troubled by relationship conflict, as well as less likely to think negatively of their partners as a result of conflict.
- Mindfulness is correlated with emotional intelligence, which itself has been associated with good social skills, ability to cooperate and ability to see another person's perspective.
- People who are mindful are also less likely to react defensively or aggressively when they feel threatened. Mindfulness seems to increase self-awareness, and is associated with greater vitality.
- Being more mindful is linked with higher success in reaching academic and personal goals.
- Practising meditation has repeatedly been shown to improve people's attention, as well as improve job performance, productivity and satisfaction, and to enable better relationships with colleagues, resulting in a reduction of work-related stress.
- People who are mindful feel more in control of their behaviour and are more able to override or change internal thoughts and feelings and resist acting on impulse.

- Meditation practices more generally have been shown to increase blood flow, reduce blood pressure and protect people at risk of developing hypertension; they have also been shown to reduce the risk of developing and dying from cardiovascular disease, and to reduce the severity of cardiovascular disease when it does arise.
- People who meditate have fewer hospital admissions for heart disease, cancer and infectious diseases, and visit their doctor half as often as people who don't meditate.
- Mindfulness can reduce addictive behaviour, and meditation practices generally have been found to help reduce use of illegal drugs, prescribed medication, alcohol and caffeine.<sup>1</sup>

This list alone might stand as a good case for the introduction of workplace mindfulness training. The case extends well beyond this, however, as later chapters will show. For now, it is worth just touching on the issue of stress and its costs. As we will see, mindfulness training enhances interpersonal relationships, it develops emotional intelligence, increases resilience, enhances innovation and creativity, and extends one's attention span. All of these have significant workplace benefits. But it is as a stress-reduction intervention that mindfulness training has so far been most widely known.

In the United Kingdom, stress in the workplace is running at epidemic levels. The Labour Force Survey conducted by the UK Office for National Statistics in 2007/2008 estimated that 442000 individuals in Britain who worked in the last year believed that they were experiencing work-related stress at a level that was making them ill.<sup>5</sup> Around 13.6% of all working individuals in the United Kingdom in 2007 thought their job was very or extremely stressful.<sup>6</sup> An estimated 237000 people who worked in 2007/2008 became aware of work-related