IMPLEMENTING MINDFULNESS IN THE WORKPLACE – WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

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This is a guest post by Robert Mather, Ph.D. Dr. Mather is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he directs the Interpersonal Processes and Social Cognition Lab and is the chair of the Institutional Review Board. He is a recognized expert in empirical social cognition research on automaticity and cognitive control, attitudes and persuasion, bias correction, stereotypes and discrimination, and leadership. This research has applications in management, consumer behavior, marketing, and forensic science. He has authored three books and over thirty articles.

Implementing Mindfulness in the Workplace - What are the Implications?



Many people have heard the term "mindfulness" in one context or another. Maybe you meditate in a yoga class, or someone is trying to get you to be less stressed and worried, or perhaps you are a mental health clinician and are using mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. Over the past 15 years, research on mindfulness has exploded in the psychological literature across many areas.

In the social cognition literature, mindfulness is closely tied to the discussion of the parameters of automaticity and cognitive control (see Bargh & Morsella, 2008; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006; Mather & Romo, 2007; Randolph-Seng & Mather, 2009). This research, made popular by Malcolm Gladwell's (2005) book *Blink*, has consistently demonstrated that unconscious thought can process a great deal of information without our awareness, and that automatic and controlled processes run on a continuum rather than a dichotomy. As such, any potential application of mindfulness interventions to the workplace (for one prominent example, see "Future of Work: Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice") should be informed by this research.

The Concept of Mindfulness

Mindfulness, according to Hyland et al. (2015), has three elements. First, mindfulness focuses on the present at the expense of ruminating about the past or future. Wegner's (1994) research on consciousness that demonstrates the failure of thought suppression (i.e., don't think about a white bear, don't think about your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend...you're welcome...) supports this first element. Second, mindfulness focuses on attending to both internal and external phenomena. This is consistent with the spotlight metaphor of attention (Dennett, 1991), in which we cast our attention toward some specific entity.

Third, mindfulness involves attending to stimuli in an unbiased manner. Wilson and Brekke (1994) developed a model of bias correction that proposed four elements that are necessary for bias correction: awareness of the potential bias, motivation to correct the bias, awareness of the direction and magnitude of the bias, and the ability to control the response. These four elements, which are necessary for bias correction, require mindful attention. However, it is quite difficult to gather enough information to align with the goals of bias correction.

As Nisbett and Wilson (1977) demonstrated, humans are not good at accurate introspection. Automatic processes define our existence, and we should be thankful that we efficiently encode information such as spatial information, frequency of occurrence, and temporal duration without having to be mindful of those things (Hasher & Zacks, 1984). However, when deployed correctly and under the right circumstances, mindfulness can help us be more accurate with those encoding events as well.

Unfortunately, our perceptual experience is the narrative that we invoke on our subjective experience of "witnessing" the outcomes of the automatic processes. Why did you get up and walk across the room? Perhaps you believe that you did so because you thought about it and chose to do so. That narrative makes sense to you, given your subjective experience, but what caused the thought? That is, what stimulus from the environment outside of your body triggered the cognitive activity that came before your subjective choice experience? The neural activity that preceded the thought can be measured by electroencephalography and comes before your experience of thinking and choosing (Randolph-Seng & Mather, 2009).

Considerations for Mindfulness in the Workplace

One of the problems with mindfulness in the workplace that was noted by Hyland et al. (2015) was that it can decrease automaticity. While this could be useful for high-risk decisions, it may be detrimental for mundane tasks, where it would slow down productivity. Another issue comes from increasing mindfulness in instances when an employee's values do not align with those of the organization. It is not difficult to envision that an exploited worker who has low job satisfaction might decrease productivity after becoming more aware of the perceived injustices of the organization. Assessing employee values might be the first step towards managing this issue.



The context of the work environment is also important to consider in the application of mindfulness. A soldier in boot camp might need to think less rather than more to accomplish his or her immediate goals. Unfocused mindfulness might not enhance the productivity of the soldier, but mindfulness in the context of the work environment, with shared values between the individual and the organization, might increase productivity.

In order to develop effective mindfulness interventions in the workplace, researchers must develop one unified concept of mindfulness to measure. Internal validity must be developed first, then external validity. Once this is established, there are a variety of individual difference measures that would seem to be applicable to the development of an understanding of contexts in which the intervention could work in an organization, most notably need for cognition and individual differences in working memory capacity.

Conclusions

Mindfulness interventions in the workplace appear to be well worth researching. However, as outlined above, there are several issues that can be informed by existing research on social automaticity, particularly thought suppression, working memory, bias correction, and the impact of interfering with automatic cognitive processes in specific work contexts.

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