

Mindfulness: multiply productivity through undivided attention

How mindfulness training strengthens a broad set of executive functions to boost productivity, improve decision-making and enhance well-being.



January 1, 2014

By [Alberto Ribera](#) & José Luis Guillén

General Mills is not just a large North American food corporation; it is also a pioneer in executive education and leadership training, thanks in part to its adoption of a groundbreaking program aimed at cultivating “mindfulness” — a state of heightened awareness and attention — among its workforce. Employees testify to enhanced listening capacity, clearer decision-making and higher productivity after participating in the company’s mindfulness training programs.

Other companies have launched similar programs of their own — including Google, Procter & Gamble, Apple, Yahoo! and Unilever.

Meanwhile, the latest research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, as well as in business management, has started to lend scientific credence to the notion of mindfulness, which until recently was widely, if mistakenly, derided as pseudo-religious mumbo jumbo.

In this article, we explain how mindfulness training can strengthen a broad set of executive functions to boost productivity, improve decision-making and enhance well-being, based on research and coaching experiences we have undertaken in designing and delivering programs for multinational corporations.

An antidote to attention deficit

In this day and age of multitasking, instant messaging and constant connectivity, the fact that people are finding it increasingly difficult to focus their attention on one thing at a time hardly comes as any surprise. Every day we are bombarded with stimuli, distractions, interruptions and growing pressures to do more with less. This has negative repercussions on our productivity and well-being. The result is often a disordered mind, reactive behavior and unduly high levels of stress and anxiety.

At IESE we surveyed around 1,000 executives to try to measure the impact of this attention deficit on workplace performance. We used two recognized temperament scales — “exploratory excitability” and “impulsiveness” — both of which are related to hyperactivity, disorderliness, a propensity to seek out novel experiences, and an intolerance for monotony and routine.

- In the first test, we found 72% of participants exhibited “high” or “very high” levels of “exploratory excitement,” suggesting heightened levels of novelty-seeking behavior.
- In the second test, we found 45% also showed “high” or “very high” levels of

“impulsiveness,” implying a lack of control of automatic responses and an unwillingness to focus in-depth on issues at hand.

Given such findings, any tool or practice that serves to relieve mental overload and helps people devote their full concentration to the tasks before them seems warranted. And that is exactly what mindfulness aims to do.

Mindfulness helps you stop functioning on autopilot, so that you can engage more consciously and proactively in your work.

Besides being able to give your full attention to the present moment, acting deliberately or mindfully also helps you detach yourself, making you less prone to emotional prejudices and whims.

Your ability to manage external stimuli and your responses to them depends on the degree to which you give your full attention. Mindfulness allows you to develop a broad set of cognitive and executive functions, raises self-awareness levels and facilitates emotional regulation, empowering individuals to substitute knee-jerk reactions with more conscious and ultimately more efficient behavior.

It is worth underscoring the difference between mindfulness as a technique and mindfulness as a state of mind: the former is just a means, but it is important to keep the latter, the true end, in sight.

Training the mind

Cultivating our attention is one of the key aspects of practicing mindfulness. The good news is that we can train our minds to enhance our attention, just like firming muscles when we do exercise.

As the psychologist and author Daniel Goleman has written: “Attention is a mental muscle and can be strengthened with the right practice. The basic move to enhance concentration in the mental gym: put your focus on a chosen target, like your breath. When it wanders away (and it will), notice that your mind has wandered. This requires mindfulness, the ability to observe our thoughts without getting caught up in them. Then bring your attention back to your breath. That’s the mental equivalent of a weightlifting rep.”

The effort we make to refocus our attention on what is most relevant has a reward: in sharpening our minds, we are effectively helping it to rest.

Start by focusing on a single element or object: it could be your breathing or physical sensations in your body. Each time your mind wanders from that element, you must make every effort to refocus on it. Doing this helps to steady your attention and reduce the frequency of distractions.

There are a variety of techniques to achieve this state of sharpened attention and full awareness. All have one thing in common: the establishment of an anchoring point to return to when your attention begins to wander.

An ideal starting point is the most internationally renowned mindfulness program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). First developed in the 1970s by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts, MBSR was initially tested in a clinical setting and later applied to the real world of business. Its positive effects on the brain — the general feeling of well-being and effective management of emotions and impulses — have been rigorously evaluated in multiple studies and are extensively documented.

To achieve the desired results, the practice of mindfulness must conform to the following requirements:

- **Nonjudgmental observation:** being able to step back from your emotions in order to be free of making distorted judgments.
- **Renewed attention:** deactivating the autopilot response so as not to be dulled by routine.
- **Anchored to the present:** living and embracing each moment in a fully conscious way.
- **Equanimity and composure:** experiencing emotions but without getting carried away by them.

Cognitive, psychosomatic and emotional benefits

The habitual and sustained practice of mindfulness has a notable impact at the neural level. The plasticity of the brain makes it possible to alter its structure and functions. Mental training can alter the patterns of activity, modifying or deactivating established neural connections and allowing for the creation of new ones.

Research points to a series of positive effects this can have for business executives in three

separate areas:

1. Cognitive effects. A broad body of research has shown that mindfulness enhances attention, memory and a number of executive functions. Some models hold that attention depends on three neural networks with distinct functions: alertness, orientation and conflict management.

Mindfulness helps to develop these networks by forcing us to focus our attention on just one element. It does this by making us avoid analyzing or judging our thoughts, sensations or feelings, and returning our attention to our breathing each time that an unwanted stimulus intrudes on our thought processes, making our minds wander.

It also significantly improves “working memory,” which is necessary to keep valuable information in mind as we perform complex functions such as understanding, learning and deliberating.

As for executive functions — by which we must regulate thoughts in order to confront problems, strategize, form concepts and make decisions — mindfulness notably improves cognitive flexibility, allowing us to better navigate unexpected or uncharted waters.

2. Psychosomatic effects. Mindfulness has a positive influence on both physical and mental well-being. Of particular note is its impact on one’s capacity to manage stress. Stress not only undermines the ability to work but can also be extremely costly for companies in terms of healthcare, sick leave, absenteeism and turnover.

Most stress management and prevention methods focus on external factors, leading many companies to try to redesign the workplace environment and dynamics.

Mindfulness, by contrast, seeks to change not the reality but the way in which the individual perceives and experiences it.

The practice of mindfulness reduces the brain’s levels of cortisol, a hormone related to stress, making it easier to concentrate and relieving certain psychosomatic problems, such as insomnia.

3. Emotional effects. The capacity to develop and focus one’s attention substantially improves an individual’s emotional balance, so that one can avoid impulsive responses.

Richard J. Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a leading expert in the field of mindfulness, has done extensive research

showing that cultivating full attention and a conscious response has a direct, positive impact on six key emotional dimensions that underlie personality and temperament:

- **Resilience:** rapid recovery in the face of negative life events;
- **Outlook:** commitment, optimism and sustained energy levels, even in difficult circumstances;
- **Social intuition:** empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence in social situations;
- **Self-awareness:** knowledge of your own feelings and emotions;
- **Context sensitivity:** knowing how to interpret the external environment and acting accordingly;
- **Attention:** maintaining focus, awareness and feelings of control, even in adverse situations.

All of these effects transcend the individual and benefit the entire organization by raising productivity, enhancing decision-making, boosting creativity, and improving social relations and the workplace atmosphere. Let's consider each benefit in turn.

Positive effects on productivity

Mindfulness raises productivity in a number of ways. Full attention in the present moment leads to a state of improved concentration, allows practitioners to reduce the extent and frequency of their mind wandering, and enables them to maintain focus for longer periods of time. These effects are especially notable in workplaces where multitasking is the norm. Constantly shifting your attention between multiple tasks has been shown to slow down performance and contributes to making more mistakes.

An article in the *Financial Times* quoted several high-profile executives from the world of finance extolling the benefits of mindfulness practices, including Philipp Hildebrand, vice chair of BlackRock and a former head of the Swiss National Bank, who said, "In a world of screens, texts, cell phones, information all over you, spending 20 minutes purposefully not thinking of anything is a wonderful thing. It's a pause that refreshes. In some ways in the financial world, it is a must."

Not letting yourself be ruled by every sensation, emotion or feeling that wells up in the course of a day saves valuable time and energy. Why? Because it avoids unhealthy rumination — chewing something over and over that perturbs you. By not dwelling on things, you reduce your levels of emotional fatigue, which means you can devote more of your

energies toward performance rather than sweating the small stuff.

Adopting a positive outlook, refusing to react automatically and consciously choosing to accept situations strengthen resilience, which translates into a greater capacity to adapt to challenges as well as recover more swiftly when things don't go as planned. Mindfulness can even boost the immune system, as several studies have shown.

Employees who are able to immerse themselves completely in their work activities display more commitment and willingness to contribute to the productivity of the organization. As such, mindfulness positively influences three aspects related to productivity: vigor; dedication and absorption; and loyalty.

The productivity benefits of running a mindfulness program at work have been demonstrated by a number of organizations. In the case of General Mills, 83% of those who participated in the company's Mindful Leadership at Work course said they subsequently took time each day to optimize their personal productivity, compared with 23% who said they did so before the course.

In addition, the number of people who made a conscious effort to eliminate tasks or meetings with little productive value went up to 82% from 32% before, according to survey results posted on the General Mills website.

More ethical considerations in decision-making

While we like to think that decision-making in companies is a wholly rational process, in reality we know that human decision-making and reasoning are unavoidably shaped by unconscious, automatic impulses. This is not always a bad thing: such impulses or intuitions allow us to act quickly, without taxing our cognitive abilities and resources, when time is of the essence.

However, when taken to the extreme or if it becomes the norm, the use of these cognitive shortcuts can lead us to act impulsively, neglect important details or ignore alternative ways of approaching a particular action or decision.

With a mindful attitude, we broaden our field of vision and are able to identify and adopt alternative ways of doing things. With our autopilot deactivated, our decision-making processes gain in terms of perspective and scope. This is particularly relevant to dynamic, fast-changing business environments where uncertainty rules.

Some authors suggest that mindfulness can also boost ethical decision-making. This is not to say that devoting your full attention necessarily makes you more ethical; however, it does free up the mental space needed to ensure that decisions are approached from all angles, including ethical ones.

In short, it makes way for higher-order motivations to reign supreme in management, which is what IESE has advocated in its business education since its foundation.

Returning to the General Mills survey, 80% of the participants in the company's allied course on Cultivating Leadership Presence reported a positive change in their ability to make better decisions with more clarity. Another 89% noticed an improvement in their listening capabilities.

This is further evidence of a positive relationship between mindfulness and decision-making that is more conscious, strategic and even more ethical.

A potential tool for promoting creativity

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet established a direct relationship between mindfulness and workplace creativity, but there are indicators that such links could exist.

Harvard researchers, for example, have demonstrated that mindfulness can be a useful tool for promoting greater creativity, flexibility and use of information in educational settings.

Given that at a neurological level the cultivation of attention promotes new connections and the development of lateral thinking, it stands to reason that organizations with mindful leaders would be more inclined toward creativity and innovation.

One of the world's most cutting-edge companies, Google, obviously believes that promoting mindfulness among its workforce could reap such benefits. It has been running the popular Search Inside Yourself program for several years, divided into three stages:

- attention training;
- self-awareness and self-mastery; and
- the development of useful mental habits.

Those who have gone through the program give it high marks, and it is always oversubscribed. Many claim the program has changed their lives.

Google's Richard Fernández told *The New York Times* how the class had transformed his own work behavior: "I'm definitely much more resilient as a leader. I listen more carefully and with less reactivity in high-stakes meetings. I work with a lot of senior executives who can be very demanding, but that doesn't faze me anymore. It's almost an emotional and mental bank account. I've now got much more of a buffer there."

Better social relations in the workplace

By improving an individual's sense of well-being, mindfulness promotes positive emotions, reduces stress and increases empathy. This has a direct, positive impact on social relationships, which in turn has a contagious effect on the wider workplace atmosphere.

Active listening also enhances communication and collaboration, and reduces interpersonal conflict.

Mindfulness seems to be particularly effective at promoting positive emotions when an individual's psychological capital — hope, efficacy, optimism and resilience — is low. In other words, it seems to help those who need it the most.

Making conscious leadership flow

The discourse on what needs to be done today to develop leaders has changed markedly. Globalization and constant technological change have created volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity. This, in turn, has generated unprecedented levels of stress among executives and the organizations they lead.

In companies, the velocity of the business cycle and the risks posed by a constantly shifting landscape create instability. Such volatility leads to emotional imbalances and lowered self-confidence in individuals. Mustering resilience in this context requires tapping new reserves of physical and mental energy.

For this reason, more and more companies are deciding to launch their own mindfulness programs to bolster the resilience of their employees.

Instead of being a constant source of frustration, work should be one of the most enriching facets of our lives. Mindfulness and other concepts offered by positive psychology such as "flow" can help reengineer workplaces so that they are more gratifying for individuals while at the same time more productive for companies.

Whether you enjoy your work or not depends largely on your own attitude. Developing “appreciative intelligence” — the ability to reframe reality and see the hidden potential — can help you see work as an opportunity to surmount challenges, develop fortitude, collaborate with others, and improve the world.

This is something that senior executives should model and promote throughout their organizations. This may mean that they have to change their traditional approaches to the development of leadership competencies.

In the words of Bill George, a Harvard professor and mindfulness practitioner: “Mindful people make much better leaders than frenetic, aggressive ones. They understand their reactions to stress and crises, and understand their impact on others. They are far better at inspiring people to take on greater responsibilities and at aligning them around common missions and values. They are better at focusing and are more effective at delegating work with closed-loop follow-up. As a result, people follow their mindful approach, and their organizations outperform others over the long run.”

Go with the flow: finding joy in your work

Another concept from positive psychology — flow — has many things in common with mindfulness and is also making waves in the business world.

The renowned psychology and management professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi coined the term “flow” to describe the overwhelming pleasure that people experience when they fully immerse themselves in a particular task they enjoy.

Although it is frequently applied to people engaged in creative pursuits, such as art, plays or writing, many people, regardless of their occupation, describe peak moments when their work just seems to flow effortlessly — when their actions and consciousness are perfectly aligned.

The benefits of flow are immediate and clear:

- At the individual level, they include better performance, increased motivation and a positive spirit.
- At the corporate level, this positive attitude and maximum commitment translate into a collective willingness to work together for organizational success.

Flow starts with individuals empowered to boost their own effectiveness and with managers

offering helpful suggestions and constructive criticism. Everyone supports each other so that the organization performs at its best.

Perhaps the best way to understand flow is to experience it for yourself. Among the people we interviewed, flow was described in various ways:

- sublime moments of inspiration;
- being completely absorbed in an activity for its own sake;
- losing all notions of time and self;
- a feeling of enormous satisfaction that you've done something you never thought possible before.

Have you ever felt like that? What characterized those moments? How could you re-create the conditions that would favor those feelings again?

For flow to happen in the workplace, managers should take special note of these three prerequisites:

1. Balance challenges with skills

This is the first rule of flow: People must have a reasonable chance of accomplishing the tasks set before them. Of course, the tasks should present varying degrees of complexity, so there is room for the person's skill levels to be elevated. Each person's outlook will condition the extent to which a particular activity is found to be gratifying.

2. Set clear goals

People won't be able to immerse themselves in an activity if they don't know which task to undertake. Objectives, which direct people's actions and facilitate focus, must be clear in the short term as well as in the long term. Often people miss the opportunity to experience "the moment" because the focus is on the end goal at some distant point in the future, instead of encouraging people to enjoy the process of getting there.

3. Give immediate feedback

Commitment comes in a large part from understanding that what we are doing has some larger purpose and is of value to the rest of the organization. This means that, in order for

people to devote themselves to an activity, they need to know if they are performing well or not. Feedback can come from colleagues, supervisors and/or clients, in tandem with the personal benchmarks that individuals set for themselves.

When challenges and skills are well aligned, when the goals are clear and when the feedback is relevant, we're ready to experience the following dimensions of flow:

- **Intense concentration:** our mind is orderly and fully focused on the task at hand.
- **Effortlessness:** on entering a deep state of concentration on the task, we do it almost without effort, pressure or tension.
- **Control:** we have the feeling of controlling the activity and the fear of failure disappears, giving way to a feeling of empowerment.
- **Loss of self:** there is no longer any room in the consciousness for insecurity or frustration stemming from social comparison; we become our stronger selves.
- **No sense of time:** when we surrender all our physical and mental being to the moment, time flies or seems plentiful.
- **A desire to do it all over again:** once you finish the task, you discover the final dimension of flow: a profound sense of fulfillment and achievement, which is reward in itself.

MORE INFO: The following technical notes are available from IESE Publishing: "[Mindfulness and Business](#)" (DPON-113-E) and "[The Science Behind Flow at Work](#)" (DPON-108-E).

This article is published in [IESE Insight magazine \(Issue 20, Q1 2014\)](#).

This content is exclusively for personal use. If you wish to use any of this material for academic or teaching purposes, please go to IESE Publishing where you can purchase a special PDF version of "[Mindfulness: Multiply productivity through undivided attention](#)" (ART-2498-E), as well as the [full magazine](#) in which it appears, in English or in Spanish.

Thanks for reading  **IESE** insight
Click below to download a PDF of this content

Array

www.iese.edu/insight