

MULTITASKING and MINDFULNESS Can They Work Together?

BY DIAN GRIESEL

In 2020, technology will cause more distractions than ever before.

Every buzz, beep, ping, and chime will shift focus from the tasks at hand. All of this will majorly impact short- and long-term productivity, according to numerous studies. As such, it's no surprise that literature is increasingly addressing the importance of mindfulness in daily life, particularly in the workplace. Simultaneously, honing the ability to multitask, a trait often attributed to successful employees and their managers, is still highly valued.

So the questions arise: What is mindfulness? Is it achievable? And can a successful manager be both mindful and someone who multitasks?

HOW DISTRACTIONS CHANGE THE BRAIN

Numerous studies have indicated that distractions aren't fleeting. A 2007 study conducted by researchers at Microsoft and the University of Illinois, "Disruption and Recovery of Computing Tasks: Field Study, Analysis, and Directions," found that people are spending more time than they realize responding to alerts. Even if the intention is to respond quickly and resume the task immediately, these distractions are proving to take up significantly more time as it becomes difficult to refocus on the original task at hand, ultimately requiring more time to complete a job.

Another study in 2015 by researchers at Florida State University, "The Attentional Cost of Receiving a Cell Phone Notification," discusses how alerts, even ones that are very short-lived, can cause "mind wandering" or thoughts that are not relevant to the task at hand. This damages performance. Further, even when people do not pick up their phone when an alert appears, the same study found these alerts significantly disrupt the completion of attention-demanding tasks.

Finally, although the 2014 study "Higher Media Multi-Tasking Activity Is Associated with Smaller Gray-Matter Density in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex," didn't prove causality, researchers at the University of Sussex found that density of gray matter in the region of the brain known to be responsible for cognitive and emotional control functions, the anterior cingulate cortex, was decreased in those who are high-media multitaskers (using several media devices at the same time), which was significant enough to draw connections.

MINDFULNESS GAINS IN POPULARITY

How can we counteract the effects of distractions in the electronic age? There has been much discussion about the



importance of mindfulness, led not only by celebrities but also successful executives and entrepreneurs.

Oprah Winfrey, on her website Oprah.com, has discussed the impact meditation has had on her life (“What Oprah Knows About the Power of Meditation”) and has developed online programming to encourage others to do the same. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld frequently talks in interviews about transcendental meditation and his daily practice. Perhaps one of the most influential advocates for mindfulness is Arianna Huffington. Huffington has said that mindfulness is what has helped her through a midcareer crisis, allowing her to refocus her priorities.

Beyond celebrities, numerous business leaders have espoused the benefits of being mindful and practicing some form of meditation. Tech industry leaders such as Jeff Weiner (Yahoo, LinkedIn) and Marc Benioff (Salesforce) are proponents of the practice, according to *Inc.*’s September 2016 article, “11 Wildly Successful Entrepreneurs Who Swear by Daily Meditation.” Even Wall Street executives, such as Ray Dalio, the founder of one of the world’s largest hedge funds, Bridgewater Associates, have been known to meditate. He joins insurance industry executive Mark T. Bertolini, the chief executive of Aetna, who used meditation to help get himself back to work after a skiing accident, according to a *New York Times* November 2018 article, “Talking Mindfulness on the C.E.O. Beat.” The same article notes that after mindfulness classes were offered

to employees at Aetna, the corporate culture changed for the better.

When an unnamed director of a multinational pharmaceutical company received poor grades for leadership effectiveness and engagement—despite making an effort to spend time interacting with his direct reports—he turned to 10 minutes of a daily mindfulness practice, according to *Harvard Business Review*’s December 2017 article, “If You Aspire to Be a Great Leader, Be Present.” The result? His colleagues found him more engaging, inspiring and nicer. Even more interesting, the article reported that while the executive received better feedback, it turned out he was spending much less time with people. So in this case, “quality time” was better than “quantity time” because the executive was fully present and not thinking about any of the countless things that occupy one’s headspace at any given time.

The anecdotal examples above are backed up by the latest scientific findings. A study titled “Effects of Meditation Experience on Functional Connectivity of Distributed Brain Networks,” conducted by researchers at Emory University and published in 2012 in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, set out to determine the effects that meditation might have on various attentional brain regions. It concluded that people with more meditation experience had increased connectivity in various parts of the brain that may be involved in the development of cognitive skills such as ignoring distraction and keeping attention. What’s even more interesting is that

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the altered brain connectivity was observed in experienced meditators, even when they weren't actually meditating—leading the researchers to believe that cognitive abilities gained while meditating transfer into daily life.

Another piece, “Contemplating Mindfulness at Work: An Integrative Review,” published in the *Journal of Management* in 2016, looked at some of the 4,000 scholarly articles on the subject published to date. Co-authored by researchers at nine different universities, the article noted that 13% of U.S. workers report engaging in mindfulness-enhancing practices. It discusses key findings about the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace. For example, it found “mindfulness has been associated with improved attentional stability (sustaining attention on a current target with less mind wandering), better control of attention (selecting appropriate targets from among a field of potential targets), and attentional efficiency (economical use and allocation of attentional resources).” It encourages researchers to continue to explore the impact of mindfulness on work performance, as initial data has so far supported it.

NOW, HOW TO ACTUALLY ACHIEVE MINDFULNESS

What exactly is mindfulness? The academic definition, according to the *Journal of Management* article referenced above, is “clear-minded attention to and awareness of what is perceived in the present.” So does this mean we have to plop down on a floor cushion, chant words that aren't understood, and breathe deeply? Is it possible to be mindful in a fast-paced workplace, or is it unrealistic when many people are holding us accountable, demanding immediate answers and responses (more on that later)? The fact is, mindfulness can be practiced in many different forms, in any place.

To me, mindfulness means truly listening and thinking. Listening not only to what other people are telling you, but

also to what they're not telling you—then taking the time to think about the implications of those words before reacting. Listening to the voice in your own head, while also listening to the environment that surrounds you. For example, a colleague may come to you with a problem. Your initial reaction and response might not be the best because of what's going on in your environment. Maybe you just received disappointing news. Maybe you have a child who's not feeling well. Maybe you're simply focused on another deadline or goal that's requiring your attention.

I believe better decisions are made by listening and pausing and then taking the time to reflect. In my opinion, one of the most underutilized tools in business is the phrase “Let me get back to you on that” or “I'd like to think that one over.”

MINDFULNESS FOR BUSY PEOPLE

As noted above, while integrating time to sit down, get comfortable, and meditate is ideal, it is not always realistic—or necessary. Those who aren't “sitting still” types can still practice mindfulness in a variety of ways, such as simply taking a few deep breaths with your eyes closed.

Another option is to take a walk while identifying points of tension within the body and gently stretching. Simultaneously, activate other senses: What are some background sounds you hear? How about the smells? (Granted, if you live in New York City, like I do, you will always notice the smell, particularly on a hot summer day!) But the point is to calmly focus. For those who still need “a task,” give yourself a goal like discovering one thing that you've never noticed before. Find a bird, squirrel, cloud, a friendly face, a fancy-looking car—anything that makes you smile.

Journaling can be another way to gather thoughts and focus. In business, this can help center the mind on specific goals. A study of 267 participants, conducted by a professor at

Dominican University of California, found that more than 70% achieved their goals after writing them down and sending them to a friend. In contrast, only 35% of those who kept the goals to themselves and never wrote them down were successful. Of course, I believe the best way to write is to literally write—not type on a smartphone or computer—because of the distractions involved.

For those who prefer books as their guides, reading is another mindfulness strategy, if done selectively. Many books in the self-help genre promise that readers will be magically transformed. The pitch is always positioned as if someone else—not us—has all the answers, which need to be revealed to us so that we can become as evolved and enlightened as the author. But I tend to advise the executives that I work with to avoid these types of books because they don't allow readers to wholly embrace their own unique greatness.

The best inspirational material helps readers to understand themselves, while encouraging them to take full responsibility for the individual characteristics and qualities that distinguish each of us from another. I believe that as people become more mindful of who they truly are, they can approach their everyday lives with greater acceptance. Imperfections can be viewed as misunderstandings, and—perhaps most important—we can remind ourselves that we are all complicated, unique, feeling-full humans who are trying to navigate life. So rather than a “self-help” book, an alternative might be to find a book of inspirational essays that allow for reflection first, rather than immediate action. That is the goal of my book, *The Silver Disobedience Playbook: 365 Inspirations for Living and Loving Agelessly* (DGI, 2019), which has been used to practice mindfulness by people in all walks of life and careers—from those just finishing college and entering the workforce to established executives who sit on boards of international, publicly traded companies.

Practicing mindfulness can also go hand-in-hand with practicing gratefulness. Although it is not a new concept and the benefits may seem obvious, showing gratitude is something that is often lost in the modern work environment. As you breathe, walk, write, or read—try to also reflect on what you're grateful for.

DOES MINDFULNESS MEAN NO MORE MULTITASKING?

Before diving into whether or not multitasking is desirable, we must ask ourselves why would managers want someone to multitask? As an entrepreneur who has run my own business for 30 years and as an executive who has worked with hundreds of CEOs, I have found that multitasking is not a skill, it is a tactic used in an attempt to satisfy demands to get as much work done as fast as possible. Instead, to prevent a sacrifice of quality, I prefer to encourage people to work smarter, not harder. Practicing mindfulness helps achieve this.

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Mindfulness does not mean doing less work. It is a means to allow the subconscious mind to prioritize, push back, delegate, and trust while ensuring that the work gets done. Regarding prioritizing, mindfulness will help set your own priorities while understanding those of others as well. In fact, many who practice mindfulness describe it as the ultimate resource for uncovering new creative solutions to solve challenges.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Encouraging employees to be mindful does not mean requiring everyone to have meditation breaks. But it does mean having more openness. It means being OK with not always receiving an instant response to an email, text, or Slack thread—particularly after typical business hours (and yes, those should be defined!)—unless in the event of an emergency or exception. It means encouraging employees to take time to process, time to think, and time to take breaks. It means providing reasons for people to meet face-to-face to tackle challenges efficiently, but it does not mean having a meeting just to have a meeting (the ultimate recipe for wandering minds).

The data is clear—mindfulness at work is not a fad like the latest diet. It should be perceived as a fundamental skill for career growth and success. [AQ](#)

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