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Workplace mindfulness: fundamental issues for research and practice

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Workplace mindfulness: fundamental issues for research and practice

Abstract

In organisational scholarship, there is a general understanding that mindfulness training programmes (MTP) can guide employees' cognitive and psychological processes and influence their decisions and actions in everyday life. Many organisations who care for the wellbeing and development of employees are adopting MTP as a tool to improve employees' functions such as their health and performance. In this research note, some of the key issues concerning mindfulness theory and practice are highlighted. First, multiple perspectives on mindfulness exist in the literature and also the boundaries between secular and non-secular practices of mindfulness are unclear. To extend the theory and practice of mindfulness, it is important to comprehend the concept of mindfulness. Second, MTP can be costly rather than beneficial in some working conditions. The managers might need to understand the risk related to the negative consequences of MTP. Third, sustainability of mindfulness practices for employees in a post-training context might be challenging. Managers might need to develop and maintain a conducive post-training work environment that encourages the employees' mindfulness practices at work. Overall, this research note suggests research directions for management scholars and informs the organisational leaders' and managers' decisions concerning the incorporation of MTP in organisations for employees' wellbeing and development.

Keywords

Mindfulness training programme, VUCA, secular mindfulness

Introduction

Contemporary organisations are facing significant internal and external challenges. The term VUCA (volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous) is used to describe the challenges faced by modern organisations in terms of economic uncertainty, rapid technological advancements, globalisation, and the complexity of social-organisational systems. In a VUCA world, occupational problems such as employees' stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, and burnout are increasing. Currently, human resource management practices are not enough to safeguard employees from occupational problems. Organisational leaders and managers are looking for emerging phenomena such as mindfulness to help employees in addressing the contemporary occupational problems (Mack et al. 2015; Wamsler et al. 2018; Reb and Choi 2014; Levey and Levey 2019).

The concept of mindfulness has deep roots in the teaching of Buddhism (Williams and Kabat-Zinn 2013). One of the key aspects of Buddha's teaching pertains to the mindful awareness that "(a) all conditioned [i.e., caused] things are inherently transitory; (b) every worldly thing is, in the end, unsatisfying; and, (c) there are really no entities that are unchanging or permanent, only processes" (Gunaratana 2002, p. 144). Buddha's teaching emphasises the elimination of the perception that the self is stable and independent of external influences. The elimination of such a perception is essential because an effort to retain particular feelings and relationships can result in dissatisfaction. In other words, one should accept that there is a complex and naturally changing relationship between humans' internal physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual world, and external circumstances, which influence each other simultaneously (Kumar 2002; Weick and Putnam 2006). Fundamentally, Buddha emphasised the clear, stable, and focused mind as a means to get relief from suffering (Hyland et al. 2015). Therefore, the right

mindfulness as awareness is an important aspect of Buddha's teaching that provides a foundation to achieve relief from suffering through insight and wisdom (Bodhi 2011).

In the past few decades mindfulness has been used in different scientific domains including health sciences and organisational studies (Good et al. 2016). Formally, mindfulness is defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn 2003, p. 145). In health science, it is argued that mindfulness as non-judgemental awareness of experiences can help people to self-regulate their unwanted thoughts and feelings. Thus, mindfulness practices can facilitate physical and psychological processes that are related to the health and wellbeing of people. In this regard, mindfulness training programmes (MTP) such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) are introduced for the treatment of patients with health problems such as stress, chronic pain, eating disorders, and substance abuse (Ie et al. 2014; Irving et al. 2014). MTP mainly involves mindfulness practices or techniques such as paying attention without judgement to the sensations of breathing, walking, and eating (Jamieson and Tuckey 2017; Khoury et al. 2017). These programmes are mainly designed to enhance participants' capacity to be mindful in everyday life and to encourage them to live each moment fully and in a non-judgemental way (Glomb et al. 2011).

In the workplace setting, MTP is designed to improve employees' functions such as wellbeing, inter-relationships, and performance (Good et al. 2016). For instance, Google offers a "Search Inside Yourself" programme to its employees. It involves different mindfulness practices that cultivate the mindfulness and emotional intelligence skills of employees. It aims to improve the health, happiness, productivity, and creativity of employees (Schaufenbuel 2015; Chade-Meng 2012). A series of studies in the organisational domain found that MTP can provide workplace

benefits (Eby et al. 2019). For example, Roeser et al. (2013) conducted a study in educational psychology to determine the effects of a MTP on the stress and burnout level of 113 school teachers during training, post-training and after three months of MTP. They found that the intervention helped teachers to reduce stress and the symptoms of burnout. Teachers also reported an improvement in their level of mindfulness at the post-training and three months follow-up stages. Recently, Johnson et al. (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of studies conducted on MTP in the workplace. The review of 28 empirical studies argued that MTP in the workplace can provide multiple wellbeing- and performance-related benefits at the individual, job, team, and organisational levels. These benefits may include positive emotions, resilience, job satisfaction, task performance, group cohesion, and positive workplace culture.

A review of the literature suggests that researchers' interest in the study of mindfulness is increasing in the domain of human resource management. Many organisations including hospitals, universities, technological firms, banks, and the military have adopted MTP for employees' performance and wellbeing. A key reason for the increasing interest of researchers and practitioners in MTP is that a series of empirical studies have indicated positive outcomes of MTP in the organisation context. Additionally, some well-known companies like Google, Target, and Intel have adopted MTP and reported positive feedback on the programme (Good et al. 2016; Eby et al. 2019; Qiu and Rooney 2019). Although the interest of organisational researchers and practitioners in mindfulness is gaining pace, there are a few fundamental issues with the application of mindfulness in the organisation. This research note highlights the key problems and challenges concerning the incorporation of MTP in the workplace context.

Construct of mindfulness

A review of clinical, social, and organisational literature suggested that mindfulness has been viewed as a multidimensional construct. Scholars discussed different perspectives, characteristics, and definitions of mindfulness. For instance, Brown and Ryan (2003) defined mindfulness as a temporary state of attention to and awareness of the current moments. They discussed present moment attention and awareness as a key aspect of mindfulness. Another definition of mindfulness highlighted two key components of mindfulness: (1) self-regulation of attention towards the present moment and (2) a specific orientation that involves curiosity, openness, and acceptance of the present experiences (Bishop et al. 2004). Shapiro et al. (2006) introduced a model of mindfulness that comprises three main factors: intention, attention, and attitude. The model presented a process of mindfulness in which these three factors occur at the same time. The intention relates to the process and outcome of mindfulness. The second factor of attention to internal and external experiences is the fundamental aspect of mindfulness. Third, attitude refers to the quality of attention such as non-judgemental attention toward present experiences. Currently, there is a lack of consensus on the definition as well as the essential aspects of mindfulness among scholars (Cigolla and Brown 2011; Sutcliffe et al. 2016). Monteiro et al. (2015) argued that mindfulness application in the contemporary workplace is very complicated because mindfulness practices which are 2600 years old have several different perspectives and understandings.

As there are several interpretations of mindfulness, it is often challenging to distinguish what is mindfulness and what is not. Such a lack of conceptual understanding of mindfulness can create confusion among the managers and practitioners. To obtain optimal benefits from mindfulness practices and programmes in the workplace context, the human resource managers, mindfulness trainers, and practitioners must be aware of multiple perspectives on mindfulness. Considering

the conceptualisation issues related to mindfulness, some authors of multi-disciplinary literature have also stressed the qualitative research approach to study mindfulness rather than the quantitative approach (Grossman 2011; Grossman 2008; Chiesa 2013; Sauer et al. 2013; Bergomi et al. 2013). A qualitative research approach enables the researcher to adopt a flexible method such as open-ended interviews and understand the complex phenomenon from the perceptions and experiences of individuals. It implies that the qualitative researcher focuses on the multiple perspectives on the research topic from the research participants rather than a predetermined concept of mindfulness using research instruments or questionnaires (Creswell and Poth 2018). An integration of both quantitative and qualitative research based studies might also help to advance the research and practice of mindfulness in the organisational context. In this way, the construct of mindfulness developed using qualitative data can be empirically examined and validated using quantitative data.

Secular and non-secular mindfulness

One of the main issues with the application of MTP in the organisation is related to the ethical foundation of mindfulness. Fundamentally, mindfulness practices originated from the spiritual and religious teaching of Buddha (Kalafatoglu and Turgut 2019). According to the teaching of Buddha, mindfulness pertains to the awareness that provides a foundation to achieve cessation from suffering through insight and wisdom (Bodhi 2011). As interest in MTP among organisational researchers and practitioners is increasing, a few critics have highlighted that commercialisation of MTP which is originally a religious practice is unethical. For example, Purser and Loy (2013) pointed out that mindfulness is being used as a secular technique in the workplace to improve workplace functioning such as employees' performance, stress reduction, and concentration. Mindfulness as a technique ignores the ethical and religious foundation of

mindfulness. The core purpose of mindfulness is "to free human beings from the delusion of being a separate self" (Purser 2018). They argued that mindfulness is a religious practice that aims for broader collective gains such as ethical behaviour, social harmony, and compassion rather than individual workplace benefits. In contrast, mindfulness is commercialised in the organisational context as a solution to all major work-related problems (Purser and Loy 2013). Collectively, these authors argued that mindfulness is more than a secular tool or practice with which to obtain workplace benefits.

In this regard, managers should be aware of the spiritual and ethical associations of mindfulness practices. In particular, mindfulness trainers should be transparent and explicitly disclose the spiritual impact of mindfulness practices in the organisation during MTP. In addition, it is important to disclose any religious association of the trainers in term of concepts, values, practices, and communities (Brown 2017). In future, management science scholars can focus on exploring the scope of MTP beyond the organisational boundaries. While a majority of organisational studies have discussed the psychological and cognitive wellbeing, inter-relationship, and performance-oriented benefits of MTP (Good et al. 2016; Eby et al. 2019), there is a need to understand how the intervention of MTP in the workplace setting can contribute towards wider social benefits relating to ethical behaviour, social harmony, and compassion. For instance, mindfulness practices in the workplace can be employed to address social sustainability challenges on a larger scale (Sajjad and Shahbaz 2020). Expanding the scope of mindfulness beyond the boundaries of the workplace setting might not resolve the issue of differences between secular and non-secular mindfulness. However, it can add value to the understanding that incorporation of MTP in the workplace setting can serve the fundamental purpose of mindfulness practices in relation to collective gains.

Contextual conditions of mindfulness

Another important issue relating to the application of mindfulness is that it might not be beneficial in all circumstances; rather, it can be detrimental in some situations. For instance, Dane (2011) argued that mindfulness practices can improve the task performance of employees in a dynamic task environment when task expertise of employees is high, while it can reduce employees' performance in a static task environment where task expertise of employees is low. Titmuss (2018) discussed four types of financial corruption that might exist in the business world including deception, bribery, fraud, and embezzlement. He further argued that mindfulness practices in the business world can foster employees' personal and collective responsibilities. Thus, mindfulness practices might challenge financial corruption in the business world through the process of personal and social responsibility. This implies that mindfulness practices can harm businesses from an employer standpoint.

Rather than adopting mindfulness techniques and practices universally for workplace advantage, it is important to understand contextual conditions under which mindfulness can be beneficial for employees and employers. Mindfulness can be beneficial for some employees, jobs, organisations, and professionals and may not be for others. Therefore, training and development managers should carefully consider the possible adverse impact of mindfulness before adopting such practices or interventions in the workplace. In management sciences, little is known about the contextual conditions including employee demography, job characteristics, and organisational culture where mindfulness practices can benefit employees as well as the employer. For management researchers, this is an attractive area of investigation. They might explore how and when contextual factors and conditions inform the positive or negative relationship between mindfulness and workplace outcomes (Dane 2011; Sutcliffe et al. 2016).

Sustainability of mindfulness practices

Currently, management literature provides a limited understanding about how the benefits of MTP can be sustained for a long period, in particular, how a post-training workplace context can facilitate the application and benefits of mindfulness practices in the workplace (Eby et al. 2019). Most common MTP encourage participants to practise mindfulness regularly in order to obtain the optimal as well as long-term benefits of mindfulness. However, the workplace context might hinder the application of mindfulness practices in the workplace. For instance, Lyddy et al. (2016) highlighted that multiple external environmental factors such as noise, task demands, and social context can facilitate or hinder the mindfulness practices in the workplace.

The initial findings of our organisational psychology study based on qualitative interviews with academic professionals in New Zealand indicated that sustainability of mindfulness practices is one of the key issues for employees. The academic professionals reported that several workplace challenges including heavy workload, lack of private space for mindfulness practices, and overall workplace culture hinder the application of mindfulness in the workplace. The study suggested that a conducive post-training workplace environment is important to obtain the long-term benefits of MTP in the workplace. Such a conducive environment might facilitate and encourage the application of mindfulness in the workplace. Future organisational psychology and management researchers need to explore the specific conditions or factors that might influence the practice of mindfulness in the workplace. Such understanding might faciliate organisational leaders and managers' efforts to promote mindfulness practices and their benefits in the workplace setting.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research note was to inform organisational leaders' and managers' decisions concerning employees' training and development through mindfulness interventions. The research note indicated that mindfulness practices are derived from the spiritual teaching of Buddha, so it is important to understand and follow an ethical code of conduct in relation to mindfulness intervention in the workplace. Currently, there is a lack of consensus on the concept of mindfulness, so managers should be aware of multiple mindfulness perspectives to avoid any theoretical and practical confusion. To obtain optimal benefits from mindfulness interventions in the workplace, managers should also consider the risks associated with mindfulness practices and the importance of a post-training workplace environment that might be conducive for mindfulness practices. The research note also provided important research directions for future management scholars.

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