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Revisiting the role of mindfulness practices for stress reduction: an empirical study

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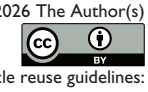
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Abstract

The emerging literature highlights the potential of mindfulness practices to reduce stress among workers. However, research on the practical application of mindfulness in real-world settings remains limited, particularly in academia, where escalating workloads compound stress levels. To address this gap, we explore how university staff engage in mindfulness practices and examine the factors that influence these practices in managing work-related stress. Our study involved semi-structured interviews with 28 university staff members in New Zealand who have integrated mindfulness into their routines. The findings reveal that university staff adopt mindfulness practices during four distinct periods: morning, midday, on the spot and after work. The findings offer insights into how mindfulness practices can be differentiated based on various times and contexts and how these differences can be linked to specific workplace outcomes. Based on the job demands–resources theory, our findings highlight the importance of a supportive organizational environment for sustaining mindfulness practices for stress reduction in university settings. Such an environment may encompass discrete spaces (e.g., prayer rooms or private offices), natural elements (e.g., trees, avian presence, greenery), communal support and the use of mobile applications. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of mindfulness practices in specific times and contexts for workplace benefits and a supportive organizational environment, thereby sustaining mindfulness practices at work to enhance stress reduction and productivity among university staff.

Keywords

Mindfulness, job demands–resources theory, stress, physical work environment, university staff, mindfulness-based training interventions

Introduction

In academia, the challenges faced by university staff have intensified due to the increasing complexity and demands of work settings. As the responsibilities of research, teaching and administration evolve, the prevalence of stress among university personnel has reached a critical level (Gavin et al., 2024; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Zibenberg, 2021). With the educational sector struggling with the multifaceted impact of stress on faculty and support staff, there is an increasing recognition of the need for effective interventions to enhance well-being, resilience and sustainable work practices. Recent research suggests that mindfulness-based training interventions (MBTIs) within universities may offer a viable approach to addressing occupational stress among university staff (Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Zibenberg, 2021).

Mindfulness, conceptualized as an enhanced awareness of the present moment, is a valuable practice for self-regulating unwelcome thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Glomb et al., 2011; Reina & Kudesia, 2020). Engaging in mindfulness practice can lead to improvements in job performance, creativity and problem-solving skills (Byrne & Thatchenkery, 2018); effective management of negative emotions (Malinowski & Lim, 2015); and stress reduction and prevention of burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Mulla et al., 2017). Additionally, prior research has demonstrated that mindfulness practices enhance job satisfaction (Shonin et al., 2014) and provide several other physical and psychological health-related advantages (Christopher et al., 2016; Luken & Sammons, 2016). Consequently, organizations such as Google, Target, Aetna, Dow Chemical, Intel and the US Marine Corps are increasingly incorporating MBTIs to enhance employee well-being and performance (Eby et al., 2019; Schaufenbuel, 2015; Shahbaz & Parker, 2022).

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While a growing body of research highlights the effectiveness of MBTIs in reducing workplace stress (Good et al., 2016; Hulsheger et al., 2018; Sutcliffe et al., 2016), there remains a significant gap in understanding how such practices are operationalized in everyday organizational settings. In particular, limited attention has been paid to how employees actually engage in mindfulness practices and the organizational or contextual factors that enable or constrain such engagement. This lack of insight impedes organizational efforts to cultivate environments that fully support the implementation and sustainability of MBTIs, ultimately limiting their long-term impact (Babu et al., 2022).

Although prior studies have explored mindfulness experiences among specific occupational groups, such as healthcare professionals (Irving et al., 2014; Lyddy et al., 2016), there is a noticeable absence of research focused on university staff, a group facing unique occupational pressures. Understanding mindfulness practices within the university context is particularly important given the sector's evolving challenges and intensifying demands. University staff are frequently required to navigate complex and competing responsibilities, including teaching, research, administrative duties and external engagement, often within resource-constrained and performance-driven environments. These pressures have been consistently linked to rising levels of occupational stress, burnout and diminished well-being among academic and professional staff (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Despite an increasing interest in mindfulness as a tool for workplace stress reduction, there is a limited empirical insight into how such interventions are experienced, adopted and sustained in higher education settings. Investigating mindfulness practices among university staff can therefore yield valuable insights into how well-being interventions function in knowledge-intensive, high-autonomy work contexts and can inform organizational policies aimed at fostering sustainable and psychologically healthy academic work environments. The purpose of this study is to address these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of university staff with mindfulness practices in real-world settings.

Drawing on the job demands–resources (JD-R) theory, this study explores how university staff engage in mindfulness practices and identifies the key factors that influence these practices in coping with work-related stress. The JD-R theory emphasizes balancing job demands and resources as fundamental for maintaining employee well-being and optimizing job performance (Demerouti et al., 2001). In this study, we propose that mindfulness practices function as valuable job resources that help mitigate the negative impacts of job demands on employee well-being. Against this background, the JD-R theory is a pertinent theoretical lens for investigating how mindfulness practices and supportive factors can serve as resources to assist university staff in sustaining their well-being and enhancing performance during stressful and challenging situations.

Literature Review

Mindfulness in the Universities

Mindfulness is commonly described as a state of present-moment attention and awareness. It is recognized as both trait-like and state-like human qualities or individual mindfulness that can be cultivated through practice (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness, as present-moment consciousness, helps individuals to self-regulate unwanted thoughts, emotions and behaviour and thus appears to be a valuable tool for addressing stress and mental health issues at work (Glomb et al., 2011; Reina & Kudesia, 2020). MBTIs were introduced in organizational and non-organizational contexts to improve individuals' overall well-being (Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020; Shahbaz & Parker, 2022). For instance, a mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) programme was introduced in clinical psychology for mental health patients (Glomb et al., 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Similar to MBSR, customized training programmes have been incorporated by some organizations, such as 'Search Inside Yourself' by Google and 'Awake@Intel' by Intel (Chade-Meng Tan & Kabat-Zinn, 2012; Eby et al., 2019; Schaufenbuel, 2015).

A systematic literature review highlighted the prevalence of high stress and burnout among university staff, along with a lower sense of overall well-being (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Further exploration, drawing from a sample of 376 academic staff, identified organizational politics as a pivotal predictor of occupational stress within educational institutions (Zibenberg, 2021). Similarly, university staff in China confront considerable occupational stress linked to physical health issues such as illnesses or disorders (Sun et al., 2011). Research conducted in Canada revealed that academic staff perceive various work-related stressors, including workloads, role conflicts, work–life conflicts, unfair administrative practices and disparities in rewards (Catano et al., 2010). Additionally, the study revealed that the primary sources of stress for academics originate from excessive workloads and conflicts between work and personal life. Notably, non-academic support staff reported more significant distress than academics, particularly concerning compensation, job aspects and work relationships (Johnson et al., 2019). Academia is often described as a neoliberal work environment characterized by intensified work, isolation and competition (Gavin et al., 2024).

Studies have also suggested that MBTIs in universities can help university staff reduce stress and improve well-being. For instance, mindfulness intervention in universities can improve university staff's well-being and work engagement and decrease their occupational stress (Koncz et al., 2016). Another study found that mindfulness

practices reduce depression and anxiety among university staff (Malarkey et al., 2013). Similarly, other studies have found that MBTIs can improve self-compassion, health-promoting behaviour, well-being (Horan & Taylor, 2018), work engagement and performance (Atkins et al., 2015). While MBTIs in the universities can be a potential source of helping university staff address their well-being and stress-related issues, there has been little understanding of how university staff practise mindfulness after MBTIs and what factors support and hinder their practices.

Employees' Mindfulness Practices

A few studies have examined mindfulness practices among healthcare professionals in the workplace. For example, Irving et al. (2014) demonstrated that healthcare professionals engage in formal mindfulness practices, such as structured yoga and meditation, and informal practices, such as being mindful during ordinary tasks like eating, walking or listening. The authors noted that both internal factors, including emotions, cognition and physical sensations, as well as external factors, such as home and work environments, influence mindfulness practices. Another study by Lyddy et al. (2016) identified various forms of mindfulness practices among healthcare professionals, including planned or formal practices, unplanned or episodic practices, on-the-fly practices or informal practices while doing routine tasks, as well as contagion practices where individuals help others to be mindful. This study also emphasized internal factors such as fatigue, ongoing thoughts and emotions, along with external factors such as noise, task demands and social context, as influences on mindfulness practices.

While existing literature provides insights into various mindfulness practices at work and highlights the factors influencing those practices, three key areas need further exploration. First, the majority of mindfulness research has focused on the healthcare sector (Glomb et al., 2011), leaving a gap in understanding its application in other professions, such as the university sector, where challenging work environments significantly impact staff well-being (Gavin et al., 2024; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Second, current research lacks a detailed analysis of how specific mindfulness practices differently influence workplace functions. Finally, while existing studies discuss general influencing factors of mindfulness practices such as home, work and social contexts, they do not offer a comprehensive understanding of the specific physical and non-physical factors affecting mindfulness practices of workers (Irving et al., 2014; Lyddy et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a need for an in-depth study that explores how university staff engage in mindfulness practices, the impact of these practices on specific workplace functions, and how physical and non-physical factors might facilitate or hinder mindfulness practices among university staff.

Physical and Non-physical Factors Affecting Workers

Emerging management scholarship suggests that the physical environment and work context influence employees' emotions, behaviours, attitudes, work engagement, performance, productivity and overall well-being (Ayoko & Ashkanasy, 2019, pp. 3–12; Carter et al., 2021). To facilitate efficient business functioning and achieve improved work outcomes, organizations invest millions of dollars in establishing and maintaining physical work environments yearly, representing the second-largest overhead for most organizations (McCoy, 2005). Johns (2006, 2018) posited that workplace and workspace environments play an essential role in organizational behaviour, as these settings shape and influence individual, group and managerial processes that determine work outcomes. Accordingly, it is imperative to understand how behaviour can be shaped, changed and transformed in the right direction, leading to positive individual and organizational outcomes (Carter et al., 2021; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2018).

Recent research has explored the impact of both physical and non-physical factors on employee behaviour and psychology in the workplace. For example, Otterbring et al. (2021) argued that physical office spaces (e.g., cellular, shared room and open-plan spaces) can affect workers' well-being. In particular, noise as an environmental stressor can negatively affect the workers' well-being in shared offices. Similarly, a study comparing workers' experiences in shared versus single-cell offices revealed that office type influences the productivity and well-being of employees. Workers in shared offices reported higher levels of distraction, reduced privacy and lower environmental quality than their counterparts in single-cell offices.

Additionally, workers in shared offices experienced a decline in perceived networking and collaboration (Morrison & Stahlmann-Brown, 2021). Bankins et al. (2021) further discussed the role of organizational and physical environments in shaping social network activities and workplace outcomes, suggesting that office space is a critical factor in employee well-being and workplace experiences. Maulidiyah and Ilahi (2020) reviewed the influence of the physical work environment on employee performance, suggesting that it contributes to job satisfaction, which in turn enhances performance. Similarly, Haapakangas et al. (2022) emphasized the need for further research on the physical work environment, including its antecedents, mechanisms and outcomes, to better understand its effects on occupational health and well-being. The authors further asserted that 'there is an urgent need for evidence-based guidelines and tools to meet employers' responsibilities to prevent work-related disorders and promote good health and well-being at work' (Haapakangas et al., 2022, p. 3). Our research aims to

contribute to the existing body of workplace mindfulness literature by examining how physical and non-physical factors influence the application of mindfulness in university settings.

Job Demand–Resource Model

This study draws on the JD-R model as one of the most widely used frameworks in occupational health psychology research. The JD-R model applies across various workplace settings to understand how the work environment influences workers' well-being and performance (Bakker & Dermerouti, 2007; Lesener et al., 2019). Work involves two key components: job demands and job resources. Demerouti et al. (2001) defined job demands as 'aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs'. For example, physiological and psychological issues are associated with increased work pressure, a toxic work environment, an unfavourable physical environment, an academic workload and emotionally demanding interactions with clients. Conversely, job resources include physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that are imperative for enhancing work engagement and organizational commitment, as well as for achieving improved work outcomes and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2003).

The JD-R perspective explains how an imbalance between available resources and job demands can lead to work-related stress. The theory holds that job demands such as workload, time pressure and role ambiguity can reduce workers' physical and mental health. However, job resources such as social support, autonomy and opportunities for skill development can act as a buffer against the adverse effects of job demands (Bakker et al., 2003; Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli, 2017). Prior research has utilized the JD-R model to explain the role of both states and traits, such as individual mindfulness, as valuable resources in psychological health management. For instance, Grover et al. (2017) investigated the impact of mindfulness on workplace stress among healthcare staff, within the context of job demands and resources. Their findings revealed that mindfulness could be a potent stress-reduction resource, mainly when job demands are substantial. This indicates that individuals who practise mindfulness are likely to exhibit lower stress levels even when confronted with high job demands. Additionally, another study posited that mindfulness constitutes a promising personal resource within the workplace that aligns with the JD-R framework, suggesting that individuals with a mindful disposition tend to report reduced burnout and heightened work engagement (Lyddy et al., 2022).

Within this study, we contend that mindfulness practices and work environments possess the potential to function as a valuable resource for reducing stress among university staff. To ensure the longevity and effectiveness of mindfulness practices in the realm of stress reduction within academic institutions, a supportive and resourceful work environment for staff is imperative. Framed within the JD-R model, we posit that the combination of mindfulness practices and an enabling post-training work environment holds the potential to act as a resource, empowering university staff to manage and address situations that induce stress effectively.

Methodology

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 28 academic and professional staff members from six universities across New Zealand, including Massey University, the University of Auckland, Auckland University of Technology, the University of Canterbury, the University of Waikato and Lincoln University. Participants were purposefully selected based on the key criterion that they were currently employed at universities across New Zealand and had either engaged in regular mindfulness practices and/or completed a mindfulness-based training programme. Using the authors' professional network and a snowball sampling technique, the potential participants were invited via e-mail to participate in the research study. The selected participants had diverse experiences with engaging in mindfulness practices and participating in MBTIs. This targeted sampling ensured that the insights generated would reflect direct experiential knowledge of mindfulness in an organizational context. In qualitative research, the number of participants often depends on 'data saturation' (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The empirical data collection reached saturation after 28 interviews, as repetition occurred, indicating that additional interviews may not yield new insights. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, while a few were conducted by telephone due to participants' availability and logistical constraints. The average interview duration was approximately 35–45 minutes, and each was audio-recorded with a digital recorder. The interview recordings were then professionally transcribed.

The participants held various academic and administrative positions, including associate professor, senior lecturer, lecturer, laboratory manager, student life manager and business relationship specialist. In addition, the interview participants had diverse experiences with MBTIs in terms of structure, content and duration. Some had attended more than one MBTI. The participants also practised diverse mindfulness techniques, such as walking meditation, the *Gatha* poem and breathing meditation. Some had practised mindfulness for many years, and some had recently started mindfulness practices. Overall, there was a significant variation in the mindfulness background of participants related to their experience with MBTIs and mindfulness practices.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed a thematic analysis approach, a widely used method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, the researcher systematically engaged in familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes and developing broader themes to capture the experiences and perspectives of university staff on mindfulness practices. NVivo software supported the organization and retrieval of interview data, while repeated readings and careful coding enabled the researcher to classify meaningful statements and group them into sub-themes and overarching themes. Throughout the process, the researcher employed a constant comparative method to refine codes and themes, revisiting and restructuring them based on the emerging insights, literature and supervisory feedback. Particular attention was given to distinguishing between formal and informal mindfulness practices, which were often discussed in overlapping ways. Given the complexity and conceptual ambiguity of mindfulness, data interpretation required iterative movement across stages of analysis to ensure analytical rigour and alignment with research objectives. Ultimately, the thematic analysis facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing mindfulness practices among academic staff in the university context.

Findings

How Do University Staff Practice Mindfulness?

The interviewees varied significantly in their formal practice of mindfulness in terms of its duration and content. For example, R18 noted that she practised mindfulness formally every day for half an hour. The interviewee mentioned that her mindfulness practices include sitting, walking and lying meditation techniques. On the other hand, R15, who was also involved in educating the nursing staff, stated that she practised mindfulness for 10–20 minutes every day. She used mindfulness techniques, including breathing and *Metta Bhavana* (similar to loving–kindness meditation). Based on the data analysis, the interview material of the mindfulness practices can be categorized as morning practices, midday practices, on-the-spot practices and after-work practices.

Morning Mindfulness Practices

Most interviewees ($n = 19$) reported practising mindfulness in the morning as these practices are part of their routine. For instance, R6, a histologist and manager of the university histology laboratory, was a regular mindfulness practitioner. When she was asked about the times when she does not feel mindful during the day, she commented:

> The only time I find that I'm not mindful is when I don't do meditation that morning.… Morning meditation keeps me very, very focused.

Midday Mindfulness Practices

Many interviewees ($n = 19$) formally practised mindfulness during the day. They described these practices as inconsistent and mainly dependent on the situation and availability of time. Midday practices involved both individual and group practices in the workplace. Some universities provide space where staff and students can practice mindfulness formally under the supervision of a trainer or a group session coordinator. The mindfulness group sessions allow the university staff to practice mindfulness daily. One university lecturer, R19, reported that she practised mindfulness in the group on Monday to relax when she had long hours of teaching:

> Mondays are a 5-hour teaching day. I go to the Monday mid-day mindfulness class … which renews my energy.

These interviewees reported that mindfulness practice during their lunch break provided relaxation and calmness. A senior university tutor, R19, stated that when she had a busy day at the university, she often practised mindfulness during lunch breaks to relax. These findings suggest that midday individual and group-based mindfulness practices facilitate psychological detachment from work pressure. The psychological detachment or break from work resulted in the stress reduction of the interviewees in terms of relaxation and calmness.

On-the-spot Practice for Self-regulation

A few interviewees ($n = 5$) practised mindfulness when encountering difficult situations at work. These included situations in which the interviewees experienced stress or anger. In such situations, the interviewees formally practised mindfulness on the spot as a tool to reduce stress or anger. Instead of being affected by the negative situation, the interviewees practised mindfulness on the spot to self-regulate their negative thoughts and feelings. On-the-spot mindfulness practices facilitate self-regulation of unwanted thoughts and feelings. For instance, an associate professor and deputy head of school in a university, R21, pointed out that when he feels stressed, he practises body scanning as a means to reduce stress:

> The other thing it does help with is when I do start to feel stressed, then I know it's time just to sit and have a body scan or something to get back into the moment.

After-work Mindfulness Practices

Some interviewees ($n = 6$) stated that they practised mindfulness formally at home after work or before going to sleep. The fundamental purpose of mindfulness practices

after work was reported to be psychological detachment from work-related stress. Interviewees formally practise mindfulness after work to psychologically detach themselves from stress. For example, R23, a business relations specialist at a university, remarked that her job was stressful because it involved many interactions and time pressures. She reported that she practised a mantra (a type of meditation) at night to switch off from work and family-related issues:

> I do that mantra one every day at the end of the day, and I just find that it just actually stops the noise in my head and it calms me … sometimes when you're lying there and you can't sleep, because you are worried about the things you still need to do or financial … when I do that mantra when I actually just stop the noise, I can deeply sleep.… So, for me, it's just being able to switch off.

Overall, mindfulness practice includes techniques such as breathing, walking and body-scanning meditation. Most interviewees reported practising mindfulness formally as a regular practice and as needed in specific situations. The study found that the implications of mindfulness practices vary depending on the time and situation. With this in mind, the analysis led to the sub-categorization of the mindfulness practices of university staff as morning practice, midday practice, after-work practice and on-the-spot practice. These practices can help employees psychologically detach themselves from their work-related problems and support relaxation, calmness and stress reduction. Mindfulness practices can also be used as an on-the-spot intervention to self-regulate negative feelings such as anger and stress in difficult situations.

Factors Affecting Mindfulness Practices

The following four factors that affect mindfulness practices in the universities' post-training context were identified from the analysis of interview material: (a) a private space to practise mindfulness, (b) the natural environment, (c) communal support and (d) mobile applications.

Private Space to Practice Mindfulness

Eight interviewees referred to private spaces such as prayer rooms and private offices to practise mindfulness. Private spaces in the workplace allowed the interviewees to practise mindfulness. For instance, a lecturer, R8, stated that he practised mindfulness in the university prayer room when there was pressure at work:

> If I need to meditate at work, there's a prayer room here, and I've done meditation at the prayer room … it was a mix of pressure at work, some stuff going on at work, and some stuff going on at home … so I disappeared off for 15 minutes to the prayer room.

The unavailability of an appropriate space hindered the application of mindfulness practices in the workplace. For example, R3, an honorary senior lecturer at a university and palliative medicine specialist at a hospital, asserted that she could not practise mindfulness in the workplace because there was no private space to do so.

Natural Environment

Eleven interviewees discussed the connection between mindfulness experiences and the natural environment. They asserted that they felt better and more relaxed when practising mindfulness in the natural environment. In this way, the natural environment facilitated their mindfulness experiences. For example, R1, a professional clinician, commented:

> I think it's (mindfulness) the connection to nature. I really enjoy nature. And if I do come across an actual river, I like to sit and do it (mindfulness practice).

Similarly, a programme director, R25, described his experience of mindfulness in the natural environment. He recalled that mindfulness practices in the natural environment allowed him to focus on the internal and external environments rather than thinking about his tasks. Disengaging from the task for a short time while informally practising mindfulness in the natural environment provided relief from the task-related pressure.

Overall, the interviewees reported that a natural environment was helpful for their mindfulness experiences. A connection between mindfulness and the natural environment, such as trees, birds and greenery around the campus, was reported. The natural environment facilitated mindfulness practices in the workplace, as informal mindfulness practices in the natural environment provided psychological detachment from negative feelings and thoughts in the workplace.

Communal Support

Communal support at the workplace was another critical factor influencing interviewees' mindful experiences. Communal support for mindfulness included the help of colleagues, friends and partners in applying mindfulness. Some interviewees ($n = 5$) indicated that communal support helped them maintain mindfulness practice. R20, a clinical educator, said that her colleagues and friends supported her in terms of mindfulness practices:

> One of the other huge strengths and supports from mindfulness that I've been fortunate to benefit from is around a community of like-minded people … who also share this passion and they've become—and they're colleagues, and they're close friends, and they're meditation teachers … being able to keep on the path like this comes from the people that I connect with as part of my community.

An international student support officer, R12, stated that her friends encouraged her to start practising mindfulness:

> I'm not a regular meditator.… So, I have been greatly influenced by some of my friends who do meditation and have encouraged me to do it more often.

Two associate professors, R4 and R14, suggested that they preferred the practice of mindfulness in a group rather than individually because they felt connected with others in a group practice. University staff reported that the communal support of colleagues, friends and partners has been beneficial in terms of maintaining mindfulness practices. The like-minded people in their surroundings who also practise mindfulness not only discussed it but also provided a sense of connection with people of the same group.

Mobile Applications

A mobile application was another tool that the interviewees used to practise mindfulness. Some interviewees mentioned using mobile applications such as Headspace to practise mindfulness. A few interviewees (n = 4) reported using mobile applications for discipline and structure. As a senior lecturer, R3, said:

> In terms of structure and discipline, it really helps me to have the app … something about the app that can make it a bit like, 'Take that off. I've done that for today'.

Similarly, R1, a professional clinician, reported using the mobile application to practise mindfulness when she could not attend group practice in the workplace. The mobile application provides an alternative way to practise mindfulness at home. This suggests that the individual efforts to incorporate mindfulness in everyday life reflected the variations in the state of mindfulness or mindful experiences among workers.

In the everyday work life of university staff, private space, the natural environment, communal support and mobile applications influence their mindfulness practices. University employees were found to require a private and quiet place, such as a prayer room or private office to practise mindfulness at work formally. Mindfulness practices in the natural environment were able to help employees psychologically detach themselves from workplace issues such as stress. Communal support also facilitates the application of workplace mindfulness. Communal support includes positive experiences of practising mindfulness in a group and the motivation and support of colleagues to maintain mindfulness practices. Using mobile applications for mindfulness practices also supports discipline and the structure of practices. Collectively, the research found that a university's physical and non-physical environment influences the workforce's mindfulness practices.

Discussion and Implications

The current neoliberal environment of higher education has intensified university staff's stress and well-being issues (Gavin et al., 2024; Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). In this regard, developing and managing the staff's psychological well-being is one of the key concerns of scholars and practitioners in higher education. Previous research has suggested that MBTIs in universities can help university staff with stress reduction and other workplace challenges (Atkins et al., 2015; Koncz et al., 2016; Malarkey et al., 2013). However, limited attention has been given to understanding how university staff engage in mindfulness practices, the impact of these practices on specific workplace functions, and how physical and non-physical factors might facilitate or hinder mindfulness practices among university staff. We focused on the experiences of staff in an under-researched university sector to understand their experiences of mindfulness practices and what workplace factors influence their mindfulness practices.

Our research found that university staff incorporate mindfulness into their routines through four distinct episodes: morning, midday, on the spot and after work. Engaging in mindfulness practices during the morning might help staff establish a productive routine. On-the-spot mindfulness practices, conversely, emerge as a valuable strategy for confronting immediate stressors and challenging situations. Furthermore, practising mindfulness after one's work hours assists in psychologically detaching from work-related stressors. It suggests that MBTIs can be customized according to these distinct episodes for maximum effectiveness. For instance, morning mindfulness practices could be strategically integrated into workplace wellness programmes to help staff establish a focused and productive start to their day. On-the-spot mindfulness techniques can be promoted as tools for managing acute stress and navigating challenging situations as they arise, enhancing immediate stress resilience (Hafenbrack, 2017). Moreover, encouraging mindfulness practices after work could support employees in effectively detaching from work-related stress, contributing to better work-life balance and overall well-being. These insights provide a framework for developing more targeted and context-specific mindfulness practices, potentially leading to improved workplace outcomes such as productivity, stress management and employee satisfaction.

Past research has predominantly highlighted the advantages of implementing MBTIs within the workplace (Good et al., 2016; Shahbaz & Parker, 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of practising mindfulness in everyday work is limited. Our research is one of the few studies that have discussed the actual experience of mindfulness practices in a real-world setting (Irving et al., 2014; Lyddy et al., 2016). In this regard, our research findings contribute to the literature by distinguishing mindfulness practices according to different times and situations and associating them with specific workplace outcomes.

Our study unfolds four key factors that play a role in sustaining mindfulness practices for stress reduction within

the university context. Among these factors, physical elements such as having a private space for mindfulness practice and access to natural surroundings within university premises emerge as influential factors. Additionally, non-physical components, including communal support from colleagues and the utilization of mobile applications, were identified as facilitators for maintaining mindfulness practices. A key argument of our research is that introducing MBTIs in university settings is insufficient for effectively reducing staff stress and improving their productivity. Instead, university leaders and mindfulness trainers must understand the significance of cultivating an environment conducive to mindfulness practice. By facilitating both physical and non-physical aspects that encourage mindfulness, universities can establish a climate that maximizes the potential benefits of these interventions for stress reduction and the productivity of university staff. For example, engaging in a brief midday mindfulness session within a dedicated workspace can effectively reduce work-related stress during the day. However, without a dedicated area for mindfulness practices, staff members could find it challenging to manage work-related stress. The implications of these findings are significant as they suggest that the effectiveness of MBTIs in universities is contingent not only on the intervention itself but also on the surrounding environment, such as the natural environment and colleagues' support, which can facilitate or hinder such practices.

Our research contributes to the literature concerning the importance of the physical work environment for employees' well-being, productivity and performance (Bankins et al., 2021; Haapakangas et al., 2022; Morrison & Stahlmann-Brown, 2021; Otterbring et al., 2021). Our research findings support the notion that an organization's supportive physical environment can potentially serve as a source for employee well-being. This empirical research identified the physical environment as one of the salient organizational factors influencing the nature and effectiveness of individual mindfulness practices in the university sector. The findings revealed that university employees require a private and quiet place, such as a dedicated prayer room or a private office, to engage in formal mindfulness exercises during working hours. Furthermore, mindfulness in natural surroundings emerged as instrumental in helping employees mentally detach from work-related stressors. This highlights the significance of a suitable physical setting that can foster individual mindfulness practices, thereby functioning as a potent stress-reduction tool for employees within the workplace. Previous literature highlights the importance of the physical environment for mindfulness experiences (Glomb et al., 2011; Good et al., 2016; Van Gordon et al., 2018). Our research is unique in providing empirical validation to the existing hypothesized connection between mindfulness and the physical work environment within university settings.

Our study contributes to the literature concerning the health management of university staff. Some studies have argued that the workplace challenges of university staff are increasing in terms of workload, work pressure and occupational stress (Jerg-Bretzke et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Kinman & Johnson, 2019; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Zibenberg, 2021), as well as burnout, which are strongly related to health-related outcomes (Bakker et al., 2014). In such a stressful environment, organizational leaders need to provide university staff with private space (e.g., a prayer room or private office) and some natural environment (e.g., a garden or park) to practise mindfulness for stress reduction. Conversely, if such arrangements are not possible (e.g., due to space constraints or the absence of natural outdoor features at a workplace location, as may be the case with a university city campus), organizations might consider the feasibility of encouraging staff to use off-site natural settings to promote their effective mindfulness practices (e.g., at nearby public parks, at retreats). Alternatively, given the finding that individual mindfulness practices and workplace benefits are contingent on a conducive physical environment, employees should consider using mindfulness-based mobile applications. In the absence of such a context, the trainers of MBTIs might suggest that the participants use mindfulness-based mobile applications to practise mindfulness and facilitate the long-term benefits of an MBTI.

The JD-R theory emphasizes the importance of identifying valuable resources that may be important to people in certain circumstances. The theory argues that demanding factors (e.g., workload, time pressure and role ambiguity) contribute to employees' physical and mental health challenges. In contrast, job resources (e.g., social support, autonomy and opportunities) help buffer job demands' adverse effects. Thus, it is essential to balance job demands and resources in the workplace (Demerouti et al., 2001; Schaufeli, 2017). Our research added value to the JD-R model by suggesting mindfulness practices and the workplace environment as a resource for stress reduction among university staff. This finding resonates with the results of Boyd et al.'s (2011) study, which suggested that job resources have a key role in achieving lower strain levels for university employees. Further, individual mindfulness is often considered a resource through the JD-R lens; however, we argue that the conducive environment of an organization (e.g., private spaces, natural environment, communal support and mobile applications) may act as a positive resource that facilitates mindfulness practices and stress reduction in challenging situations at work. Thus, a favourable work environment might help gain more resources in terms of mindfulness experiences and the well-being of employees. In the absence of a conducive work environment, employees are unlikely to practise mindfulness in stressful situations, which can negatively impact their overall well-being.

Our research added value to the higher education literature by understanding the relationship between university context, mindfulness and staff well-being through the JD-R lens.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study focused on investigating the influence of environmental factors on mindfulness practices within university contexts. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that various individual and sector-specific variables may also shape mindfulness practices in the workplace. For example, Hulsheger et al. (2018) found that workload can hinder employees' mindfulness experiences. While we primarily focused our analysis on the role of the physical and non-physical environments, future research might explore individual-level and macro-conditions that may be important for achieving the workplace benefits of mindfulness practices, including stress reduction. Factors such as individual differences, economic constraints and culture might influence the mindfulness practices of workers.

In addition, this study selected participants from six different universities in New Zealand. The physical environment of selected universities in New Zealand is generally conducive to mindfulness practices in terms of space and natural environmental features, which cannot be assumed to exist in all other workplace settings or all university settings elsewhere. Thus, exploring and understanding how employees practise mindfulness in organizations where the physical environment is not conducive to mindfulness practices would be worthwhile. Organizational leaders and mindfulness trainers might thus explore the alternatives available to facilitate the workplace benefits of mindfulness practices when organizational resources are scarce.

Conclusion

Most previous studies have focused on the benefits of mindfulness practices, with only a limited number examining their real-world application, particularly in the healthcare sector. There is a notable gap in research exploring how university staff engage in mindfulness practices, the impact of these practices on specific workplace functions and the role of physical and non-physical factors in facilitating or hindering these practices. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with university staff in New Zealand, our study identifies four distinct episodes of mindfulness practices: morning, midday, on the spot and after work. We also emphasize that mindfulness practices are shaped by various factors, including the availability of discrete spaces (e.g., prayer rooms or private offices), natural elements (e.g., trees, avian presence, greenery), communal support and the use of mobile applications. It is crucial to foster a work environment rich in resources that support mindfulness practices among university staff to ensure the long-term benefits of MBTIs. This need becomes particularly evident when considering the circumstances of university employees, who are increasingly exposed to work intensification and its related consequences, including stress and burnout.

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