

Mindfulness in the workplace

On an upward curve

Building better workplaces


WellbeingPulse

bank
workers
charity


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About us

Promoting positive change in UK banks

The Bank Workers Charity (BWC) exists to support the health and wellbeing of the banking community. We work with banks to complement their existing wellbeing strategies, and aim to assist them in building better workplaces. Our Wellbeing Pulse blog delivers the latest in thinking, research and techniques across the four pillars of workplace wellbeing: psychological, physical, social and financial. We also offer a range of services to build and maintain the wellbeing of bank employees.

Research shows that wellbeing is a major factor in employee performance and productivity, and therefore in organisational effectiveness. We believe a meaningful and sustained employee wellbeing strategy is not an extravagance, it's a business imperative.

www.bwcharity.org.uk

www.thewellbeingpulse.com



Foreword

At the Bank Workers Charity (BWC), we routinely monitor developments in the workplace wellbeing landscape. It's been clear for some time that mindfulness - a form of meditation with its origins in Buddhism - is making significant inroads among UK businesses.

This is a development we welcome. Many thousands of studies have now established mindfulness' effectiveness in treating a wide range of different health conditions, and in supporting individuals' wellbeing. Increasingly it's being offered within workplaces as a means of supporting the health and wellbeing of UK workers, with more organisations every year incorporating it into their wellbeing strategies.



We are pleased to see so many banks among UK businesses embracing mindfulness.

As a workplace intervention, it is still relatively early days for mindfulness. Organisations across the UK are at different stages of development in terms of their thinking and the levels

of engagement around mindfulness. Some indeed have already introduced it at work and see it as an effective way of building resilience in their workforce, but have yet to integrate it into wellbeing strategies. Others have committed to offering something 'mindful', but aren't quite sure of the best way to approach it and what options are available. Others still see an app-based approach as a cost-effective way of making it available to employees, but are unsure of the benefits and pitfalls. Then there are employers who are curious about mindfulness, but need reassurance about its scientific credibility before moving forward. There are also HR teams keen to incorporate mindfulness into their wellbeing offerings, but needing to build the business case to persuade senior leaders of its value.

This whitepaper seeks to address these and other concerns by exploring the landscape around mindfulness in the workplace. We include examples of the ways businesses have introduced mindfulness, and a case study from a UK bank that provides helpful pointers as to how it can be done successfully. There is abundant evidence that mindfulness can enhance the quality of people's lives. Yet there is no single best way to practice mindfulness or for businesses to introduce it. Approaches vary from formal organised classes to individuals practising at home using an app. The starting point for businesses should be to establish the best fit with

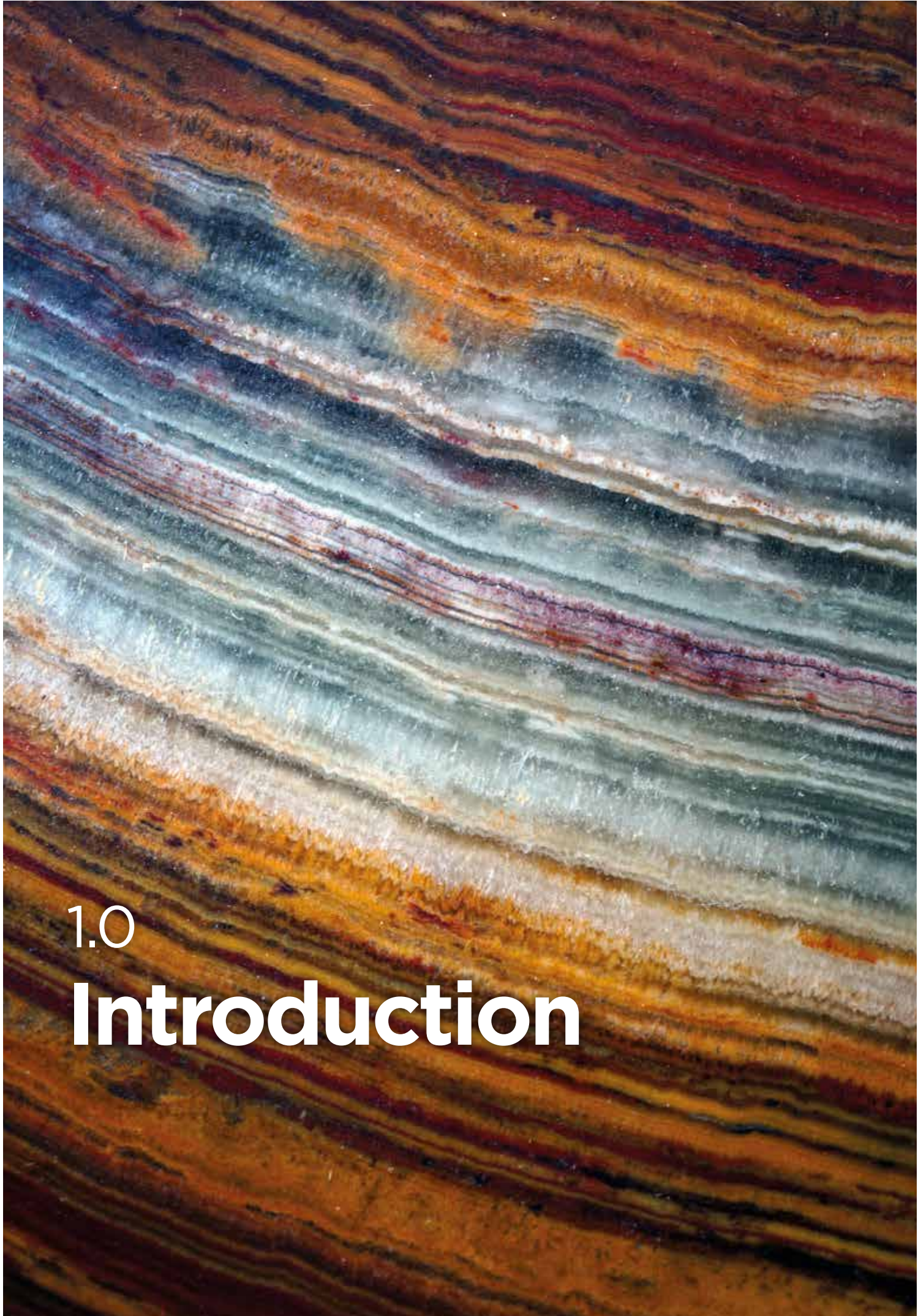


Mindfulness is one of a range of interventions making a difference in UK workplaces.

the needs of their employees and the culture and values of the business.

We believe this whitepaper is the first to have, as its primary focus, the different ways that businesses have adopted mindfulness. We are particularly interested in how this is happening in the banking sector. It can be especially helpful in building resilience among those working in high-pressure environments, so we are pleased to see so many banks in the vanguard of UK businesses embracing mindfulness.

Our goal at BWC is to help build and maintain the wellbeing of employees in the financial sector. We hope this paper makes it easier for banks and other businesses to make choices that work best for them. Mindfulness is one of a range of workplace interventions making a difference in UK workplaces. Introduced in the right way, and for the right reasons, we believe it can be of great benefit to employees and to businesses.



1.0

Introduction

Mindfulness is everywhere. It's hard to open a magazine or a newspaper without encountering features on the subject. And it's not just a celebrity health fad. Leaders from CEOs to politicians are testifying to the positive impact it has had on their lives.

A mindfulness book search on Amazon produces more than 20,000 titles. Online training is readily available and there are mindfulness classes right across the UK. Unsurprisingly in our digital age, there has also been a boom in the development of mindfulness apps. There is even a Master's course in mindfulness. Although it has been around for a long time, it's only over the last decade that mindfulness has risen to prominence - at first within society and latterly in the workplace.

So mindfulness has gone mainstream, but where did it come from? Is it really as beneficial as its advocates suggest? The health benefits seem impressive, but is there any scientific foundation to its claims? Businesses are rightly focused on the bottom line, so how has it gained a foothold?

In this whitepaper, we will explore these and many other questions, but our main focus will be its application in the workplace. Many businesses

have offered mindfulness activities to their employees - some on a grand scale - but the approaches often vary, so we will look at different types of mindfulness interventions. We'll consider the evidence base and try and sift the reality from the hype. A whole industry has grown up around mindfulness, so it's important to understand how its claims for business benefits stack up against the reality.

1.1 What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a form of meditation with its origins in Buddhism. The practice involves paying attention to what's happening in the present moment. This can involve focusing on many aspects of immediate experience, including feelings, mental images, external sounds, the inner voice, or physical sensations. It also entails attending to these things in an open, accepting and non-judgemental way.

This concentration on the 'here and now' stands in marked contrast to most of our day-to-day experience, in which we find our minds racing from one thought or demand to the next, and in which much of what we do happens on autopilot.

Shorn of its more spiritual components, mindfulness meditation has become an integral part of the daily lives of millions of people round the world. It



It's important to understand how its claims for business benefits stack up.

has been the subject of numerous studies on everything from its effectiveness in improving cognitive functioning to its application as a treatment for a range of debilitating health conditions.

Some history - the origins of mindfulness

Mindfulness has its origins in ancient meditation practices. In the modern era, the practice began in 1979, when US academic Jon Kabat-Zinn adapted Buddhist teachings and developed a meditation-based intervention to treat stress and chronic pain whilst working at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

His approach evolved into what he termed Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). In this way, Kabat-Zinn detached meditation practice from its Buddhist context - arguably paving the way for its subsequent adoption by those not spiritually inclined.

Mindfulness' credibility as a health treatment has subsequently grown to the extent that by 2017 more than

24,000 patients had been through the programme at the University of Massachusetts,¹ and the institution had certified 1,000 MBSR instructors in more than 30 countries. MBSR has now been supplemented by two other evidence-based interventions: Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for the treatment of depression, and Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention for dealing with addiction.



2.0

**Does mindfulness
work?**

In the UK, we've seen bastions of the establishment such as Parliament, universities and the NHS all embrace mindfulness. Why should that be? The simple answer comes from something Jon Kabat-Zinn said in an [interview with Time magazine](#): "The reason is the science."¹

Mindfulness has taken off largely because of the substantial body of evidence that sits behind it.

The science is particularly important in overcoming scepticism among those put off by its new age and spiritual connotations. There has been criticism of the quality of the evidence base, but it's hard to dispute the effectiveness of mindfulness when faced with the sheer volume of peer-reviewed research papers and the highly respected academic institutions responsible for them. It is beyond the remit of this whitepaper to explore these in detail, but we'll look briefly at some key studies. There is a huge repository of [mindfulness research](#)² accessible through Springer for those who wish to dig deeper.

2.1 The evidence base

Studies into the impact of mindfulness have been going on for many years, but since 2010 the number of peer-reviewed research papers has mushroomed. The result is a body of evidence confirming that mindfulness can be used to treat a range of health conditions, as well as improve wellbeing and cognitive functioning.

Early studies showed its value in treating depression – findings ratified by subsequent papers, including a [recent study in The Lancet](#),³ which

found that mindfulness was more beneficial than antidepressants for people suffering with depression.

Mindfulness has been shown to help with other mental health conditions too, including [anxiety and mood disorders](#).⁴ It is effective in relation to musculoskeletal conditions, and has benefited patients with [fibromyalgia](#)⁵ and [pain management](#)⁶ issues.

Regular mindfulness practice has been shown to produce other physical benefits. These include: [lower blood pressure](#),⁷ a strengthened [immune system](#)⁸ and reduced levels of [cortisol](#),⁹ which produces stress. It is also beneficial for [sleep](#),¹⁰ improves [cardiovascular health](#)¹¹ and has been used to treat substance abuse.

Cognitive benefits conferred by mindfulness can include [improved executive functioning and visuo-spatial processing](#),¹² as well as [better concentration and memory retention](#).¹³

This substantial evidence base, and the scientific credibility it brings, is the chief reason mindfulness has moved from being a lifestyle choice to becoming a treatment recommended by GPs and offered through the NHS.

2.2 The growing reach of mindfulness

Mindfulness first took off in the US, but has since become a global phenomenon. It is today widely practised in the UK, and its growing evidence base has convinced the NHS to make it a recommended treatment for some conditions. In 2004, the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence endorsed [mindfulness-based cognitive therapy](#)¹⁴

as having a positive impact on recurrent depression – upgrading its recommendation in 2009 to give it 'key priority' status.

But mindfulness has not just been accepted within the medical establishment; academic institutions have also embraced it in a big way. There are Masters courses at Oxford and Bangor Universities, whilst Oxford University's Mindfulness Centre has pioneered research into the area since 2008. There are also mindfulness research and teaching centres across the US, including those at prestigious institutions, such as the University of California in Los Angeles, and the University of Illinois.

It has gained acceptance in political circles. In the UK, the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) has been collaborating with policy makers and members of Parliament to develop recommendations for how mindfulness might contribute to society more widely. As a result, the practice has now been introduced into schools and prisons.

MAPPG created a policy institute, The Mindfulness Initiative, which recently published a comprehensive [business case for mindfulness](#)¹⁵ to support organisations wishing to make the practice available to their workforces.

Finally, the introduction of mindfulness into so many different workplaces as a component of corporate wellbeing strategies has confirmed its transition from a once little-known meditation exercise, practiced by a small number of dedicated enthusiasts, to a fixture of the UK healthcare system and an inescapable feature of modern life.

The mindfulness industry

The rapid growth of interest in mindfulness has presented a huge business opportunity – one that's been quickly seized. It's been estimated that [18 million Americans meditate regularly](#),¹⁶ so it's unsurprising that the

market research firm IBISWorld [valued the mindfulness industry at \\$1.1 billion](#)¹⁷ in the US. Mindfulness training alone comprises 7.4% of the US \$15.1 billion alternative care market. The corporate sector's increasing spend on wellbeing programmes will surely see this figure expand still further.

One particularly significant growth area has been the development of digital delivery. The widespread use of mobile devices, the convenience of an app-based approach for users, and its potential for large-scale distribution within workplaces always made this a likely route.



3.0

Mindfulness in the workplace

Mindfulness has made great headway in organisational settings. In 2016, 22% of businesses in the US offered mindfulness training to staff,¹ with that figure expected to double in 2017.

Among major companies that have embraced mindfulness, **Google were early adopters,²** starting back in 2007. Others include the insurance giant Aetna and global food conglomerate General Mills. Since then, Apple, IKEA, Transport for London, General Motors, Proctor and Gamble, Ford Motor Company and a host of others have followed suit.

Mindfulness has also gained traction in the financial sector. Banks that have offered it to their employees include HSBC, Barclays, Goldman Sachs, Bank of England, JPMorgan, Lloyds Banking Group, and the Royal Bank of Scotland. At BT, amongst the earliest of companies to tackle employee wellbeing strategically, **1,000 people attended the first pan-BT mindfulness session³** and hundreds of employees signed up for weekly mindfulness practice.

Aetna too has adopted mindfulness on a large scale. More than **13,000 of its employees⁴** have attended at least one mindfulness class. The participants reported a significant reduction in their stress levels and an improvement in sleep quality. Moreover, the employees evidenced 62 minutes of extra productivity per week. Aetna's organisational data also showed that, **healthcare costs dropped by \$2,000⁵** on average for participants, compared

to colleagues who didn't receive training. Impressive outcomes were also found at Intel, where **1,500 staff participated in a 19-session mindfulness course.⁶** At its conclusion, the employees reported significant decreases in stress levels, they were happier, and there were improvements in their creativity, working relationships and concentration.

At Goldman Sachs, **mindfulness was introduced as a core component⁷** in the bank's resilience training programme. Sally Boyle, International Head of Human Capital Management at the bank, **told the FT:⁸** "In years to come, we'll be talking about mindfulness as we talk about exercise now."

3.1 Mindfulness in the banking sector

Most of the large UK banks have made mindfulness available to their workforce, albeit in different ways. As early as 2003, bank leaders like John Studzinski at HSBC were using mindfulness to frame their approach to management. An early practitioner of mindful leadership, Studzinski attributed a significant part of his success to the authentic relationships and high levels of trust he was able to build through his **mindful approach to work.⁹**

Recently, Dan Nixon of the Bank of England's Stakeholder Communications and Strategy Division has argued for a **mindful approach to economics.¹⁰** He suggests that its cognitive benefits would be helpful in the work, and that mindfulness could provide a new lens through which to view economic ideas. Nixon argues that placing less emphasis on consumption and more on wellbeing could bring a new dimension to some of the wider economic debates.

Investment banks appear particularly receptive to mindfulness - perhaps as a means of helping employees to be resilient in a round-the-clock, high-pressure environment. It's a measure of the sector's appetite that the consultancy Mindfulness at Work has worked with around 25 banks,

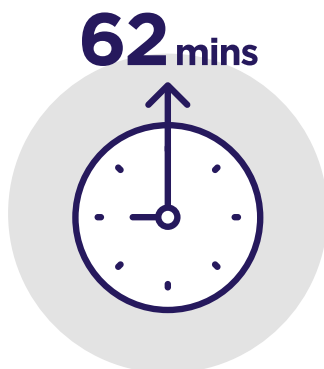
including JPMorgan and Citibank. Co-founder Louise Cox-Chester told Financial News that **banks are using mindfulness in a variety of ways:¹¹** "to address burnout, improve working relationships, and deal with stress".

She added that CEOs and HR heads are using it to identify their default modes of behaviour and thinking, and even as part of diversity and inclusion training to help employees recognise and address cognitive bias.

RBS has developed an impressive multi-track approach. To mark World Mental Health day in 2016, the bank launched a mindfulness toolkit in partnership with the Bank Workers Charity. This allowed employees to access podcasts and articles at work, on the way to work, or at home. In addition, it ran one-hour roadshows for around 5,000 employees, led by an internal mindfulness practitioner. Mindfulness courses are part of the bank's suite of wellbeing tools and they also offer mindfulness workshops led by an external supplier. The bank's social media pages act as a channel for individual employees to share their experiences of mindfulness and hints and tips with others. Mindfulness remains a key theme in RBS's wellbeing calendar, with articles and webinars published regularly through the bank's communications channels.

HSBC has taken a particularly innovative and employee-led route, building upon the enthusiasm of a cohort of dedicated mindfulness enthusiasts to make mindfulness available to employees across the business. Details of this can be found in the case study on page 17.

Meanwhile, Goldman Sachs, which **offered the app Headspace as an employee benefit,¹²** runs twice-weekly meditation sessions and is looking at **providing contemplation spaces¹¹** at its new London office to allow for 'personal quiet reflection'. So in the banking sector, as in the business world in general, mindfulness continues to flourish.



Aetna reported 62 minutes of extra productivity per person per week.

A photograph of a teal, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large piece of art, with several brown autumn leaves scattered across it. The leaves are in various stages of decay, showing shades of orange, yellow, and brown. The teal surface has a mottled, almost marbled appearance with darker brown spots. The overall composition is simple and evocative of the season.

4.0

The business case for mindfulness

What convinces organisations to bring mindfulness into the workplace? With the possible exception of tech companies, few have a reputation for dabbling in new age practices.

There are a variety of reasons why mindfulness has made such progress in corporate environments, but all make business sense. These include:

4.1 To support wellbeing strategies

Mindfulness aligns well with the growing strategic interest in employee wellbeing. It fits comfortably into the wellbeing agenda of most corporations, which have now bought into the positive relationship between employee wellbeing and productivity.

4.2 To address the mental health at work agenda

Tackling mental health at work remains a strategic priority for many businesses, including the banking sector. Mindfulness, with its proven benefits for those suffering from stress and depression, is therefore particularly helpful.

4.3 To support work-life balance

Another factor is the recognition by businesses that the boundaries between work and home have eroded, possibly for good. The universality of mobile devices means that working outside conventional hours and

beyond the workplace has never been easier, leading to what some refer to as the 'always on' culture.

There is growing evidence that this is having a detrimental impact on employees, who may never feel able to separate from work mode completely. This sense of being under siege - from work, from information and from the other insistent demands modern life presents - has not been lost on businesses. They are becoming increasingly concerned about the strain their employees face in dealing with this multitude of demands, and view mindfulness as a way of helping their staff to shut out the noise, and gain some much-needed respite.

4.4 To build employee health and resilience

Mindfulness also appeals to employers because it has been shown to do much more than ameliorate health conditions. Many companies are keen to do more at the preventative end of the wellbeing spectrum. Some already offer resilience training to improve the wellbeing of their employees.

Mindfulness is also proven to boost resilience. It can hence be employed as a preventative measure, helping employees in good health to remain well. And whereas one-off resilience training may have a short-term impact, mindfulness, with its reinforcement through daily practice, is more likely to have a sustained effect.

4.5 To improve cognitive performance

Mindfulness has been shown to bring about significant improvements in a range of skills and behaviours highly valued in the workplace. Cognitive performance, sensitivity to the needs of others, collaborative working and managing complexity are all boosted by mindfulness.

4.6 To address the employee sleep deficit

Mindfulness has repeatedly been found to improve the quantity and quality of sleep - an issue of growing concern for employers. Research over the past 10 years has revolutionised our understanding of the importance of sleep. We now know that inadequate sleep over a prolonged period has serious consequences for physical and mental health.

There is a high prevalence of sleep problems in the UK. One in four people [suffer from a sleep disorder](#),¹ affecting both the amount and quality of their sleep. A recent study found that [60% of employees get less than seven hours' sleep per night](#),² the minimum to avoid adverse health consequences. Businesses suffer too. It is estimated that [poor sleep costs the UK economy £40bn per year](#)³ in lost productivity. No surprise, then, that some companies are incorporating measures to improve sleep quality within their wellbeing offerings.

The pressure of an 'always on' culture

'Something like 40% of people wake up, and the first thing they do is check their email. For another 40%,

it's the last thing they do at night.

A 'macho' working culture, where employees want to be seen to be available on email at all hours, is causing stress and depression, and in turn making workers less efficient.'

Sir Cary Cooper

50th Anniversary Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health, Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, President of the CIPD

An aerial photograph of a vast beach with numerous sand dunes. The dunes are arranged in a series of parallel ridges that recede into the distance. The sand is a warm, golden-brown color. In the upper portion of the image, the ocean waves are visible, with white foam from the surf contrasting against the blue water. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

5.0

Introducing mindfulness in the workplace

Businesses have chosen to introduce mindfulness into the workplace in a variety of ways. Here are four of the most common:

5.1 Mindful leadership

Some companies prefer to introduce mindfulness by focusing on leaders. This operates on the assumption that the leaders of the organisation, through their vision and behaviours, help shape the culture of the company. The inference is that a mindful leadership style will create a more ethical, people-focused and healthy organisational culture that in turn performs better. Mindfulness is increasingly being included in leadership programmes, where it is considered part of senior managers' professional development.

Perhaps because of its popularity, there has been a growth of research into the impact of mindfulness training on leaders. The University of Westminster reported that, following mindfulness training, its [senior managers' self-confidence had improved](#).¹ They also felt better able to create a shared vision, display moral intelligence, and motivate others. More research is needed, but the results so far are promising.

5.2 Whole organisation approach

Here, mindfulness is made available to the workforce through training programmes, available usually on a voluntary basis. Sometimes its introduction is preceded by staff surveys or focus groups that identify mindfulness as being of interest to

large numbers of employees. There is often a pilot programme, after which the training is rolled out to the whole organisation. Training is typically provided by an external provider, but may be offered through the organisation's training and development function as part of a wellbeing offering.



A mindful leadership style will create a more ethical culture.

5.3 Employee-led mindfulness

This approach is less common, but where it has been tried, it appears to have worked well. It involves the business supporting mindfulness initiatives that develop naturally from the enthusiasm of employee-led groups. These spread gradually through the organisation as awareness and commitment widens. In some instances, company support amounts to little more than providing room space for practice, but it can also extend to much more sophisticated approaches, as at Schneider and HSBC.

At a recent wellbeing conference, Schneider explained how its own mindfulness initiative had emerged from companywide wellbeing labs formed by volunteers committed to particular wellbeing ideas. The labs were part of a global commitment to employee wellbeing, under which

the business agreed to support ideas that took root in a given locality and make them available to others across the organisation. Mindfulness has now become one of the most successful of Schneider's wellbeing labs.

HSBC's programme arose in a less structured manner, but was just as successful. Details can be seen in the case study in this whitepaper.

5.4 Making mindfulness apps available

Mobile devices have the potential to revolutionise approaches to wellbeing investment. Apps can be a very effective way of making mindfulness widely available. While there are hundreds of apps on the market, information about the quality and efficacy of many is limited. However, selected with caution, this approach has the advantage that apps are readily available and can be distributed easily and scaled to meet demand. They can be made available free, or at a discounted rate, as part of an employee benefits package.

Most app companies offer a graduated charge, depending on the number of employees offered or making use of the product. The main drawback is the likelihood of a significant dropout rate. Apps lack the on-going support implicit in regular mindfulness sessions, so this approach may not have the same impact as access to regular onsite classes.

When they form part of a wider wellbeing offer, apps can be deployed successfully in the workplace, with sustained high engagement rates.

Mindfulness apps

If you are considering an app-based approach to mindfulness, here are our top 10 considerations:

1. Is the app's purpose aligned with your overall wellbeing offer?
2. Will it help form part of a healthy support system for your employees?
3. Will it work for employees with diverse health goals/challenges?

4. Is the app based on a theory of change/psychological model/established good practice?
5. Is there adequate research/evidence of its effectiveness?
6. Is the app updated regularly?
7. Is it clear what, if any, data are collected, stored, communicated and processed by the app?

8. Is the tool compliant with data standards and regulations?
9. Is the tool accessible on different mobile platforms?
10. Will the tool provide aggregated management information on usage and goals to further support the continual development of your wellbeing offer?

A close-up photograph of a spiderweb covered in dew drops against a soft, greenish-yellow background. The dew drops are of various sizes and are scattered across the intricate web structure. The background is a gradient of light green and yellow, creating a serene and natural atmosphere.

6.0

Mindfulness apps

There are now over **1,300 mindfulness apps on the market**.¹ So what explains their popularity?

Firstly, they can be a great way for those uncertain about mindfulness to dip their toes in the water. Some apps offer free introductory usage at the outset to help people decide. Indeed, for many, their first experience of mindfulness will be through an app.

An app is an easy way to build mindfulness into a daily routine. Even those attending regular mindfulness classes often use an app to practice between sessions. In addition, the almost universal usage of mobile devices makes them a very accessible means of developing a mindfulness regime. It is also likely that younger people's predilection for digital products will make mindfulness apps popular among that demographic.

6.1 The app business

Mindfulness apps have now become a major market in their own right. Recent figures show that one of the most successful products, Headspace, has been **downloaded 11 million times**,¹ and was recently valued at £250 million. A common approach for mindfulness apps is to allow a limited amount of free downloads and the opportunity to undertake short mindfulness exercises, with a subscription needed to access deeper levels of practice.

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An app is an easy way to build mindfulness into a daily routine.

Now that so many mindfulness apps are available, how can consumers or employers make a meaningful choice about which one to buy? Some have referred to the mindfulness app market as the 'Wild West'. There is some truth in this, but probably no more so than in the wider world of health apps.

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Apps can make a meaningful difference if used regularly.

6.2 What's the evidence?

App providers make bold claims about their products, but draw on wider research about the effectiveness of mindfulness in general, rather than the specific attributes of their app. This is partly down to the realities of the app market. App creators are aware that this is a fast-moving market, and that lengthy clinical testing may allow competitors to steal ahead. The result is that many apps lack scientific authenticity, which can pose a problem for purchasers struggling to make a good choice.

One study found that most apps claiming to be mindfulness related, were in fact **guided meditation apps, timers or reminders**.² In addition, very few apps had high ratings on the Mobile Application Rating Scale, in terms of visual aesthetics, engagement, functionality or information quality.

A warning was sent to app providers in 2013 when **Luminosity was fined \$2 million**³ for deceiving consumers with its advertising. The company claimed its brain-training app would

improve cognitive performance and protect against cognitive decline, but the science was found wanting and the company was unable to provide credible evidence to back its claims.

The best apps have been clinically tested, so buyers who carefully research their purchases can make an informed choice. Other than from app providers, there have been few studies into the effectiveness of mindfulness apps that could be considered methodologically acceptable by the research community. However, one recent example gives grounds for optimism that they can **make a meaningful difference if used regularly**.⁴ As ever, more studies are needed.



The best apps have been clinically tested.



7.0

Introducing mindfulness

Other considerations

Mindfulness has been one of the wellbeing success stories of the past five years. Here are some final considerations for businesses to take account of when planning a workplace intervention.

7.1 Consider health risks

As mindfulness grew in popularity, it was almost inevitable that at some point there would be a backlash. Much of this is media froth, but one question deserves attention: does mindfulness always produce beneficial outcomes or can it pose a health risk? A flurry of recent press articles has raised concerns that care should be exercised around who should be recommended mindfulness.

Under ordinary circumstances, it isn't uncommon for some people to experience unpleasant feelings like anxiety and agitation during mindfulness practice. However, these are usually temporary and form part of the kind of psychological adjustment thought necessary to incorporate mindfulness into a daily regime. There is evidence that a small minority of people experience greater problems following their mindfulness practice, including [higher levels of anxiety, panic and depression](#).¹

It has been suggested that those who have experienced traumatic events could find their [memories triggered by mindfulness](#),² resulting in re-traumatisation. Similarly, people

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No health intervention, even a routine physical operation, is free of risk.”

who have experienced seizures and psychosis might be subject to an increased risk of recurrence of their symptoms. Only a small amount of research is currently available on this subject, but the risk appears to be associated with more intensive meditative experiences, such as [mindfulness retreats](#),¹ rather than the more short-session, evidence-based practices such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy.

The vast majority of people, even those who do experience unpleasant symptoms, appear able to move beyond these without sustaining any long-term harm. Nevertheless, it may be that those with a history of mental health problems are more at risk.

It should be recognised that no health intervention, even a routine physical operation, is free of risk. For example, [5-10% of psychotherapy patients experience a deterioration](#)³ in their condition, and yet psychotherapy remains a valued clinical option. For businesses offering mindfulness, it may be precautionary to suggest that employees with a diagnosed mental health condition talk to a mental health professional before starting the practice.

7.2 Mindfulness as a fad

As with any new type of workplace intervention, organisations buy into mindfulness for a variety of reasons. Some do so simply because their peers have done so, without reflecting on whether it fits into their wellbeing approach or business culture.

This can be equally true of the companies that now offer mindfulness products and services. Inevitably, some are capitalising on the trend. Most training organisations targeting the workplace now offer mindfulness packages. As a result, the market has become flooded with practitioners

of variable and sometime dubious quality. The word 'mindful' can easily be tacked on to products to create a veneer of authenticity, so purchasers need to be wary about what they buy and from whom. Researching the market to establish the credentials of the provider before purchasing is essential.

“
Organisations buy into mindfulness for a variety of reasons.”

7.3 Just a sticking plaster?

As mindfulness becomes a more familiar component of the wellbeing landscape, there is a risk it will be introduced in some organisations for the wrong reasons. On its own, it will never provide a fast track to improved business performance, so companies buying into mindfulness on that basis will be disappointed.

While there is good evidence that mindfulness can build up people's resilience, it should not be used as a pretext for failing to tackle the kinds of organisational problems that can make the workplace a stressful environment. Such a 'McMindfulness' approach will almost certainly backfire. Indeed, if employees perceive that mindfulness is being offered as a buffer to help them cope with the stresses of a 'toxic' work environment, they will view it cynically and the uptake of mindfulness sessions will be lower. To get the best out of it, businesses should make mindfulness part of a strategic approach to wellbeing that takes full account of organisational culture and practice.

A close-up photograph of a tree trunk cross-section, showing concentric growth rings and radial cracks. The wood is a warm, golden-brown color. The text is overlaid in the bottom left corner.

8.0

Case study

HSBC Bank

HSBC provides an innovative example of just how to embed mindfulness organisationally, from the bottom up.

One of the advantages of such an approach is that it evolves organically through the commitment of dedicated enthusiasts, who wish to communicate the benefits to others. Introduced in this way, mindfulness only succeeds if there is enough interest among the workforce. Also, being initiated by employees, it is hard to argue that it is being introduced for faddish reasons or that mindfulness is being hijacked to suit corporate ends.

“
The popularity of the mindfulness network snowballed.”

8.1 Mindfulness pioneer

Mindfulness at HSBC was initiated through the efforts of Mari Lewis, a Senior IT Architect in Sheffield, who practised mindfulness regularly. She found it hugely beneficial, and wanted to find out if there was appetite among colleagues to form a regular group.

In 2012, she solicited interest in her workplace through an onsite stall at lunchtime, signing up 15-20 staff. Mari, an experienced practitioner, led the sessions and the interest grew. Five years on, 350 employees have been through the programme at Sheffield.

One year after the initial session, following discussions with mindfulness enthusiasts in other parts of the bank, a network was established with a colleague Jane Daniels joining Mari as co-chair. An intranet site was created to support the network's activities and in July 2014 a launch event was held at the bank's Canary Wharf HQ. The occasion was introduced by one of the bank's global heads, with a special

interest in mental health. It attracted 500 employees, many dialling in from HSBC sites round the world.

Mindfulness sessions were soon formed at other HSBC sites where experienced volunteers were available: at First Direct in Leeds and several sites in London. Support for the developing network was gained from the UK bank's Head of HR, who was responsible for HSBC UK's wellbeing agenda. Since then, there have been many mindfulness events, often involving external speakers. Mari was also invited to join the Private Sector Working Group, part of the Government-endorsed Mindfulness Initiative. This group recently produced an influential report making the business case for mindfulness.

8.2 Raising the profile

The popularity of the mindfulness network snowballed, and the biggest problem was meeting demand. But more was needed if mindfulness was going to embed long-term at the bank. In 2016, an internal leadership project group focused its energies on raising the profile of mindfulness further. It canvassed and gained support and funding from the UK Head of Benefits and Reward, who was leading HSBC UK's new wellbeing strategy.

This enabled the group to develop a programme consisting of several strands, whilst retaining the employee-driven approach. These included expanding access to resources such as mindfulness apps, and training over 25 champions to support the formation of mindfulness hubs to meet demand across different regions.

Kalapa, one of the leading providers of workplace mindfulness training, was commissioned to provide the training, using a 'train the trainer' approach to ensure the training of future champions becomes self-sustaining. The programme includes, at HSBC's request, research into its impact. The

registration process is now underway for the recruitment of champions to take mindfulness at the bank to the next level.

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The app is available to employees at a discounted rate.”

To support the initiative, the bank has agreed with the creators of the mindfulness app Simple Habits to make their product available to employees at a discounted rate. To help embed it further, mindfulness has been introduced as an option into the bank's Mental Health Pathways, the process under which mental health cases are managed at HSBC, which includes occupational health and the private health insurance provider.

In September 2017, HSBC received a Parliamentary award in recognition of the achievements of the mindfulness network. Following this success, colleagues from other parts of the world have contacted them for support in setting up their own networks.



The launch event was held at the bank's Canary Wharf HQ.



9.0

What's next for mindfulness?

Mindfulness continues to gain ground both in society and in the workplace. The growing number of studies is expanding the evidence base. And with its credibility enhanced, it is becoming an increasingly common feature of corporate wellbeing programmes.

Research on its impact in the workplace is still relatively scarce, with just over 100 studies so far, but the outcomes are promising. It is an area of continuing interest to researchers and more studies will follow. Outside the workplace, the impact of mindfulness is not in doubt. It is routinely offered as a treatment by the NHS and it has proven benefits for building resilience and wellbeing.

There is surely a strong case for mindfulness to feature in any well-balanced wellbeing strategy. Mindfulness may not be for everyone, but as our case study shows, large numbers of

“

Large numbers of employees will take up the practice.



Mindfulness has proven benefits for building resilience and wellbeing.

employees will take up the practice at work given the right opportunity. And if, as the research tells us, it improves their happiness and wellbeing, the business benefits too. Provided it is offered for the right reasons and in the right way, we believe mindfulness can be a highly effective component of organisational wellbeing strategies.

There's no doubt that mindfulness is on an upward curve. The signs are that it will become a familiar feature of the workplace wellbeing landscape.

“

Mindfulness can be a highly effective component of organisational wellbeing strategies.

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