



How mindfulness can improve the way we work

Social psychologist and Harvard University Professor Ellen Langer says increased mindfulness can deliver measurable benefits.

Back in the day, the workplace tended to be a more structured environment. We worked set hours, followed set procedures and conformed to a set mindset.

But plenty has changed over the years. Modern 21st century workplaces are increasingly embracing flexible working hours, flexible procedures and more flexible mindsets.

And along with this has been the rise and rise of mindfulness—a movement that encourages us to think differently.

Mindfulness is often described as simply another form of meditation. But it's much more than that.

Mindfulness is the simple art of noticing new things. Paying attention. Never assuming.

Social psychologist and Harvard University Professor Ellen Langer has been studying mindfulness for more than 40 years.

Professor Langer says mindfulness is an active state of mind characterised by being:

- situated in the present
- sensitive to context and perspective
- guided (but not rigidly ruled) by rules and routine
- more engaged.

Her research shows increased mindfulness translates to measurable benefits for our psychological wellbeing, physical health and productivity.

When 1+1 can equal 3

It's all too easy to slip into mindlessness—the opposite of mindfulness. Mindlessness is grounded in accepting absolute truths.

Professor Langer says, “When you're asked a question to which you think you know the answer, there's probably another way to look at it.”

Does 1+1 always equal 2? In a rigid theoretical mathematical context, yes. In the real world, with all the real world's variables, not necessarily.

By being mindful, and uncertain, you question everything. And this can lead to meaningful change.

Professor Langer says, “Rather than the illusion of stability, exploit the power in uncertainty.”

With only subtle shifts in our thinking and expectations, we can begin to change the ingrained behaviour that saps health, competence, optimism and vitality from our lives.

Try again. Fail again. Fail better

The fear of making mistakes can be a roadblock to change. And failure in one thing can result in success in another. Professor Langer cites a famous example of a company turning a failed glue that didn't stick properly into the hugely successful concept of the post-it note.

Mindful optimism can be a more productive mindset than defensive pessimism, where you hope for the best but expect the worst. The alternative is to make a plan, and then get on with living—something Professor Langer says can help get us through the current COVID-19 crisis.

Mindfulness can have some startling benefits. Many of Professor Langer's studies focus on how changing mental perceptions can actually lead to improved physical outcomes.

Her famous Counterclockwise study showed the mind and body are more attuned than we might think. The researchers changed the external environment for a group of elderly men and turned the clock back 20 years.

The participants didn't simply emerge with a more youthful mindset, they actually rolled back the years in terms of their physical capabilities and even their appearance.

5 ways to create a more mindful workplace

Mindfulness doesn't only deliver personal benefits. It can also lead to better business outcomes. In a study of salespeople, participants who were encouraged to deviate from a set script and think about what they were doing ended up selling more magazines.

And mindfulness is contagious. In a collaborative workplace, there can be a knock-on effect. When you see someone else exhibiting mindful characteristics, you tend to increase your own mindfulness.

Here are a few tips from Professor Langer to create a more mindful workplace.

1. **Accept you don't always know the answer**
2. **See accidents or mistakes as possibilities**
3. **Recognise everyone has something useful to contribute**
4. **Encourage more from the people around you**
5. **Exploit the power of uncertainty.**

A workplace dominated by fixed mindsets can lead to problems as people become afraid a lack of knowledge will be discovered.

A workplace dominated by flexible mindsets can free people up to make meaningful change as they accept they don't necessarily have the best way of doing everything.

“Lack of expertise is what keeps us interested in what we're doing, and by extension, keeps us interesting to other people”, Professor Langer says.

“If we increase our mindfulness, we increase our effectiveness, health and wellbeing.”