

Staying well in a COVID-19 reality

Maintaining productivity
through meditation



Unprecedented challenges

In a matter of months, COVID-19 has drastically changed how businesses operate and individuals relate to their work. Front-line and essential workers continue to experience an unprecedented sense of health risk, and countless office employees have been adapting to the reality of working from home for the foreseeable future. Even those who are accustomed to working with mobile platforms, such as call-centre operators and freelancers, are finding that the nature of their work has become more technology-driven and intensified in many ways.

Virtual work is not a new concept, and many businesses and individuals have been operating through digital and mobile platforms for years. But social distancing measures have had a profound effect on job design, particularly for traditional knowledge-intensive workers. Over the past couple of months, we have seen thousands of office-based employees relocate their physical place of work and intensify how they use technology to carry out their jobs. From call-centres to mobile working to home office environments, the world of work has changed dramatically and become much more demanding on our visual and auditory senses.

At the same time, employees have also been forced to adapt their preconceived notions of work-life balance against the backdrop of family obligations, strict social distancing measures and the general uncertainty of what COVID-19 will mean going forward. Even those who have worked through digital platforms for many years may have struggled to set strict working hours, take adequate breaks and recognize the strain on their wellbeing. All of these elements have created the unique challenge of combining virtual working practices with newer ways to collaborate and interact with colleagues.

The wellness impact for businesses

While many traditionally mobile employees and knowledge-intensive workers may enjoy the autonomy and flexibility that comes from working virtually, employers should give special consideration to maintaining their mental health and wellbeing. Past and current experience suggests that the weight of this new reality is likely to contribute to feelings of exhaustion, stress, lack of motivation and anxiety. For all businesses, the negative link between these feelings and individual and team productivity levels should be clear — when employees do not feel at their best, they cannot give their best to the organization.



Relaxation techniques for coping and thriving

So what can employers do to encourage their employees to rise to these challenges and stimulate strong mental health in such a stressful time? As many health and medical studies have suggested, it is more important than ever to learn how to relate mindfully to stress and recognize when it is becoming too difficult to cope with. While not fully embraced in many workplace environments, various forms of meditation are highly effective tools in helping employees to thrive.

Meditation encompasses a number of related techniques — such as mindfulness, focused breathing, and yoga — aimed at calming a frenzied mind. It involves taking a mental break from all of the complex problems and stressors around you for even a brief amount of time, ultimately reenergizing you to face your new reality. Fortunately, an individual does not need to be a Buddhist monk to practice these techniques!

As briefly described, these techniques are simple to understand and use, and they can yield immediate benefits:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully focused on the “present moment” without dwelling on the past or anticipating the future. It requires you to pause any activity, bring your attention to what’s going on around you and recognize your feelings without reacting to them. Allowing yourself to objectively acknowledge stressors and challenges while keeping emotions under control is an excellent first step to developing coping strategies. While it can be particularly difficult to disconnect from everything happening around us, developing a mindful approach to our new reality can happen at your own pace. There is no single way to be mindful! For example, some people practice mindfulness first thing in the morning, while others prefer to utilize this tool as a break during the day.





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Breathing exercises

A very useful mindfulness technique for people at all levels is to concentrate on a range of focused breaths. For example, you can try the following simple exercise at any time. Start by sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and taking several deep breaths. Focus on each breath as you inhale and exhale. Then begin to notice other sensations, such as sounds, scents and the temperature around you. As thoughts and emotions come to mind, either of work calling for your attention or chores waiting to be done, try to simply acknowledge them without attributing any judgment, negativity or extra focus to them. If you find yourself becoming distracted, bring your focus back to your breath.

Yoga

Yoga is another excellent way to practice meditation and support strong mental health. It can be an intimidating activity for some. But by respecting your own limits — whether that means doing simple stretches or more advanced yoga poses like wrapping your legs around your head — everyone can benefit. Yoga also involves focusing on your breath as you move and stretch, strengthening your ability to be present and disconnect from stressors in your daily life. Taking a break to physically separate from your workstation, get some physical exercise and experience some movement, even for a few minutes, can make all the difference in your motivation and productivity for the rest of your day.

Resources

To encourage and guide employees in embracing some of these simple relaxation techniques, a number of online resources are available. In acknowledgment of this exceptionally stressful time, many resource providers have now made them free and widely accessible!

Headspace and *Calm* are two well-reputed apps offering free, guided mindfulness sessions and exercises in as little as 10 minutes. Each app is also offering additional free resources — like blogs, articles and videos — during the COVID-19 crisis.

There are countless resources and videos available online for people of all levels looking to integrate more yoga into their routine. DoYogaWithMe, a great website with both free and subscription-based videos, is currently offering new members unlimited access to all of its content. The site also includes yoga stretches for kids, a valuable resource for parents balancing work with family life.

Integrating meditation into a workplace environment

The economy is beginning to reopen, and preventative and social distancing measures are being softened. But COVID-19 will continue to profoundly impact front-line employees across multiple sectors and the structure and nature of work in knowledge-intensive sectors. Employers will need to continue thinking through how the power and positive impact of wellness techniques — like meditation — can be woven into the daily cycle and pace of work processes and performance expectations. This becomes even more challenging when considering highly structured, process-based jobs that may not offer a high degree of autonomy.

Allowing employees to make time for meditation in their daily work schedules should be possible and encouraged. Employers can share resources such as those suggested in this article, establish a set time of day for employees to practice mindfulness, and even introduce a policy that allows employees the opportunity to disconnect outside of allocated breaks. Even 10 minutes a day can have a material positive impact on both physical and mental health. Stress related to COVID-19 will undeniably affect individual and team productivity in the months — perhaps even years — to come. It is time to recognize the value of wellness tools in combating this challenge and empower employees to adapt.



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