



Stress Management and Mindfulness in the Workplace

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Executive Summary

Mindfulness is the art of living in the moment. The idea dates back millennia, but only recently has it been promoted as a valuable workplace practice.

Why?

Some observers view it as a possible treatment for a number of workplace ills, ranging from rising stress levels to declining job satisfaction to shortages of excellent leaders. Such beliefs partly stem from scientific reports indicating that mindfulness practices reduce stress and enhance concentration.

Despite such beliefs, however, there have been few studies of workplace mindfulness practices or their effectiveness.

To help fill this gap in the research, the American Management Association conducted a major survey in association with the Business Research Consortium (see sidebar). Following are highlights from the study:

About half of respondents' firms are leveraging mindfulness as a part of their training and/or management practices. That is, 49% of their organizations provide mindfulness-related training or resources to some degree, and about one-quarter do so to at least a moderate degree.

Mindfulness practices are seen as beneficial. Among respondents from the organizations that leverage mindfulness practices, about 85% reported that mindfulness training and/or resources are at least somewhat beneficial to their organizations, and nearly two fifths viewed them as "very beneficial."

Workplace stress is a major problem in today's organizations. Among all the issues explored in the study, the problem of high stress levels ranked highest. Well over half of respondents said their organizations suffered from above-average stress levels, while just 8% reported less-than-average amounts of worker stress.



About This Study

The findings in this report originate from the American Management Association's Mindfulness Survey, conducted in collaboration with the Business Research Consortium (BRC) in late 2014. BRC provides research expertise to professional firms and vendors. Gathering information from 991 respondents, most of them residing in the United States, the survey asked participants about whether their organizations were using or supporting mindfulness practices and, if so, how this was being done. It also asked a series of questions about the state of their organizations in terms of workforce-related issues such as engagement and stress, as well as leadership issues such as emotional intelligence and decision-making abilities.

Respondents who practice mindfulness believe the top benefits are in the areas of stress reduction and increased productivity. Among those who engage in off-of-the-job mindfulness practices, 85% report that mindfulness helps them control stress at work, and 82% say it makes them more productive.

Few leaders are good at managing employee stress. Only about one-quarter of respondents said their leaders were above average in this area. According to respondents, many leaders are also lacking in the areas of emotional intelligence and employee engagement.

There are five key associations between mindfulness and organizational performance. The study asked about various facets of organizational and leadership performance and then correlated those facets with the degree to which mindfulness practices were used. The strongest positive relationships between mindfulness are:

- Employee engagement
- Leaders' ability to engage employees
- Leaders' emotional intelligence
- Leaders' ability to manage stress
- An averaged index of multiple leadership abilities

No single mindfulness practice dominates in today's organizations. This may speak to the variety of such practices or to fact that, as with any relatively new practice, organizations are still experimenting with which ones best fit their needs.

Mindfulness practices are usually voluntary. Most respondents whose organizations support mindfulness training said that participation is voluntary (67%). Just 4% said it was mandatory.

Bottom Line: There is a widespread impression among study participants that mindfulness practices can have a beneficial impact on their organizations. Although correlation is not causation, a statistical investigation lends support to the idea that mindfulness practices are positively related to various other performance indicators, such as employee engagement and leadership ability.

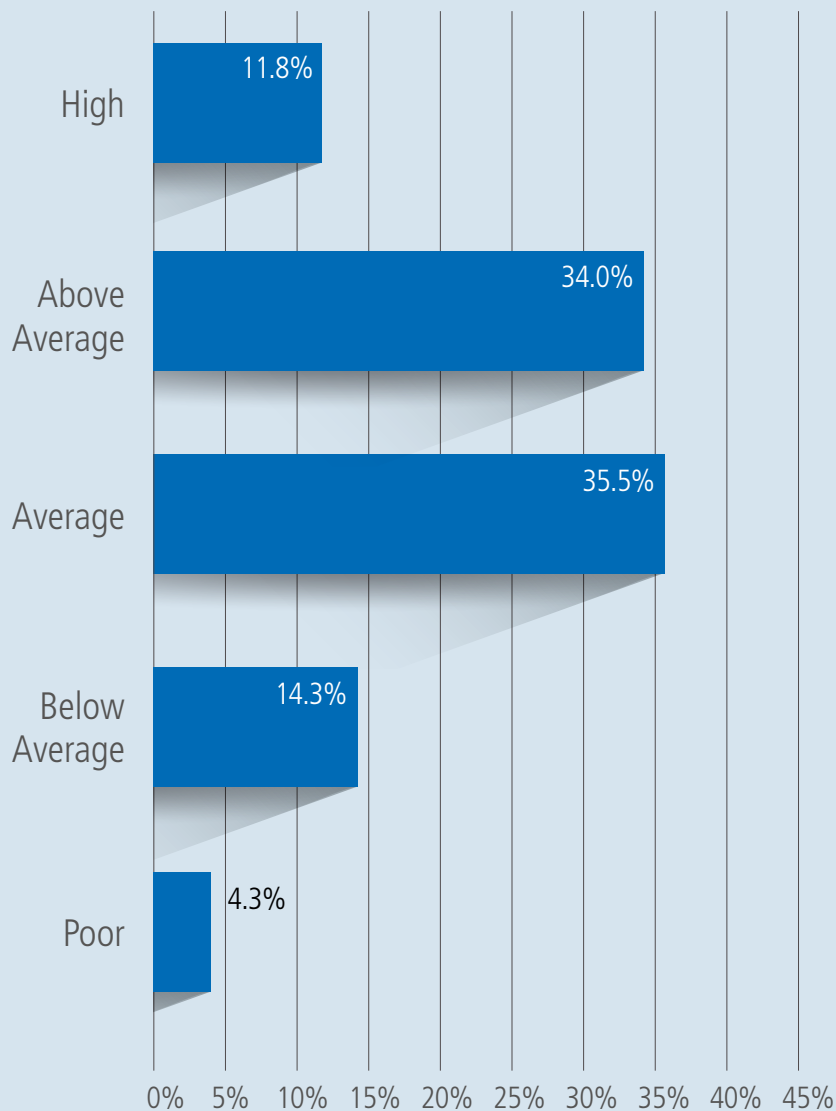
There is a widespread impression among study participants that mindfulness practices can have a beneficial impact on their organizations

Key Workforce Management Issues

To gain a better understanding of the management challenges facing U.S. organizations, the study asked about employee engagement, worker stress levels, absenteeism, staff turnover, interpersonal conflicts, and decision-making.

Figure 1
Attaining High Levels of Employee Engagement Remains
a Challenge in Many U.S. Organizations

Employee Engagement in Participating Organizations



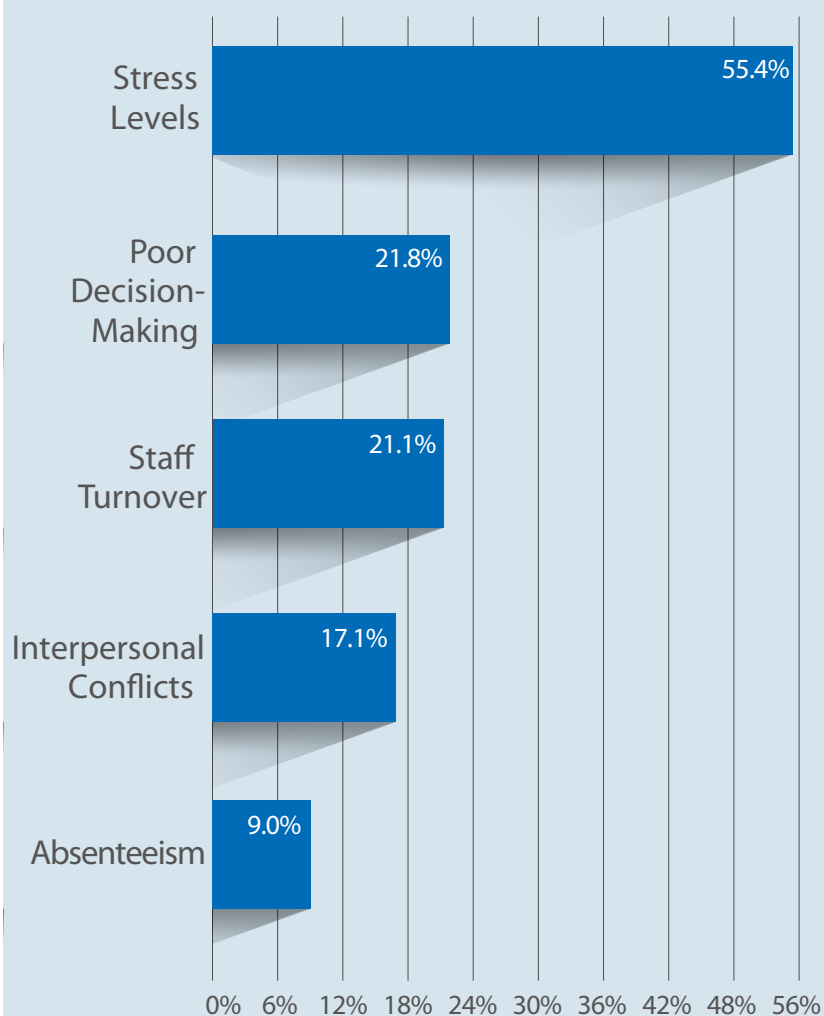
Finding 1: For Many, Employee Engagement Is Mediocre or Worse

Figure 1 illustrates that, according to respondents, organizations were split between those that reported higher-than-average employee engagement (46%) and those who said employee engagement was average or lower (54%). Considerably more respondents reported above-average engagement than below-average engagement.

Figure 2

High Stress Has Become a Significant Problem in U.S. Organizations, Outranking Other Workforce Management Issues

Percent of Organizations That Experience the Following Issues to an Above Average or Very High Degree



Finding 2: High Stress Is a Major Challenge

Among all the workforce-related issues we explored, the problem of high stress levels ranked highest. Fully 55% of respondents indicated that their organizations suffered from an above average or very high degree of employee stress. In contrast, only about 8% reported their organizations had less-than-average amounts of employee stress.

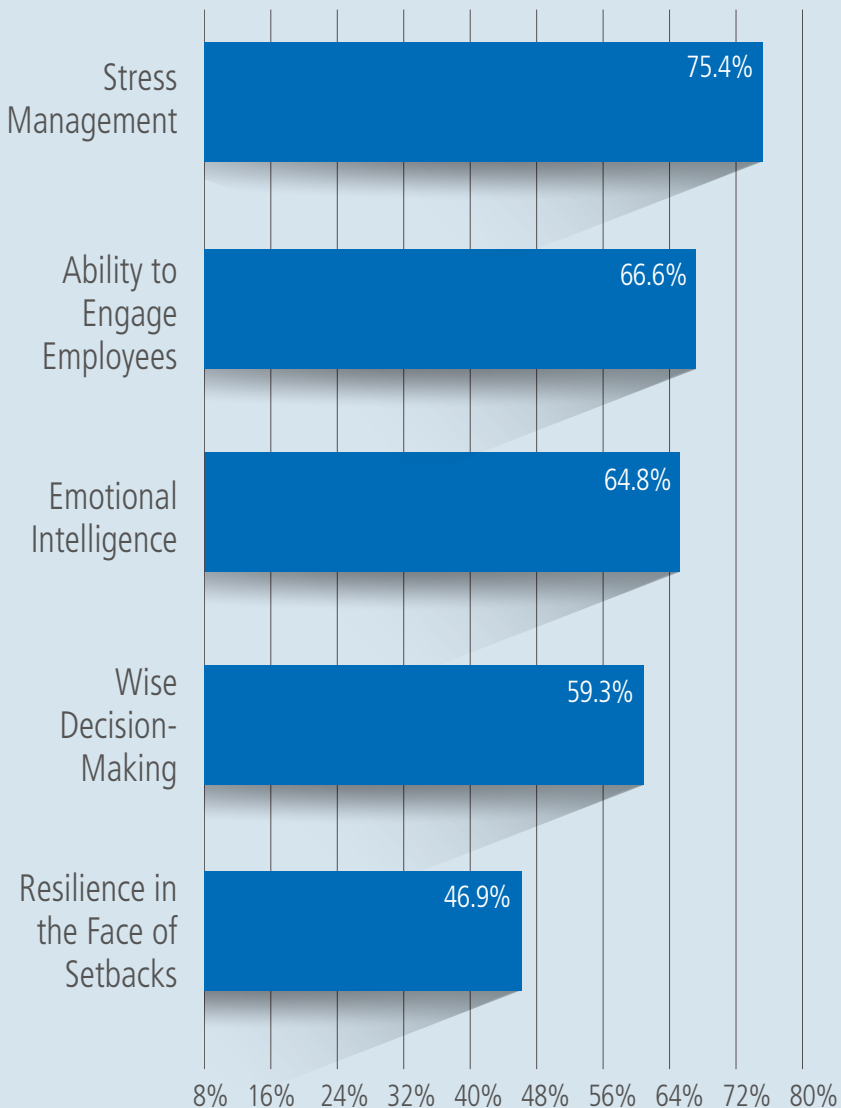
Although employee stress was the highest ranking problem, it was not the only one. More than one-fifth of the respondents indicated their organizations showed unusually high degrees of poor decision-making and worker turnover. Interpersonal conflicts were also a problem in many companies.

All in all, the typical respondent's organization exhibits high levels of employee stress, punctuated by significant levels of poor decision-making and interpersonal conflicts. Not only does this suggest that such operational problems are relatively common, it indicates that many respondents are working in environments that are potentially detrimental to employee health.

Figure 3

The Most Significant Leadership Deficits Are In the Areas of Stress Management, Ability to Engage, and Emotional Intelligence

Percent of Respondents Whose Leaders Demonstrate These Qualities to an Average, Below Average, and Very Low Average Degree



Finding 3: There Are Three Key Leadership Deficits

This study also examined leadership, asking respondents to rate the degree to which leaders in their organizations demonstrated five qualities:

- Emotional intelligence
- Wise decision-making
- Ability to engage employees
- Resilience in the face of setbacks
- Stress management

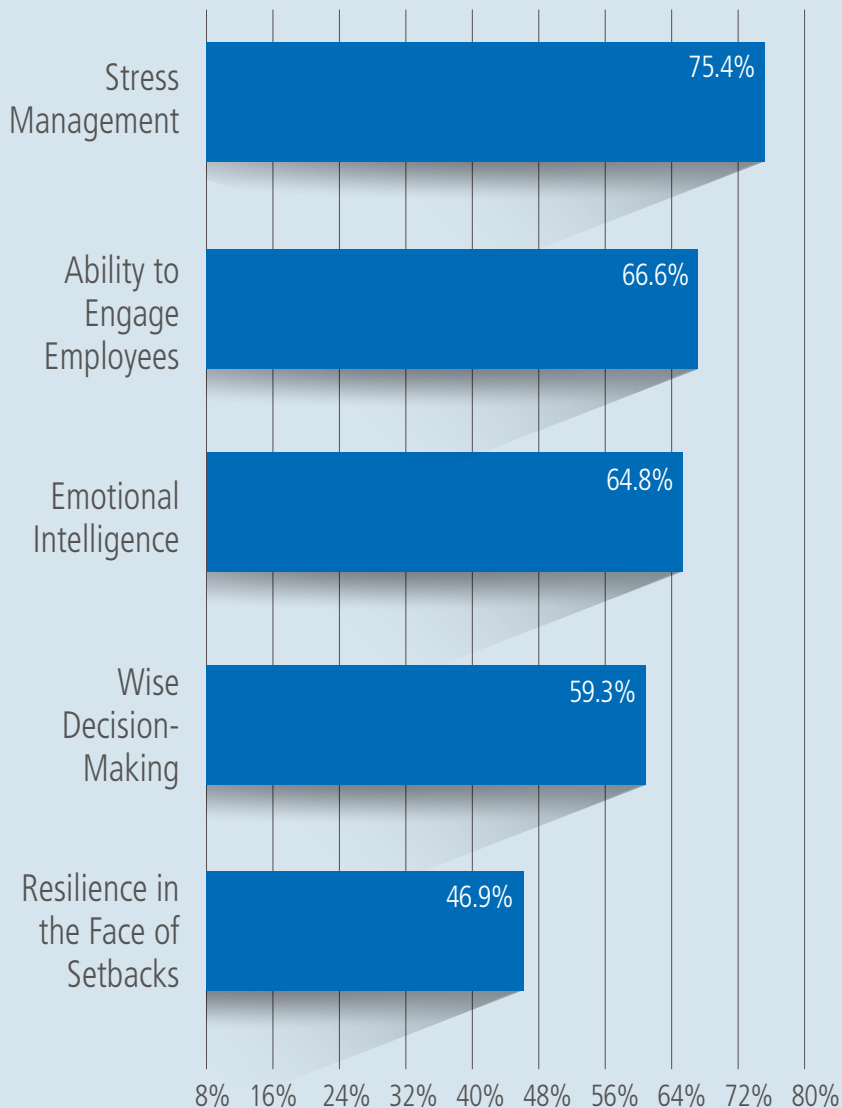
Of all the leadership qualities we examined, stress management received the lowest scores. Only about one-quarter of respondents said their leaders were above average in this area, whereas three quarters said they were average or worse. These findings are consistent with the responses to the previous question about organizational problems (see Figure 2), which found high employee stress levels are common.

Stress is a major issue and many leaders are not effectively addressing it. This finding, above all others, indicates that organizations could benefit from mindfulness programs.

Figure 3

The Most Significant Leadership Deficits Are In the Areas of Stress Management, Ability to Engage, and Emotional Intelligence

Percent of Respondents Whose Leaders Demonstrate These Qualities to an Average, Below Average, and Very Low Average Degree



(Finding 3 continued)

Perhaps related to these poor stress-management skills are concerns about emotional intelligence and employee engagement. Only about 34.3% of participants rated their leaders as above average in these two areas.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) can be defined as a person's ability to correctly assess his or her own emotions and the emotions of others and to use such information to engage in appropriate behaviors. Leaders who are less emotionally intelligent are probably less capable of managing their own or their subordinates' stress levels well.

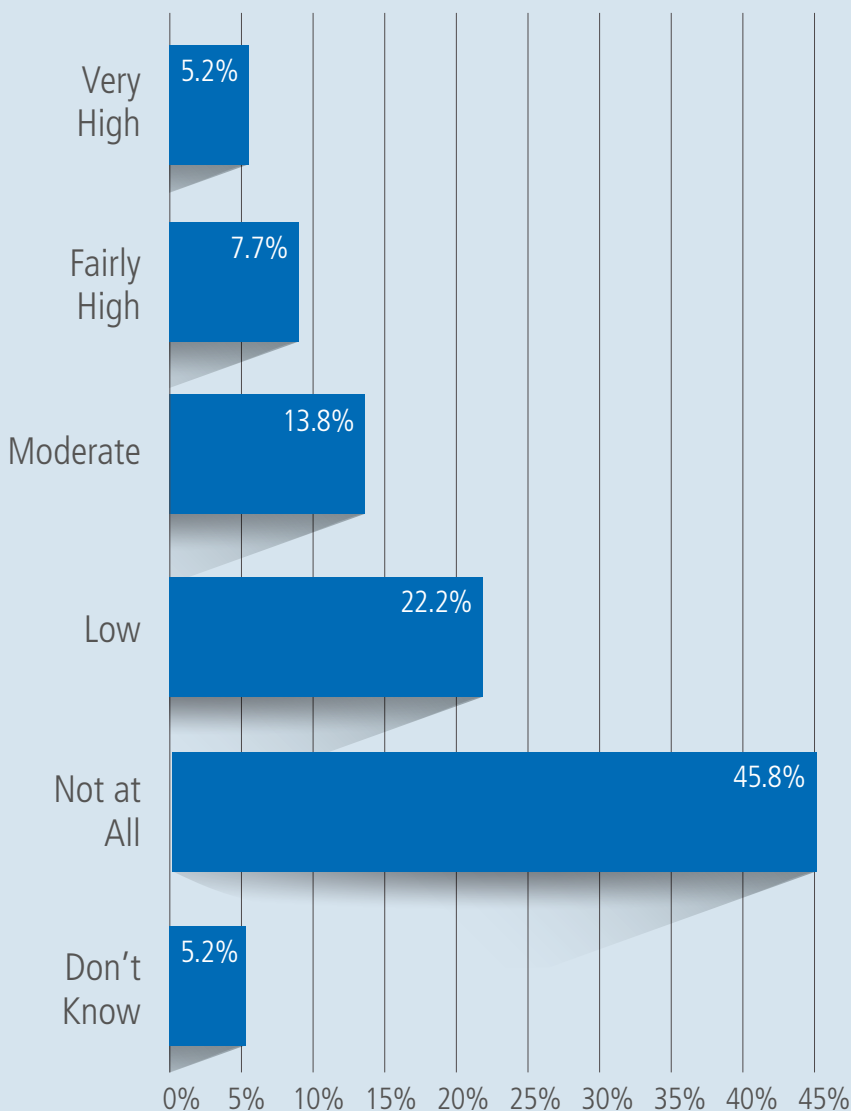
Similarly, leaders who lack a high degree of EI may well have a more difficult time engaging employees. After all, employees suffering from high levels of workplace stress are not likely to feel engaged in their work. Rather, they are likely to resent leaders for unrealistic and stress-inducing workloads.

The State of Mindfulness Practices in Today's Organizations

Figure 4

Nearly Half of Organizations Are Leveraging Mindfulness Practices, Few Are Doing So to a High Degree

Organizations Providing Training or Other Resources for Mindfulness Practices



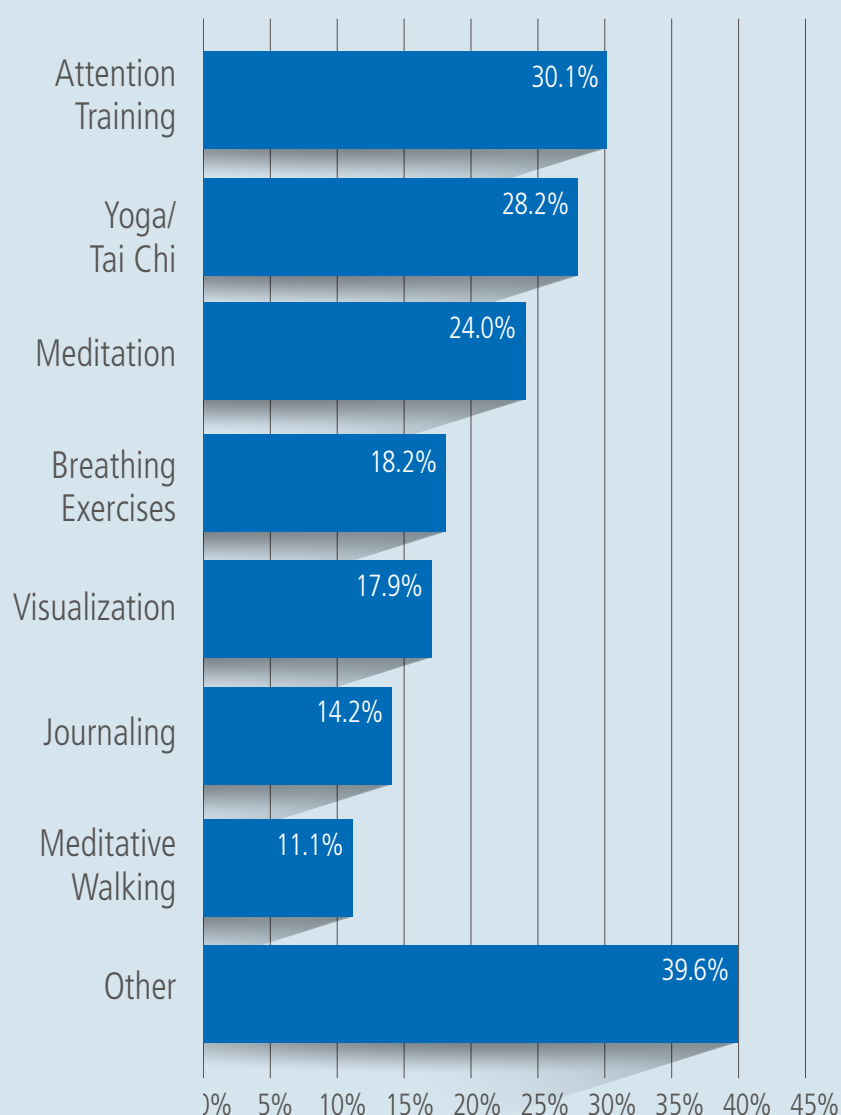
Finding 4: Nearly Half of Respondents' Firms Leverage Mindfulness

So, given the high stress of today's workplace, what proportion of organizations have introduced mindfulness training or otherwise provided resources to mindfulness practices? Among our respondents, nearly half stated that they do this to some degree. But only about one-quarter of participants say their organizations provide training or resources in mindfulness to at least a moderate degree, and just 13% said their organizations do so to a very or fairly high degree.

Figure 5

Among Organizations That Leverage Mindfulness, the Most Commonly Used Are Attention-Training Exercises and Yoga/Tai Chi

Percent of Respondents Whose Organizations Use These Types of Practices



Finding 5: The Most Commonly-Used Practices Involve Attention-Training

Mindfulness practices can take many forms, so the survey asked participants about their organization's practices. The study found that no single practice dominates, which may speak to the variety of mindfulness-related practices or to the fact that, as with any relatively new practice, organizations are still experimenting with which ones best fit their needs.

About 30% said their organizations make "Attention-training exercises" available, but this is a catch-all category that potentially includes any or all of the other listed practices. Among the more well-defined practices, the most commonly provided or supported one was "Yoga or Tai Chi," with over one-quarter (28%) of participants choosing it. It was followed by "Meditation," at 24%.

In 2013, it was reported that 15 million people regularly participated in yoga in the U.S., and over \$27 billion was spent on yoga products. Some sources report that there are as many as 300 million yoga practitioners worldwide. As for tai chi, a National Health Interview Survey reported that about 2.5 million individuals practice it in the U.S., and another half million perform its close cousin qigong. One source reports that, around the world, nearly 250 million people practice tai chi. Therefore, many organizations have little problem finding trainers capable of teaching these mindfulness-related practices.

Defining Common Mindfulness Practices

Yoga: A system of exercises, many of which involve stretching into poses and holding them for a time. The goal is to enhance well-being while attaining greater control over body and mind. Although originating in India as part of religious traditions, a nonreligious form of the discipline was popularized in the U.S. and elsewhere in the 20th century.

Tai chi: Although a martial arts discipline originating in China, it is generally viewed as a form of mindful exercise. Practitioners perform a series of movements known as kata, often at a slow and controlled pace.

Meditation: An umbrella term that generally refers to practices designed to help people regulate their attention from moment to moment. So-called mindfulness meditation is a nonsectarian-based form with roots in Western research on stress and other conditions. It is designed to develop the skill of paying attention to internal and external experiences with acceptance, patience, and compassion.

Visualization: Often used in tandem with meditation, it generally involves envisioning images and experiences to help enhance relaxation or attention on passing thoughts.

Breathing exercises: Focusing on breathing is a common way of centering a person's attention during meditation, but breathing exercises can also be used to increase relaxation and reduce stress hormones.

Journaling: Involves keeping a journal that can be used to record sensations, thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The goal is to make the practitioner more aware of what is currently happening in his or her mind.

Meditative walking: A method in which practitioners focus on their immediate experiences as they walk. The goal is to focus awareness on the experience of walking. It can be easier for people to focus on their bodies while walking as opposed to sitting.

Attention training: An umbrella term for any type of training designed to help people concentrate their attention on something. Practices range from meditation to specific games or tasks in which players are required to intently focus on something in order to progress.



Organizations were not as likely to provide visualization, journaling, and meditative walking practices, but we must note that most of the mindfulness practices listed in the survey question could be considered variations on the theme of meditation. Breathing exercises are generally associated with meditation, and yoga is a discipline that includes breath control and meditation as well as various body postures. Therefore, the lines between each mindfulness method are often blurred.

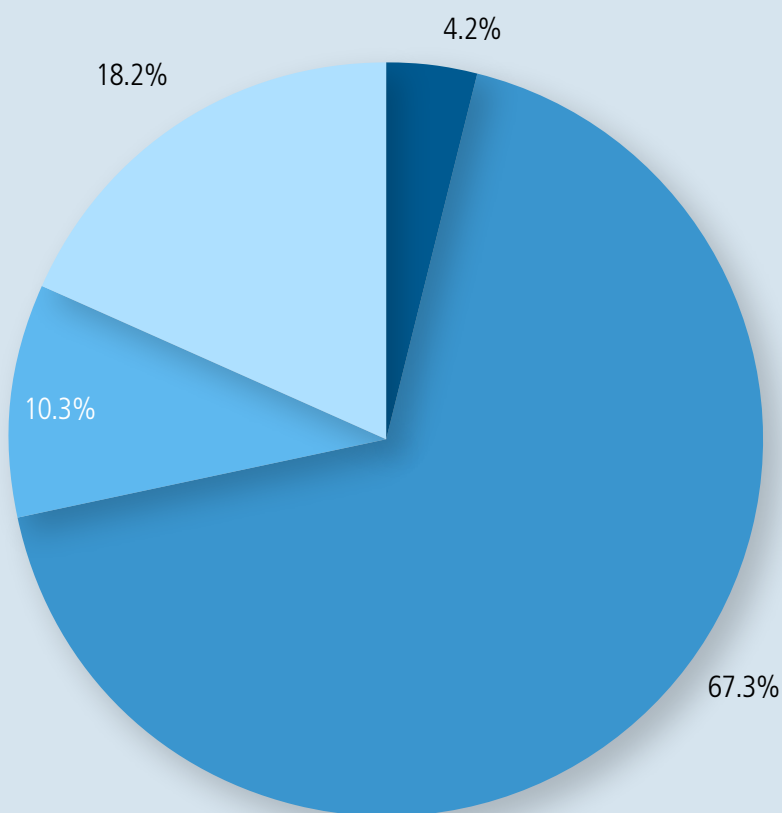
In addition to asking respondents about specific mindfulness-enhancing practices, we also asked them to write in other practices that were not listed. A number of the write-ins were not what are generally considered related to mindfulness. Among them were Pilates, gym workouts, running events, and job effectiveness training. Items that seemed more directly related to mindfulness included speakers on the subject, lunch events during which related books are discussed, websites that give people guidance in mindfulness practices, wellness programs, and mindfulness training specifically geared to higher level managers.

On Delivering Mindfulness Training

Figure 6

The Majority of Mindfulness Programs Are Those That Employees Engage In Voluntarily

Type of Participation in Respondent Organizations



4.2% Mandatory
67.3% Voluntary
10.3% It Depends
18.2% Don't Know

Finding 6: Voluntary Participation Is Common

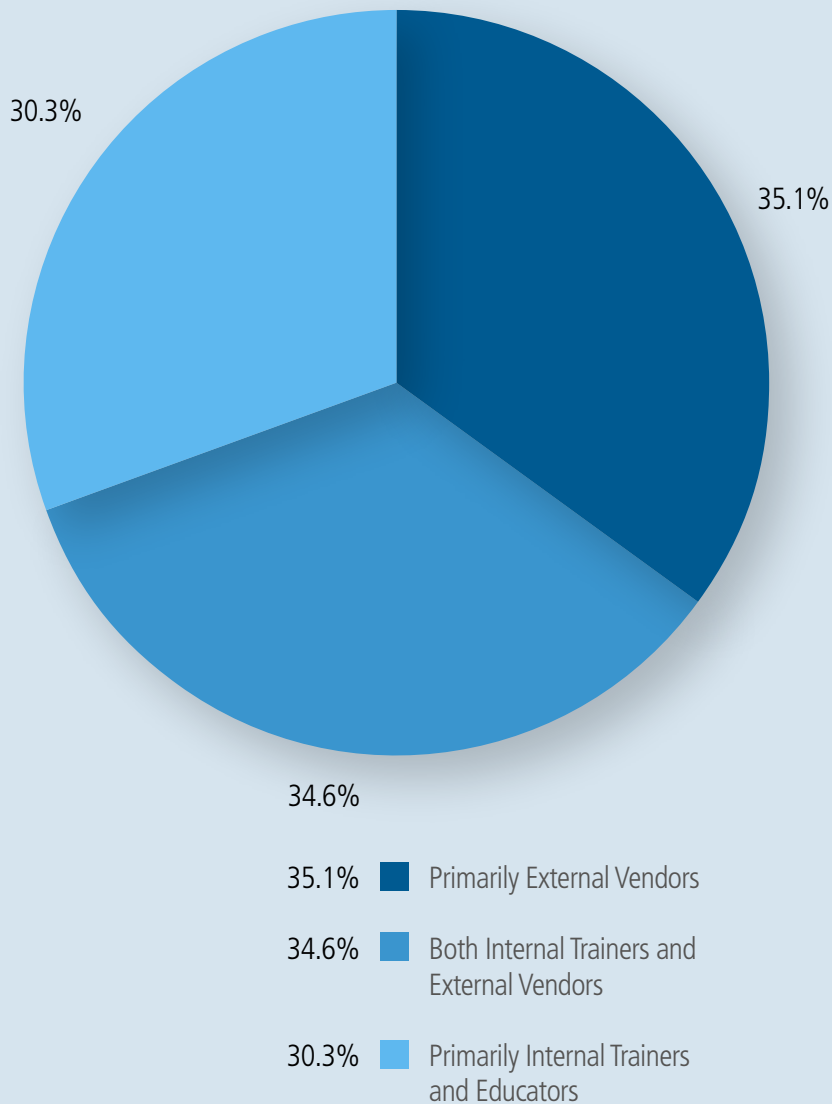
Most respondents whose organizations support mindfulness training said that participation is voluntary (67%). Just 4% said it was mandatory. The rest either said they didn't know (18%) or that "it depends" (10%). We added "it depends" to possible responses because, while we expected that most programs in any given organization would be voluntary, some might be part of mandatory development or employee assistance programs.

Organizations might find that mandating mindfulness training is self-defeating. An employee who resents being asked to spend time on such training -- which could be viewed as unconnected to work skills -- is unlikely to benefit from it. And, because some techniques have, at least in terms of their origins, a religious or spiritual connotation, other human resource-related issues could arise.

Figure 7

There Is No Standard Way to Deliver Such Training

How Respondents' Organization Provided Employees Access to Mindfulness-Related Ideas, Interventions, and/or Training



Finding 7: Delivery Is Not Yet Standardized

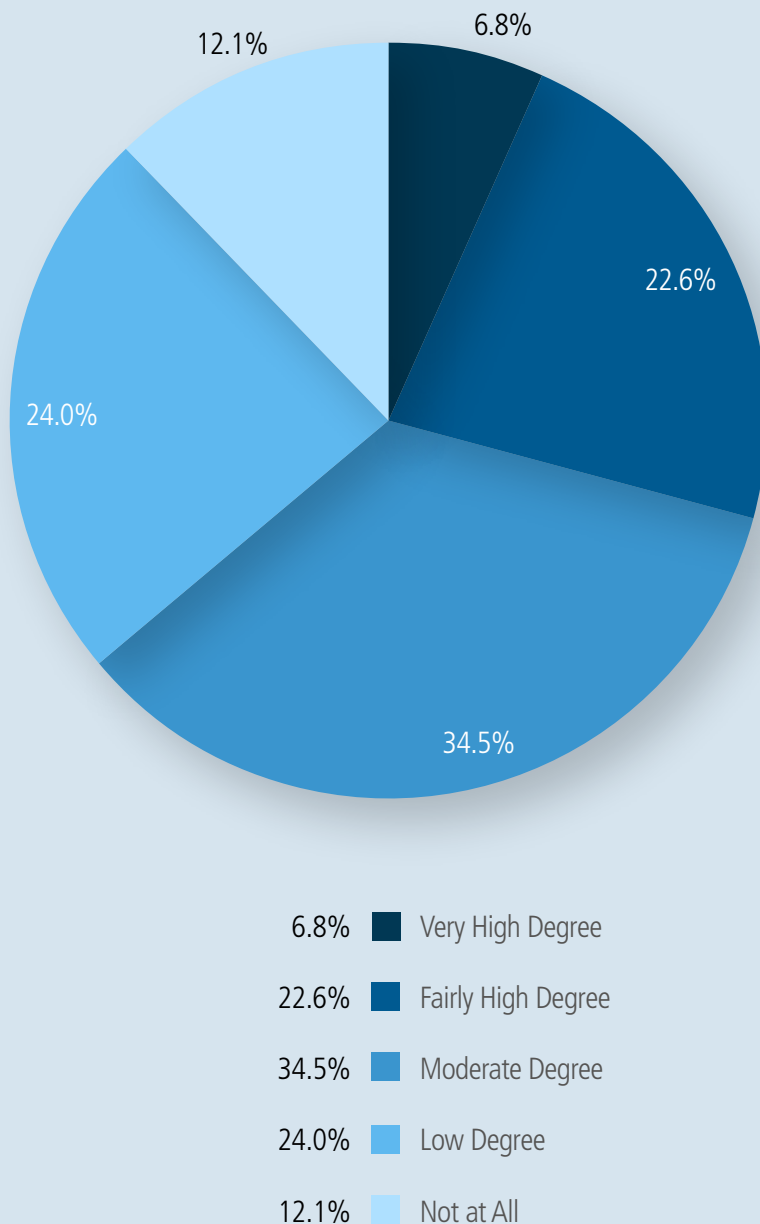
There is no obvious “right way” of giving employees access to mindfulness-related workshops, presentations, and/or training (see Figure 7). Among the participants whose organizations do this, about one-third primarily used internal trainers, another third mainly used external vendors, and the remaining third used both.

The lack of a common practice in this area is another indicator that mindfulness-related training in the workplace is still in the early stages. We expect that, over time, one of these three methods of providing access will become more common than the others.

Figure 8

The Large Majority of Respondents to This Study Engage In Mindfulness Practices Outside the Workplace

Degree to Which Participants Engage in Mindfulness Practices Outside of Work



Finding 8: Most Respondents Practice Mindfulness

The study found that a surprisingly high number of respondents (88%) engage in mindfulness practices outside of work (see Figure 8). Nearly 30% report that they practice mindfulness to a high or a very high degree. If we include those who engage in mindfulness to a moderate degree, then almost 65% practice with some regularity and focus.

This suggests there was a significant degree of self-selection among those who decided to respond to this survey. It is important to keep this factor in mind when interpreting the other results of the study. Many of the respondents may have come to it with a pre-established interest in mindfulness and a presumed belief in its efficacy.

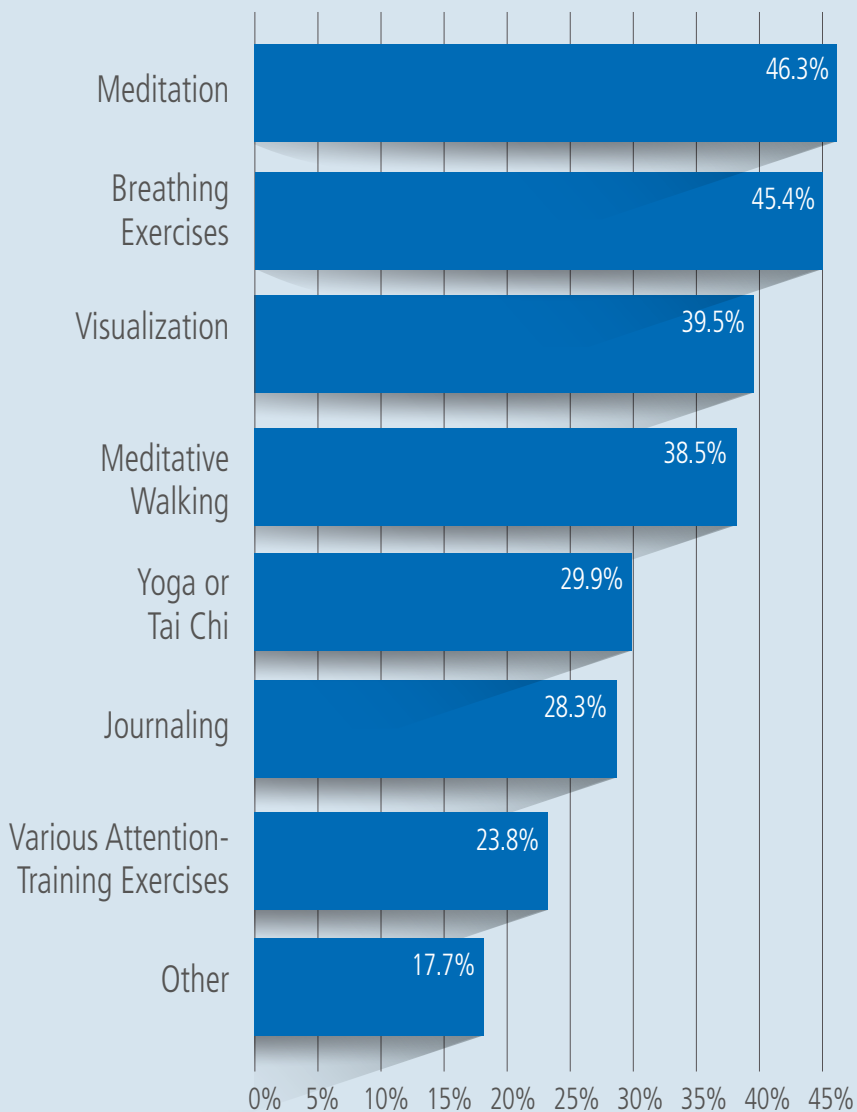
Another interpretation of the data is that many respondents are employed in stressful work environments and so are more likely to adopt mindfulness practices in their personal lives. In this study, demographic and organizational performance questions indicate that many participants are employed in global, high-performing organizations that presumably demand long hours and accurate, high-quality work.

Types of Practices Individuals Adopt

Figure 9

Meditation Is the Most Commonly Used Mindfulness Practice Among Individuals Who Pursue Such Activities in Their Personal Lives

Degree to Which Individuals Pursue These Mindfulness Practice Outside of Work



Finding 9: Meditation and Breathing Exercises Are Key

When engaging in mindfulness practices outside of the workplace, respondents were most likely to practice "Meditation" or "Breathing exercises." By comparison, the most commonly provided or supported practices in the workplace were "Attention-training exercises" and "Yoga or Tai Chi."

Why the difference? Yoga and tai chi are types of exercise as well as forms of moving meditation. They are often performed in group settings under the supervision of skilled instructors. Instructors are often paid and so these tend to be services with a cost. It is possible that employers view such supervised instruction as preferable for a number of reasons:

- Because they are exercises, yoga and tai chi fall more clearly into the category of employee wellness programs
- Because there are associated instructors, yoga and tai chi also fall more clearly into the category of training and development
- Because they are group activities, yoga and tai chi can bring employees together, helping to encourage a sense of teamwork and cohesiveness
- Because they are paid-for activities, yoga and tai chi work better as employee perks with definite value

In contrast, meditation and breathing exercise are often something that, once learned, can be done by individuals in solitude. Unless they are part of a retreat, there are no fees associated with these activities. Therefore, they may be more attractive to individuals pursuing mindfulness on their own time.

This is not to say that individuals are avoiding the other practices. As Figure 9 illustrates, visualization and meditative walking were the third and fourth most pursued practices. In addition to the items appearing in the graph, respondents were also asked about what other practices they engage in. The most often cited response was that they practiced prayer. Most of the write-in choices demonstrate a working knowledge of what mindfulness is and the many forms it has.

The Impact of Mindfulness Practices

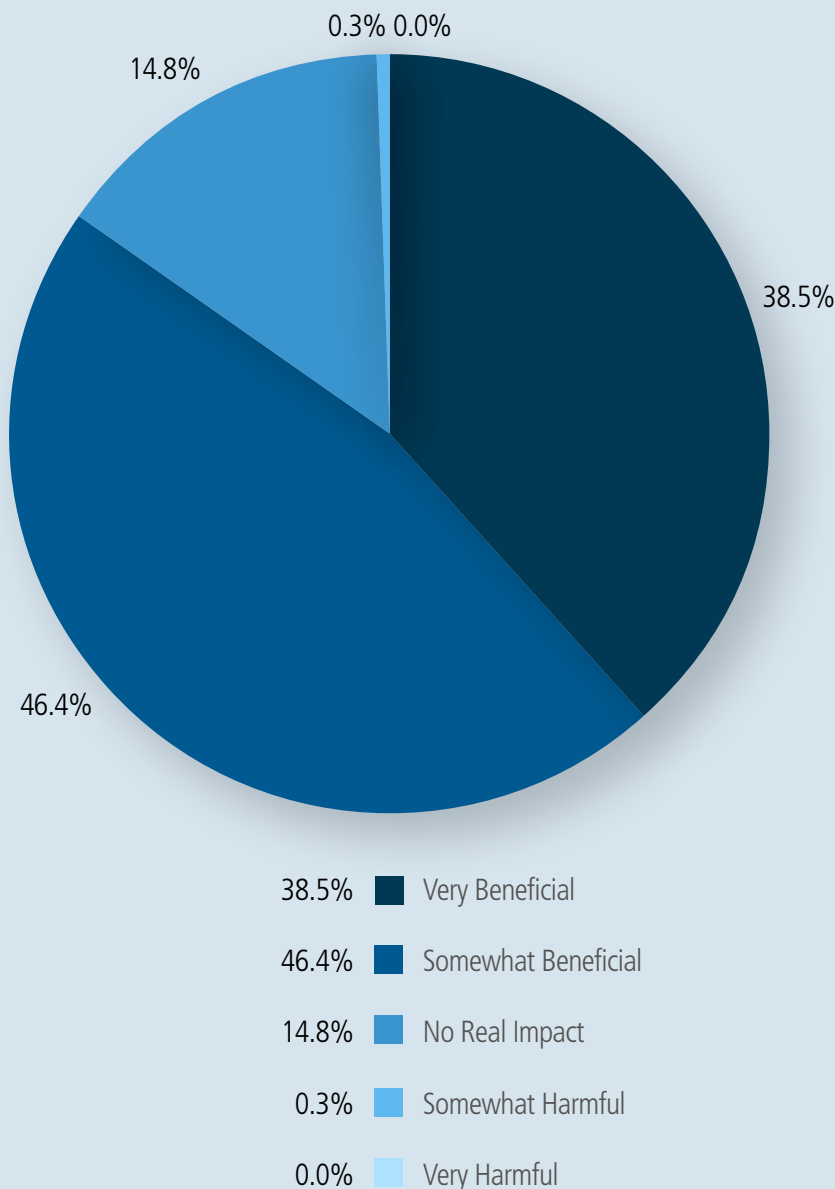
Among the key questions this study was designed to address is, “What’s the impact of mindfulness practices on the workplace?” We examined this question on four levels:

- 1) Perceived impact of mindfulness practices on organizations that use them.
- 2) Perceived potential impact of mindfulness on organizations that do not use them.
- 3) Perceived impact of mindfulness practices on individual employees.
- 4) Statistical correlations between the use of mindfulness practices and other factors related to organizational or leadership performance.

Figure 10

Most Respondents in Organizations with Mindfulness Practices View Them as Being Beneficial to the Organization

Impact of Mindfulness Training or Resources on Your Organization



Finding 10: Most Respondents See Positive Organizational Impacts

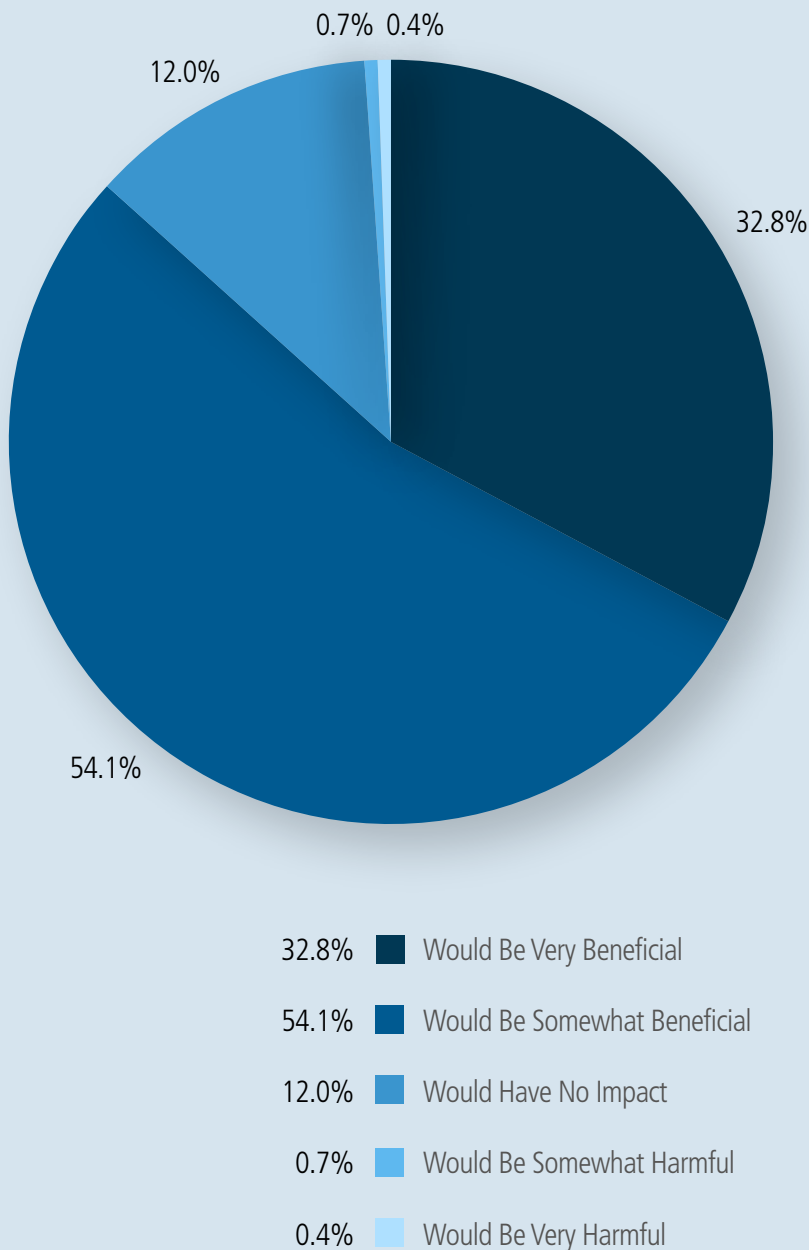
Respondents from the organizations that utilize mindfulness practices hold high opinions of their utility. In fact, about 85% of respondents reported that mindfulness training and/or resources are at least somewhat beneficial to their organizations, and nearly two fifths viewed them as “very beneficial.”

This is not a surprise in itself. Organizations that invest in such programs are likely to think they derive some benefit from them. Moreover, as noted in the previous section, these respondents may be somewhat predisposed to view mindfulness practices as worthwhile.

Figure 11

Most Respondents in Organizations That Do Not Support Mindfulness Practices Predict They Would Be Beneficial

How Would Mindfulness Initiatives / Interventions Affect Your Organization?



Finding 11: Most Individuals Say They Experience Work Benefits

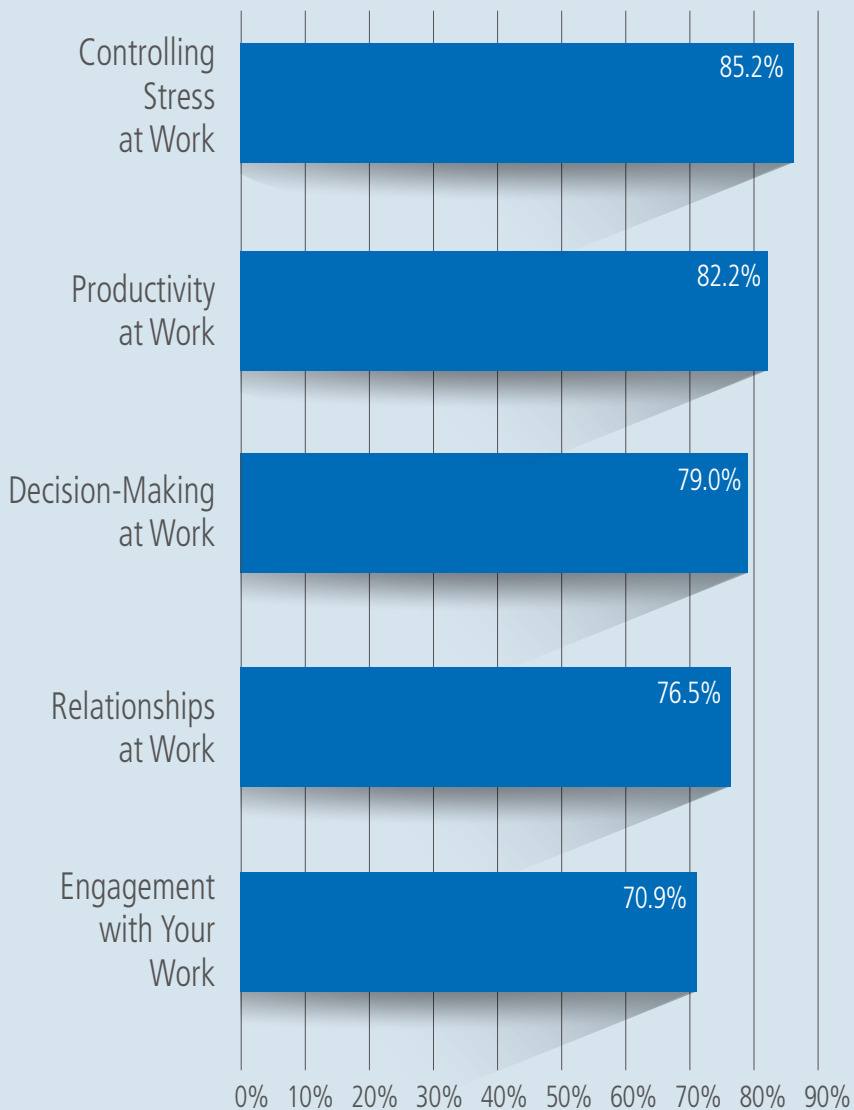
We found it interesting that optimism about workplace-based mindfulness practices extends to those whose companies do not yet support it. That is, we asked respondents from organizations that do NOT provide training and/or resources for mindfulness about how beneficial they expect mindfulness practices would be. Nearly as many of these participants (33%) estimated such training would be “very beneficial” as those from organizations that actually provide such training (39%). Another 54% estimated it would be “somewhat beneficial.”

Although, as we have discussed, these respondents may be somewhat predisposed toward mindfulness, these findings nonetheless suggest that there is a certain amount of pent-up demand for such practices in today’s workplaces. Of course, it is possible this is just temporary enthusiasm for a concept that is popular at the moment, and that enthusiasm may wane in another few years. On the other hand, if organizations can find ways of cost-effectively providing mindfulness training/resources, then there might well be a pool of interested employees who would take advantage of them. This leads us to believe that a growing proportion of organizations will adopt mindfulness practices in coming years.

Figure 12

Most Respondents Who Engage in Off-the-Job Mindfulness Practices Believe They Have an Impact at Work, Especially in the Areas of Productivity and Stress Control

Percent Saying Mindfulness Has a Somewhat or Very Beneficial Impact on These Features of Their Work Life



Finding 12: Five Key Statistical Relationships Emerge

The perceived impact of mindfulness practice on workplace performance is strongly positive. Respondents report that mindfulness helps them control stress at work (85%), be more productive (82%), make better decisions (79%), have better work relationships (76%), and be more engaged (71%). Although there is a subjective element to these findings, they would likely be of interest to most executive teams.

Having discovered that most respondents believed mindfulness practices benefit their organizations as well as their own work performance, we set out to see if we could discover statistical correlations between mindfulness practices and other organizational factors.

The analyses found that the degree to which respondents reported that their organizations provide training and/or resources for mindfulness practices is positively correlated with five factors. That is, as one factor rises or falls, the other factors are significantly more likely to rise or fall.

Statistical Approach

The data in this study was analyzed using a variety of statistical methods, most of them seeking meaningful relationships between the degree to which organizations utilize mindfulness practices and other factors. To find those relationships, we used a combination of correlations, multiple regressions, and Chi-square tests.

Although we discovered many relationships that were statistically significant, only a handful stood out as having relationships strong enough to warrant reporting. The accompanying data is reported in terms of Spearman's correlation coefficient numbers, followed by p-values. The former indicates the strength of the relationship and the latter signifies that the relationship between them is not merely coincidental.

- Employee engagement: Respondents who said employees were more engaged in their organizations were also significantly more likely to say their organizations provided some type of training and/or resources for mindfulness practices. (Spearman's $\rho=0.31$, $p\text{-value} < 2.2e-16$)
- Leaders' emotional intelligence: Respondents who gave their leaders higher marks in terms of their emotional intelligence were also more likely to say their organizations provide some type of training and/or resources for mindfulness practices.
- Leaders' ability to engage employees: Respondents who said their organizational leaders were better at engaging employees were also more likely to say their organizations provide some type of training and/or resources for mindfulness practices.
- Leaders' ability to manage stress: The ambiguity of the phrasing may have influenced the findings, since it is not perfectly clear if leaders are managing their own or others' stress levels. However, it is likely respondents were indicating their leaders were better at managing the stress of employees if their organizations provided some type of training and/or resources for mindfulness practices.
- The averaged index of multiple leadership abilities: We created an index by averaging the scores respondents gave their leaders in terms of their abilities in the areas of emotional intelligence, decision-making, engagement, resilience, and stress management. The higher the overall score, the more likely respondents were to say their organizations provide some type of training and/or resources for mindfulness practices.

Correlation is not causation, so it is impossible to know from these data whether mindfulness training is helping to drive such outcomes or whether organizations with such characteristics (e.g., better employee engagement and better leadership) are simply more likely to be on the cutting edge of utilizing mindfulness practices.

We found it interesting that there were multiple correlations between mindfulness practices and leadership performance. It is possible that leaders who adopt and implement practices related to mindfulness are viewed as more caring than other leaders, thereby enhancing their reputations as emotionally intelligent people capable of engaging their workforces.

Another interpretation is that leaders who have access to mindfulness practices in the workplace genuinely improve their ability to do their jobs, increasing their own emotional intelligence and becoming better at managing their staff members.

Conclusion



The results of this study indicate that around half of respondents' organizations are investing time and resources into providing mindfulness training and support, although relatively few do this to a high degree. Among the key reasons for this support seem to be a high degree of work-related stress and the need for organizations to manage it more effectively.

Mindfulness practices and training take many forms, ranging from meditation and visualization to journaling and organized activities. The most commonly provided or supported practices in the workplace were "Attention-training exercises" and "Yoga or Tai Chi."

There is no clear set of standards or delivery formats for organizations providing mindfulness training and support. Among the participants whose organizations provide mindfulness practices, about one-third primarily used internal trainers, another third mainly used external vendors, and the remaining third used both. This is typical for practices that are still relatively new. Standard delivery processes will likely become clearer as mindfulness training and support programs spread.

Respondents' personal experience with mindfulness tends to be positive. They report that mindfulness is an effective way to counter their own stress levels while increasing productivity and decision-making abilities. Most report that mindfulness training and support either is or would be beneficial to their organizations. Respondents from organizations that provide mindfulness training and support are also more likely to view their workforces as more highly engaged and their leaders as more highly skilled.

Given such findings, we expect that mindfulness practices will become more prevalent in coming years in U.S. workplaces. The correlations between mindfulness and leadership skills suggest such practices may be increasingly incorporated into leadership development programs. If the benefits of such practices are demonstrated over the long term, then they will probably become part of the standard package of employee offerings, incorporated into existing wellness and learning programs.

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The authors work collaboratively as the Business Research Consortium (BRC), which provides organizations with research, tools, and education. For more information on BRC, please visit <http://www.leadership-solutions.info/BRC.html> or send email to brc@leadershipsolutions.info.

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