

THE NEW WORKER

cec ASSOCIATES
INCORPORATED *est. 1983*



Fall 2014

Finding Work-Life Balance Through Mindfulness: Keeping Our Millennial Employees Productive and Happy

By Jasen Walker, Ed.D., C.R.C., and Fred Heffner, Ed.D.

Humans in groups carry out various endeavors: medicine, education, art, entertainment, etc. When all the specific endeavors are brought together, they form a whole that is greater than the individual parts. We call this whole “society.” Work and the workplace are a part of this whole as well, and since essentially everyone works, it is a significant part of society.

Society advances as individual and single-focused groups ideate and develop new concepts and refine/upgrade old ideas to move a particular aspect of the endeavor forward. As the individual endeavors advance, society advances.

In the world of work, there have been individuals and groups who have contributed to the process with both research findings and real-world applications of those findings. The products of some of these professionals were so important to the development and advancement of the work process that they deserve special credit:

- R. C. Behan and A. H. Hirschfeld: The physicians working with employees of Detroit’s automobile industry determined that “some employees under certain conditions would manifest disability without disease or accident.”
- M. R. Weinstein: conceptualized disability as a process and detailed recognizable stages in the process.
- M. Seligman and C. Peterson: the principal developers of Positive Psychology and “Values in Action.”

- M. Csikszentmihalyi: introduced the concept of [“Flow,”](#) a mental state where an individual becomes immersed in his/her present interest to the extent that he/she becomes enmeshed/energized by it (a form of “mindfulness.”).
- A. Wrzesniewski: the most active academic researcher on all things related to work and the workplace.

Another significant contributor to the work process has been CEC Associates, Inc., a group of rehabilitation professionals located in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. CEC Associates has long been identifying and sharing fresh research findings from academia that may be adapted to become effective workplace management tools. While CEC does not do original research, they adapt, create, and share materials to enhance theories of the workplace and the occupational rehabilitation processes.

Led by Jasen Walker, Ed.D., C.R.C., CEC Associates has made specific contributions that include:

- Publishing a quarterly workplace-specific newsletter for employers and employment attorneys for more than 25 years. [The New Worker](#) is the earliest and longest running newsletter in workplace methods for the occupational rehabilitation profession.
- Creating and maintaining a glossary of essential terms specific to work called the [“Workipedia.”](#)
- Identifying the specific components that are essential to planning and operating an effective disability management program in the workplace.
- Developing the specific methods and materials needed to organize and operate a “Transition-to-Work” program. (This process is used to replace the archaic and ineffective “Light Duty” approach used by employers in the early stages of workplace management.)
- Introducing work management concepts such as disability-prone employees, injured worker helplessness, etc. Walker also assists workplace managers to become aware of developing theories that could inform the work and rehabilitation processes, including adverse childhood experiences (ACE), attribution theory, the biopsychosocial vs. medical model in rehabilitation decision-making, etc.

“Generation Nice”: The Dominant Demographic Employees in Today’s Workplace:

Even though we may scuff at the idea, generational differences are real, and we believe that having some knowledge about them can be helpful to both supervisors and colleagues in the workplace. There are an estimated 80,000,000 Americans (more than the Baby Boomers) who fall into the “Millennial” classification, and in fact, since most of them work, certain aspects of their composite characteristics can be set out to serve as insights on how to best supervise them. (Prior “generations” include: The Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Gen-Xers.)

The most extensive and research-based reporting on generational differences is conducted by the Pew Research Center. They offer the following conclusions regarding Millennials:

- narcissistic, self-absorbed, self-indulging,

But also:

- confident,
- optimistic,
- connected,
- open to change and changing,
- complex and introspective,
- more inclined to volunteer,
- largely unimpressed with anything “prestigious,” and
- supportive of companies that demonstrate “good citizenship.”

According to [Pew Research](#), “some 43% of Millennial adults are non-white, the highest share of any generation.” There are also more individuals in this classification than prior groups who have been raised by single parents. Incidentally, contrary to what many may guess, only 12 percent of Millennials classify themselves as vegetarians.

Does having some insight into the “nature” of the Millennials help supervisors? The answer is “only if the supervisor wants to understand how to achieve better production, better communications, and better overall workplace outcomes.”

Work-Life Balance Through Mindfulness: Keeping the Millennial Employees Productive and Happy

They are sometimes referred to as the [Recession Generation](#) – the Millennials – those who have reportedly been self-indulged by the Baby Boomers, individuals who were raised by the [“Greatest Generation.”](#) Regardless of the labels we apply to generational differences, today’s young workers are apparently tuned into the philosophy of work-life balance.

Is this yet another label for job dissatisfaction? What is work-life balance or the need to lessen job dissatisfaction with what might appear to be equally if not more meaningful and valued daily activities? Have the Millennials lost the drive and the eventual satisfaction found by keeping one’s nose to the grindstone?

Work-life balance is deceptive. [The best definition we have seen](#) asserts that there are two key elements to achieving this elusive balance: achievement and enjoyment. We believe that achievement is the accumulation and application of knowledge. Enjoyment is the satisfaction derived from using that knowledge to benefit, not simply one’s self, but others as well. In the process, we also advocate that one never lose sight of the perception and belief that in our affluent society, “Gratitude is the best attitude.”

The practice of mindfulness can be helpful. According to *Psychology Today*, “Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. When you’re mindful, you observe your thoughts and feelings from a distance, without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to experience.” But it is more than that. It is the day-to-day, if not moment-to-moment, awareness that happiness can be found in work, and work can be used as a tool to benefit one’s self and others. Work is achievement. Work can also be enjoyment.

Even if individuals are dissatisfied with their work, or unhappy with their employment setting, they need not surrender to their unhappiness. Our attitudes toward work are shaped by many factors, both internal and external. By more effectively managing one's internal actions and reactions, we have an opportunity to change the external. To be more specific, we might use a rather dire analogy and ask, "How is it that prisoners actually adjust to life behind bars?" The answer seems to be with achievement and the joy found in giving to others.

In [*Serve To Be Great*](#), author Matt Tenney describes his ordeal of facing a five-and-a-half-year military prison sentence after embezzling almost \$3 million of U.S. government money in 2001, while serving as an officer in the Marine Corps. Although his conviction could have sent him spiraling forever downward, he consciously decided to make a change.

Tenney explains that he had previously focused on short-term goals. He had committed to making himself financially independent by age 30, and that myopic view of job satisfaction and work-life balance apparently led him to carry out what he considered a "victimless" crime. While serving his sentence, Tenney started reading about mindfulness – which evidently helped him to discover true, lasting happiness. He trained himself to become a monk and now delivers much acclaimed leadership talks all over the world. Moreover, he helps children with cancer pain by teaching them mindfulness.

Although Tenney's journey may sound like a Michael Milken redemption story or a "Wolf on Wall Street" rehabilitation scenario, the discovery and actualization of mindfulness need not be so dramatic. Mindfulness is a method of disciplining the mind by becoming aware of and not misled by its natural tendencies. It is, according to Donald Altman, M.A., "Living in the what-is as opposed to the what-if world" and "getting freed from habit and reactivity."

If anything can be said about young employees as well as many older workers, we tend to become wrapped up in "shoulds." The work "should" be more meaningful. The boss "should" be more pleasant. I "should" get a promotion. We "should" not be working overtime. Shoulds often reflect the worker's perception of injustice.

Of course, as the Dalai Lama professes in the Howard Cutler bestseller, *The Art of Happiness at Work*, "if there is injustice, then I think inaction is the wrong response." (pg 19). But short of real injustice in the workplace, we ultimately "make our own beds and lie in them," as my mother is still fond of saying as she approaches 90. The truth is that we have significant responsibility for creating our own realities, and the practice of mindfulness allows us not only to accept those realities but to take achievement-oriented action to change them. Members of every generation can benefit from the practice of mindfulness.

In the past, we have offered our readership many ideas of empowerment in the workplace. We encourage our readers to consider mindfulness as a practice of awareness, renewal, enjoyment, and achievement.

Continuing to Improve Workplace Methods and Materials Going Forward:

Thirty years ago, employers were essentially on their own in terms of planning and managing their employees at work. When they were compelled to take employees who had been injured at work

back into the workforce, their solution was to have the employee sit in the lunch room for eight-hour shifts (called “Light Duty”). More recently, a process called “Transition-to-Work” has replaced the former non-productive approach. Similarly, the advent of “Positive Psychology” has enabled most professions (including those responsible for work and the workforce) to view psychological difficulties primarily as opportunities to develop and instill positive approaches and to avoid, or at least limit, the use of dysfunctional references and treatments.

Professionals, especially academicians, who have reportedly chosen to focus on methodologies that have practical applications in planning and developing workplace strategies. There are efforts afoot to adapt their findings and disseminate them to employers.

For example, there are numerous resources online that focus on mindfulness as an essential aspect of work management. As a good start, one suggested source is an article titled [“Mindfulness at Work: 5 Tricks For A Healthier, Less Stressful Work Day”](#) by Carolyn Gregoire, reported in the Huffington Post. (This overview article identifies John Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., as the writer/researcher who brought attention to the value of mindfulness as an effective tool for workplace management.)

Additional resources include:

- [The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program](#) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, started by Dr. Kabat-Zinn.
- The UCLA [Mindful Awareness Research Center](#), whose website defines mindful awareness as “paying attention to present moment experiences with openness, curiosity, and a willingness to be with what is.”
- Donald Altman’s book, [The Mindfulness Toolbox: 50 Tips, Tools & Handouts for Anxiety, Depression, Stress & Pain](#), published by PESI Publishing and Media.
- [The Institute for Mindful Leadership](#) based in Oakland, New Jersey, which offers course work on mindfulness.

Perhaps the single most prolific of these academics who focus their research on work-related issues is Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor in the Yale School of Management. Some of Wrzesniewski’s recent contributions to the work process include:

- The meaning of work
- Jobs, careers and callings: Work orientation and job transitions
- Multiple types of motivators
- Job crafting

An equally helpful source in this field is [The Center for Positive Organizations](#), a component of the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. The Center offers credit courses in organization (workplace) methods, provides teaching resources, makes research available, and reviews articles.

Ultimately, we arrive at the conclusion that the practice of mindfulness may be beneficial for anyone who wishes to develop new insight, positive change, and a sense of hope in and out of the workplace,

regardless of age and experience. We believe that through mindfulness, one can discover their own definition of work-life balance.

The Meaning of Work: Job, Career, or Calling?

Often, what meaning we attach to our work dictates the behaviors that we will exhibit while engaging in it. Amy Wrzesniewski and others have suggested a tripartite model of work orientation, proposing that individuals tend to see their work primarily as a job, a career, or a calling. While jobs are primarily a means to financial ends that allow individuals to enjoy their time away from work, and careers suggest deeper personal investment marked by achievements through advancement within the occupational structure, callings are thought to be unique to each individual – something people believe they must do to fulfill their purpose in life, and are often seen as a path or connection to one's deepest self. Callings are hypothetically associated with what Abraham Maslow felt were pathways to self-actualization. How organizations and individual workers can plan for jobs to become careers and callings may be one way work-life balance can be realized. As Stephen Hawking is credited as having said, "Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it."

Stress Abatement and Control:

Mindfulness, combined with meditation and proper breathing, has proven to be a surefire method of reducing anxiety, slowing the heart rate, and lowering blood pressure. Mindfulness practices help individuals deal with stress and reduce chronic back and muscular pain. Changing one's attitudes toward fear and stress can be valuable. Fritz Perls, the father of [Gestalt Therapy](#), was fond of saying, "The only difference between anxiety and excitement is our attitude toward it."

Emotional Contagion:

Emotional contagion is the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally with them. Elaine Hadfield has pointed out that by attending to a stream of tiny moment-to-moment reactions, individuals can and do "feel themselves into" the emotional landscapes inhabited by others. Sigal Barsade, Ph.D., has recommended a [number of steps](#) that organizational and team leaders can take to create positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover.

Knowledge Acquisition:

Knowledge acquisition may be defined as the "extracting, structuring, and organizing," as well as the acting upon, of knowledge from experts in various scientific, social, psychological, and cultural arenas. Greater appreciation of morality, art, and science results in what Howard Gardner has deemed, "[The Disciplined Mind.](#)" All workers and organizations need to acquire more knowledge in order to make substantial contributions to the rest of society. Major universities now offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and there is little reason why both individuals and their employers

cannot acquire greater knowledge and achieve more for the benefit of society with relatively little effort.

Positive Psychology:

While many academics have latched onto Positive Psychology by finding and refining individual niches within it, not one of these academics has chosen as of yet to conduct research studies on the application of Positive Psychology concepts with respect to work or the workplace. When we do find something along these lines, we will be certain to share it with our professional colleagues.

One aspect of Positive Psychology that came from its original conceivers is that individuals can, and by all means should, understand their personal “strengths and weaknesses.” To facilitate this concept, founders Christopher Peterson, Ph.D., and Martin E. P. Seligman, Ph.D., have provided a series of “questionnaires,” including one which specifically identifies an individual’s strengths and weaknesses. The questionnaires are available from the [Positive Psychology Center](#) of the University of Pennsylvania. CEC Associates made the VIA Inventory of Strengths questionnaire available to its employees, and the results yielded some animated discussions by our staff. The more-than-one-dozen questionnaires available online can be invaluable tools for employees, employers, and overall company development.