

Mindfulness in the workplace: what is all the fuss about?

Margaret Chapman explores the shift from the marginal to the mainstream and implications for practitioners

I am aware as I sit down to write this article that the first book on the application of mindfulness-based interventions in organisations is due for publication¹. This follows an Association for Coaching conference in July², where the workshop delivered by the book's author, Michael Chaskalson, attracted the largest attendance. Chaskalson, along with Mark Williams, Ruby Wax and others from the world of business, entertainment and academia are due to speak at the first mindfulness in the workplace conference in Cambridge, in February 2012². It seems therefore that there is something of a fuss around mindfulness.

This crossover of mindfulness into organisational practice is embryonic, yet 'this fuss' confirms Jon Kabat Zinn's observation in Mark Williams and Danny Penman's new book: *Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*, that '... the world is abuzz with mindfulness'³.

What a dramatic shift. It was only in 2005 that Clare Pointon, whilst acknowledging the growing interest in mindfulness, in *Therapy Today*, nonetheless described mindfulness as marginal⁴. In that same article, Williams himself, co-founder of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) suggested that integrating mindfulness presented a challenge to 'therapy as we know it'. A similar observation is inferred in the therapeutic literature as recent as April 2010, when Manu Bazzano, in *Therapy Today*, echoed Williams' assertion by describing mindfulness as counter-culture⁵. Contrast these comments, however, with the headline of an article in the *Ashridge Business* journal in spring 2011, in which Emma Dolman and Dave Bond wrote: 'The practice of mindfulness is increasingly moving from the fringe to the mainstream, and already features as a key part of international management and organisation development programmes'⁶.

In this article I explore what the current 'fuss' is about and consider possible reasons why there is a flurry of activity leading to a crossover of mindfulness into the workplace and with what implications. In doing this I draw heavily on a decade's experience in emotional intelligence (EQ) and in writing and speaking about how this idea moved out of potential scientific obscurity into

popular and organisational discourse⁷. I do so, as it is timely to consider the implications of all this fuss, not only for counselling at work practitioners, but in terms of the integrity of mindfulness-based interventions. The question is, will mindfulness enjoy a similar trajectory as EQ? And, in moving from marginal to the mainstream, will it both gain and lose something in the process? And does it matter?

Mindfulness and EQ: from fringe to mainstream

When I began researching EQ in the workplace in 2000, my findings revealed that many organisations were afraid to talk openly about emotions generally and, particularly, about the idea of emotionally intelligent leaders. I discovered that many were subsuming EQ into competency frameworks and using the language of high performance behaviours. However, there were some pioneering organisations, most notably those within the financial services sector such as American Express and The Prudential that were open about developing leaders' capacity to be emotionally intelligent⁸. In essence, these global corporations appeared to fully embrace Daniel

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Goleman's assertions that EQ capabilities, particularly in leadership, mattered twice as much as IQ or technical expertise. As Goleman asserted in his second text in 1998, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*: '...the impact of emotional intelligence is greater at the top of the leadership pyramid.'⁹

So how is it that a potentially obscure psychological construct such as EQ and a counter-cultural idea such as mindfulness are able to transition from the marginal to the mainstream? Drawing on evidence from exploring how EQ became central to an executive development, an essential ingredient is the need for a 'knowledge entrepreneur' and the essential first step is for this (usually male) guru to publish the first book on the topic that speaks to the intended audience. In the case of EQ, this was Daniel Goleman, and in terms of mindfulness, this is set to be Michael Chaskalson's *The Mindful Workplace: Developing Resilient Individuals and Resonant Organisations*.

Goleman's first work, published in 1996, entitled *Emotional Intelligence: Why EQ matters more than IQ*, captured worldwide attention¹⁰. In 1998, Goleman, caught by surprise in terms of the corporate reaction to that book, then translated those earlier ideas into the language of business directly in *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. To be assured of success, however, a seminal book not only has to have a catchy title, but needs to cite relevant research evidence that taps into the current *Zeitgeist*¹¹.

This then has to go further by offering the potential for being translated into practical interventions that can deliver solutions to address the challenges organisations face, at that particular moment in time. In the noughties (00s) EQ was successful because it was anchored to organisational performance through leadership; in particular, ways in which emotionally intelligent leaders could help their businesses navigate increasing globalisation and an operating environment characterised by euphemisms such as downsizing, rightsizing and de-layering¹².

Today, the buzz words that proliferate the globalised, 24/7 environments in which 21st century businesses operate, (and that are aptly addressed in the title to Chaskalson's book) include: building individual and organisational resilience; engaging employees in an age of austerity, and addressing the second biggest source of lost productivity, that is workplace stress¹³. Based on the emerging research, mindfulness-informed interventions offer the potential to do just that. Ample evidence is provided, for example in the recent Mental Health Foundation *Report on Mindfulness* in which Ed Halliwell recommends that mindfulness interventions should not only be a priority for the Government's mental health strategy, but that the evidence base needs to be widened to show how mindfulness-based interventions, such as MBCT and MBSR, contribute to reducing stress at work¹⁴.

2,500 years +	Buddhist tradition: 'the mind can observe itself and understand its own nature' ¹⁵
1990	Jon Kabat Zinn translates benefits of Buddhist meditative practices and integrates Eastern philosophy and Western science, through publication of <i>Full Catastrophe Living</i> in which he outlines the ground-breaking programme, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
2002	Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale adapt MBSR and integrate with CBT in their book <i>Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: a New Approach to Preventing Relapse</i>
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Based on evidence from RCTs, MBCT becomes recognised by NICE for treating clients with three or more episodes of depression ■ Google designs and implements 'Search Inside Yourself', a model of 'EQ' development based on mindfulness (Jon Kabat Zinn and Daniel Goleman are contributors)²¹
2008	INSEAD report shows executive programmes that incorporate coaching and mindfulness, result in greater likelihood of corporations acting with greater social responsibility (2010)
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Wendy Harvey publishes article 'Mindfulness in Practice' in <i>Counselling at Work</i>²⁵ ■ Patrizia Collard and Gladeana McMahon publish article on 'Mindfulness Based Cognitive Coaching' (MBCC) in <i>Coaching at Work</i>²⁷
2010	Ed Halliwell publishes report on mindfulness for Mental Health Foundation as part of its 'Be Mindful' campaign ¹⁴
2011	Mark Williams and Danny Penman make MBCT accessible to popular audience with their publication: <i>Mindfulness: a Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World</i> ³
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Michael Chaskalson publishes seminal text on MBSR applied to organisations: <i>The Mindful Workplace: Developing Resilient Individuals and Resonant Organizations with MBSR</i>¹ ■ Dolman and Bond, Ashridge Business School, publish article entitled 'Mindful Leadership'¹⁶
2012	Robinson College, Cambridge, inaugural conference 'Mindfulness at Work'. Speakers include Professor Mark Williams, Ruby Wax, Michael Chaskalson ²

Table 1. From Buddhism to business. Key milestones in the transition of mindfulness from the marginal to the mainstream

Looking at the apparent speed by which mindfulness is crossing over from the clinical into the organisational field (indicated in milestones identified in table 1) it appears that (to use Daniel Goleman's 1998 words) being mindful is now the new yardstick by which pioneering organisations and their leaders are being judged. Today's leaders not only have to be emotionally intelligent, but also mindful. An emotionally intelligent mindful leader is one who, in an age of austerity, can concurrently inspire employees to achieve more with less; is concerned about employee wellbeing and behaves with greater care and compassion.

The research evidence: building the business case – exemplar organisations

When looking at whether there is an increased flurry of activity around a particular idea (referred to here as the 'fuss') one way is to examine whether there has been an increase in the volume of publications in the popular, business and academic press. For example, a simple search in 1999 on www.amazon.co.uk using the term emotional intelligence, yielded only six titles; in 2002, this rose to 63; 183 in 2006; 406 in 2009 and today (August, 2011), that same search reveals 9,621. Jon Kabat Zinn observes a similar spike in scientific publications with 'mindfulness' in the title. The dramatic increase since 1982 (see figure 1) led him to suggest that 'It is apparent that the field is growing exponentially [and that] its sheer size represents a watershed.'¹⁵

So, taking the example of how EQ moved from the marginal to the mainstream, by being translated into organisational and popular discourse, it did so as a result of a number of social processes. First, Daniel Goleman attended a conference in which the original theory of emotional intelligence was being discussed. He was a psychologist and science journalist writing for the *New York Times*. With these combined skills, Goleman was able to translate Peter Salovey and John D Mayer's original scientific theory from 1990 into everyday discourse. That spoke to a global, (including corporate) audience¹⁶. The popularity of his 1996 text provided a snappy shorthand EQ that grabbed popular attention. This fuelled a flurry of activity described by Stephen Fineman, professor of management at Bath University as a phenomenon¹⁷. This 'fuss' captured the attention of business, through a plethora of seminars, conferences, academic programmes, and spurred even more books. Eventually the theory of EQ was translated into consultant-led leadership interventions. EQ was then further translated into specific organisational contexts by HR specialists, speaking as it did to the organisational problems of the day.

This wasn't all, however. The phrase 'emotional intelligence' diffused not only into organisational practice, but into popular culture, the term being referred to in *Desert Island Discs* (by Andy McNab); soap operas (ITV's *Where the heart is*) and even posed as a question by the Queen of Mean, Anne Robinson on *The Weakest Link*¹⁸.

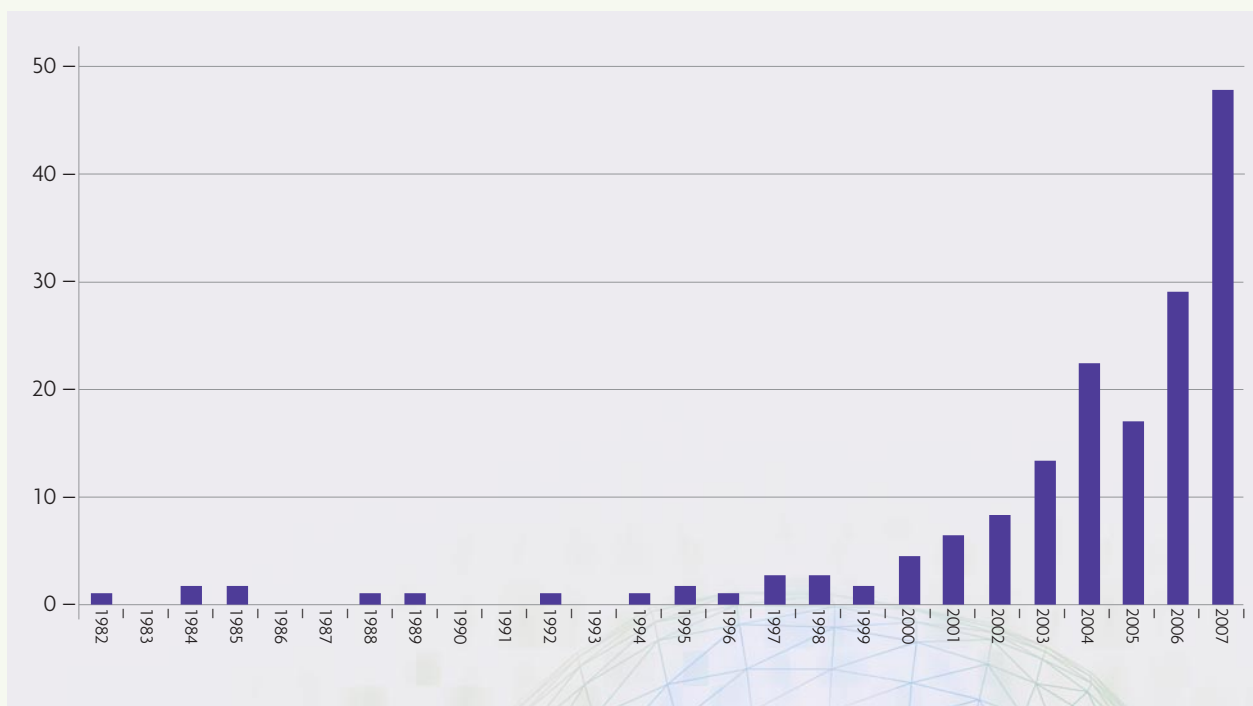


Figure 1. Number of publications with the word 'mindfulness' in the title by year since 1982

Building the business case for mindfulness: case studies – pioneers with credibility

For any new idea to be taken up by organisations, it is not enough for it to appear in a seminal book. To be convinced of the business case, this has to be accompanied by empirical evidence that includes credible case examples of successful, high-profile organisations that have gained positive results through implementation. In the case of EQ, one of the most cited organisations in the business press at the time was the financial services organisation, American Express. In 2011, read any article or entry on the social networking group, LinkedIn (*Mindfulness in the Workplace and Mindful Leadership*)¹⁹ and the equivalent 21st century organisations are companies such as Google, eBay, Yahoo and Apple. These are pioneers in introducing mindfulness, exemplar organisations that characterise the 21st century business environment. These pioneering organisations are, as in the case of EQ, no longer in the financial services sector, but technology firms that employ talented knowledge workers. These employees demand different types of leaders. Couple this with the voices of leading business schools, such as INSEAD in Copenhagen and Ashridge in the UK²⁰ and the ingredients are right for heralding a shift in mindfulness from the marginal to the mainstream.

Addressing the current corporate Zeitgeist: mindfulness and corporate social responsibility

The INSEAD report, published in 2008, looked at ways in which organisations could be more socially responsible. One of the features of the study looked at executive education and the types of interventions that would change managerial behaviour. The findings revealed that:

- Standard executive education based on engaged discussions and case analyses failed to facilitate managers to shift towards higher probabilities to make socially responsible decisions.
- Coaching programmes based on introspection and meditation (mindfulness) techniques, without any discussion about CSR topics, impacted significantly on the probability of managers to act in a socially responsible way.
- A 'non-orthodox' training intervention, based on hatha yoga techniques (postures, relaxation etc), produced a positive impact on socially responsible behaviour.

Mindfulness and wellbeing

Whilst the INSEAD report suggests that mindfulness-based leadership interventions offer the potential for managers to act with greater care and compassion, the authors of the Ashridge article suggest that the

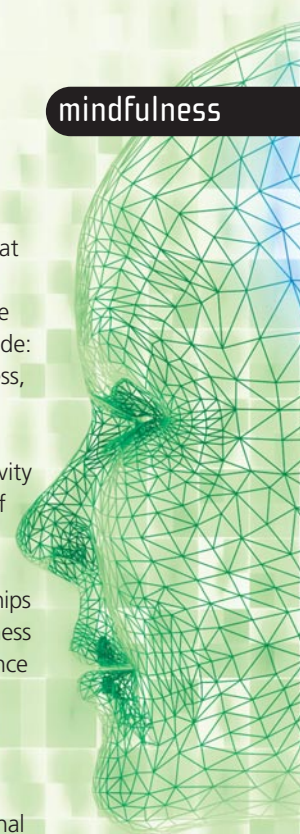
world of business has been 'won over by findings at the American Institute of Health, the University of Massachusetts and the mind-body medical institute at Harvard'. The findings that are highlighted include:

- reduced costs of staff absenteeism caused by illness, injury, stress
- improved cognitive function – including better concentration, memory, learning ability and creativity
- improved productivity and improved overall staff and business wellbeing
- reduced staff turnover and associated costs
- enhanced employer/employee and client relationships
- reduced health insurance premiums for the business
- a visible and tangible corporate responsibility stance
- enhanced employee job satisfaction.

What next? Implications for practitioners

Whilst the crossover of mindfulness from the marginal to the mainstream in organisations is embryonic, nonetheless there is a lot of fuss around this seemingly counter-cultural idea. The main reason is that mindfulness-based interventions are being translated into ways in which these unorthodox interventions address the challenges organisations face at this moment in time. One of the exemplar organisations mentioned earlier that is successfully developing emotional intelligence through mindfulness is Google. Their programme 'Search inside Yourself' is based on MBSR and includes a mix of the scientific, with meditation and business expertise, and, to quote one of the principal SIY's teachers: '...within Google it is working. For people who take the course, it makes a difference in how they operate... how they communicate. They learn they don't have to leave their emotions at the door when they come to work, and that is big. If Wall Street Traders, for example had more emotional intelligence, they might have realised that the crazy derivatives they created, were wrong.'²¹

However, a note of caution; mindfulness, whilst a low-cost intervention in financial terms, is an experiential intervention that demands a high degree of motivation and commitment. Thus there is a cost to individuals – commitment to practice. This is currently one of the key issues occupying commentators in the field, as mindfulness moves from clinical to organisational settings. In addition, there is a question as to whether a cut-down version of the original programme will yield similar results to those studies based on the original configuration development by Jon Kabat Zinn²². A central concern is that the integrity of mindfulness, as originally conceived, needs to be protected. The early proponents argue that interventions should be based on the structure and shape of the original eight-week programme, that comprises daily practice, interspersed with weekly two-



hour led sessions and day-long integration of the learning. In this respect, on whether or not a shortened version will work, the jury is still out. However, evidence is emerging that adapted versions, applied in the workplace, to reduce stress, do work²³.

This is where the trajectory of mindfulness into the workplace, differs from earlier configurations of EQ programmes. Mindfulness interventions will take time to embed as mindfulness cannot, as Jon Kabat Zinn regularly asserts, be learned out of a book, attending a seminar or going on a one-day workshop. Mindfulness is an embodied practice. This means that in order to implement mindfulness-based interventions, counsellors in the workplace first need to experience and develop their own mindfulness. There is no short cut. However, from my own experience of developing my mindfulness practice over the last three years, it does make a difference personally and in working with clients; similar benefits are reported in the psychotherapeutic literature²⁴. It is well worth commencing the journey, because, in the words of the originator of MBSR, Jon Kabat Zinn: 'We cannot stop the tide, but we can at least learn to surf the waves.'

Mindfulness is moving from the marginal to the mainstream because it speaks to the challenges of our time, which are to build our own, employees' and organisational resilience. Mindfulness practice provides, as Wendy Harvey, observes: 'individuals with new ways of responding to life's experience and cultivating a deeper sense of health and wellbeing.'²⁵

Counter-cultural and unorthodox interventions may be just what are needed to help ourselves and others 'surf the waves'. In so doing, mindfulness offers the potential to address the gaps left by the shortcomings in EQ interventions, that is, as Bazzano, Harvey and others have observed, to really create the kinds of organisations in which individuals thrive and that are fit to house the human spirit²⁶. A goal, I am sure, that concerns all of us engaged in facilitating health and wellbeing at work. ■

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Useful websites

- <http://www.mindfulexperience.org>
<http://www.mindfulnet.org>
<http://www.bemindful.co.uk>

University-based programmes and research

- <http://oxfordmindfulness.org>
<http://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness>
<http://psychology.exeter.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/pgmindfulness/whatismindfulness>

Work-based articles on mindfulness

- <http://www.coaching-at-work.com>