

By DELON SHURTZ  
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Sitting on the floor, legs crossed and eyes closed while chanting a mantra, may not be the boss's idea of a productive work day.

But more and more employers are looking seriously at meditation and yoga these days to improve the environment at work, reduce stress levels, and strengthen the bottom line.

Maria Gonzalez, president of Argonauta Strategic Alliances Consulting in Toronto, and a frequent speaker on creating a healthy organization, says stress levels in the workplace are rising, and multi-tasking has reached epic proportions.

But executives looking for better results at work may want to consider something other than cracking the whip and making their employees work longer and harder. That "something" may be the ancient technique called mindfulness meditation. At least, that Gonzalez's recommendation. Gonzalez has taught mindfulness meditation for some six years, but she notes this year more executives are turning to her to teach them how to incorporate mindfulness into their daily lives.

"People are starting to take it seriously," Gonzalez says. "People typically describe it as transforming their lives."

The objective of mindfulness meditation is to train the mind to be in the moment. Its roots go back some 2,500 years, but in modern times it's been adapted to suit modern needs, including those in business. And with growing stress levels and daily pressures in the workplace, meditation is needed more than ever.

"You're going to create calm and you're going to create focus."

In the workplace, that leads to happier, healthier, contented employees, which leads to greater productivity. Mental health is just one benefit, however. Gonzalez says mindfulness meditation also improves physical health by boosting the immune system, lowering blood pressure and strengthening the heart. It also helps manage anxiety disorders and depression. "That is a huge issue in the workplace."

Gonzalez notes studies have shown that a worker is interrupted on average every 11 minutes, and it takes up to 25 minutes to get totally refocused. That directly impacts productivity. With mindfulness meditation, however, it only takes seconds to refocus on tasks.

Mindfulness teaches people how to relax the body, to create calm and identify areas of the body that are "tight."

“When the body is tight, the mind is tight, and vice-versa.”

A greater ability to anticipate and serve client needs is yet another benefit of mindfulness meditation, states Gonzalez’s website. It also boosts innovation and inspiration; the ability to perceive situations clearly; to focus on projects and complete them with greater efficiency and effectiveness; to have more effective and efficient meetings; to determine what underlies most conflict; and to improve team performances with fewer misunderstandings.

And it’s easy to learn.

“If you can breathe, you can do it.”

Yoga also has its place in the world of work. Yoga incorporates meditation, but in western society it largely revolves around body movement to improve health.

David Gibson of Lethbridge was introduced to meditation in 1975, and he became involved in hatha yoga (usually associated with postures) 10 years later. Like meditation, yoga also describes the various practices that lead to peace and tranquility.

“The word yoga defines a state of being where one’s consciousness is united in the heart, and the mind is still,” Gibson says.

Gibson, who began teaching yoga in 2000, says the object of the practice, on a grand scale, is complete liberation from suffering. It is most effective in mitigating suffering when it combines exercise, proper breathing, proper relaxation, proper

diet, positive thinking and meditation.

And the benefits are numerous.

“Improvements in breathing, relaxation, flexibility and stamina are almost immediate.”

In addition, Gibson says yoga also supports and improves the circulatory, respiratory, digestive and other physiological systems.

“Personally, I have utilized yoga to effect a 40 per cent decrease in cholesterol and triglyceride levels; a decided benefit for someone with a family history of cardiac and diabetic issues.”

Gibson believes the best reason to practice yoga is to increase the level of happiness and contentment in all aspects of life, including work. In fact, it’s possible to teach yoga to employees and employers during seminars, business retreats and other work-related training sessions, to improve how they feel and perform at work. Daily doses are even better.

“Ten minutes of daily exercise, meditation and conscious relaxation are more effective than an hour once a week. The practices do not need to be complex and/or esoteric. Nor do they need to be challenging physically. Simply learning a few yoga relaxation techniques, practiced regularly, will prove easy to master and make an observable difference.”