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Mindfulness, Flow, and Mind Wandering: The Role of Trait-Based Mindfulness in State-Task Alignment

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Mindfulness—present moment attention and awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003)—is commonly proposed as a productive state of consciousness in the workplace. Unfortunately, being mindful at every moment of the workday is fairly uncommon. Research suggests that people engage in *mind wandering*—a lack of attention to and awareness of the present (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006)—for the majority of their day (in every task except making love; Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Further, there is another state of consciousness called *flow*—an intense sense of concentration and control over activities—that has also been linked to workplace performance (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Interestingly, whereas mindfulness facilitates higher performance by being aware of external stimuli, flow enables higher performance by doing the opposite—blocking out external stimuli. These findings suggest that mindfulness is neither the most common psychological state nor the only productive psychological state for the workplace.

Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) suggest broadening investigations of mindfulness by considering its relationship with other consciousness constructs. Aligning with this directive, I offer arguments suggesting that

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mindfulness may be the ideal state for some work tasks, whereas flow and/or mind wandering may be ideal for other work tasks. This approach ensures that mindfulness does not become a catchall state of consciousness for workplace productivity, a designation that will detract from its potential to be appropriately leveraged in the workplace.

If states of mindfulness, mind wandering, and flow occur irregularly throughout the day, and each state is beneficial for different tasks, optimal functioning depends on an employee's ability to match the appropriate state of consciousness with a specific work task. Trait-based mindfulness research may assist in understanding this meta-consciousness competency. Employees with a chronic tendency to nonjudgmentally refocus their attention and awareness to the present have a heightened ability to self-regulate (Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang, 2011). Thus, the self-regulatory competencies inherent in high trait-based mindfulness enable matching the appropriate states of consciousness with certain work tasks. As highlighted by Hyland and colleagues (2015), future mindfulness research may reach a bottleneck if the uniqueness among, and relationships between, varying conceptualizations of mindfulness (e.g., state, trait, learned skills) are not clarified and explored. To address this concern, I offer explanations for the relationships between trait-based mindfulness and state-based mindfulness, as well as the conceptually similar states of mind wandering and flow. In addition, I discuss the work tasks that are most appropriate for mindfulness, mind wandering, and flow. Finally, I offer arguments explaining how the self-regulatory capabilities associated with trait-based mindfulness affect the ability to match psychological states with specific work tasks.

Mindfulness, Flow, and Mind Wandering

Mindfulness entails both high present moment attention and wide attentional breadth (i.e., attention to both internal and external stimuli; Dane, 2011). Research suggests that being mindful is particularly useful when interacting with colleagues (Glomb et al., 2011). The attention and awareness to the mindset of others increases empathy. Employees who consider the perspectives of others are more likely to work collaboratively as opposed to combatively. Conflicting intentions and goals among colleagues are inevitable, but employees who remain present are aware of and accept physiological reactions to disagreements, which helps to ensure that psychological and behavioral reactions are productive and nonconfrontational.

Mindfulness is also an ideal psychological state when working in complex and dynamic work environments (Dane, 2011). The increased working memory associated with high present moment attention and wide attentional breadth ensures that employees can integrate all of the necessary details and nuances of the situation into a contextualized, informed decision

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(Glomb et al., 2011). Similarly, increased response flexibility helps employees quickly adapt to the changing conditions of the work environment. The enhanced sense of persistence and the ability to cope during stressful situations also ensure that employees overcome obstacles, as opposed to being paralyzed by the difficulties of the situation. Although a state of mindfulness may be ideal for social interactions and dynamic work environments, flow and mind wandering offer unique psychological benefits that may be better suited to different work tasks.

Flow is similar to mindfulness because it entails a high level of present moment attention. However, unlike mindfulness, flow entails narrow attentional breadth. In a state of flow, an employee is fully absorbed in a task and disregards external stimuli. This intense focus coincides with a disconnection from the social environment (e.g., external distractions are unnoticed; time appears to pass quickly). Flow is likely to be a beneficial state of consciousness during tasks that require dedicated concentration and the application of knowledge and skills (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). For example, the willingness to psychologically persist without interruption is necessary when writing a detailed explanation of a complicated topic or developing a plan with multiple moving parts.

Flow is therefore distinct from mindfulness, because flow is ideal for individual initiatives that require attention to a static, challenging task. The wide attentional breadth inherent in mindfulness would be distracting when engaging in these types of tasks. In addition, the narrow attentional breadth inherent in flow is likely to be disadvantageous during dynamic events or social interactions. In a state of flow, attention is narrowly focused, and external stimuli that might inform the employee in how to appropriately handle the nuances of the situation would be missed. Thus, mindful and flow states both entail present moment attention but align with distinct tasks, given their differences in attentional breadth.

The third state of consciousness, mind wandering, is both similar to and different from mindfulness and flow. Mind wandering is similar to mindfulness in that it entails wide attentional breadth. However, unlike mindfulness and flow, mind wandering entails low present moment attention. In a state of mind wandering, attention moves in an undisciplined and nondeliberate manner between a plethora of ideas and thoughts. As the mind wanders, employees make connections between experiences and events that facilitate problem solving and goal accomplishment. For example, mind wandering is commonly associated with new ideas and "ah-ha" moments. Mind wandering also facilitates the visualization of social situations that may potentially arise to help prepare for the same. These states of mind wandering are therefore productive forms of consciousness that best fit in between predefined work tasks or socially oriented work tasks. Mind wandering serves as a

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natural break from the psychological demands of complex tasks and social interactions and allows the mind to make its own connections between previous and potential experiences (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). This rejuvenation and idea development can be helpful when returning to static work tasks that require flow or dynamic and interactive work tasks that require mindfulness.

Mind wandering, therefore, is distinct from mindfulness and flow in that dishabituation releases psychological resources for making new connections. Low present moment attention inherent in mind wandering is detrimental to social interaction, dynamic tasks, or tasks that require intense concentration; these tasks are better suited for mindful and flow states, respectively. However, mind wandering should not be disregarded as ineffectual. Employees attempting to remain present at all times, whether it be mindful states (wide attention) or flow states (narrow attention), are forgoing a natural and productive state of consciousness.

Trait-Based Mindfulness and Self-Regulatory Competencies

Trait-based mindfulness and state-based mindfulness are considered unique but related constructs, and both are thought to be related to employee effectiveness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dane, 2011; Glomb et al., 2011). Although evidence indicates that trait-based mindfulness positively correlates with states of mindfulness (Hülsheger, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013), discussion is limited about how exactly the two constructs interact. This is important because each state of consciousness—mindfulness, flow, and mind wandering—has the potential to be productive. Perhaps trait-based mindfulness is related to employee effectiveness not because it leads to mindful states but because it facilitates the ideal state of consciousness for a specific moment in time. In this case, optimal employee functioning depends on an employee's ability to be aware of both the type of task at hand and his or her own psychological state and then make appropriate psychological adjustments to ensure state-task alignment. I suggest that the self-regulatory competencies associated with trait-based mindfulness assist employees in making these psychological adjustments that lead to state-task alignment.

In the Glomb and colleagues (2011) review of mindfulness at work, they propose two distinct self-regulatory mental processes stemming from mindfulness. I propose that these mechanisms facilitate efficient matching between state and task, which then translates into employee effectiveness. The first mental process is decoupling of the self from experiences and emotions through *meta-awareness* (i.e., awareness of one's current state of mind: Hargus, Crane, Barnhofer, & Williams, 2010). This competency enables objective observation of one's current psychological state, initiating the self-regulatory process that allows for redirecting the mind to the optimal

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psychological state. The second mental process entails less reliance and dependence on previously established mental schemas through reduced *automaticity* (i.e., reflexive mental processing based upon previously developed schemes; Siegel, 2007). Automaticity reduces the ability to disconnect from a current psychological state and reconnect with a state that is more appropriate for the given task. The self-regulatory capabilities stemming from trait-based mindfulness ensure that employees do not reflexively engage in a psychological state but make conscious choices about the psychological state that best fits the characteristics of the current task.

Through the self-regulatory competencies of employees with high trait-based mindfulness, the state-task matching process becomes more efficient. For example, mind wandering is a common tendency. Self-regulatory competencies ensure that when employees interact with colleagues, they remain mindful as opposed to losing their present moment attention. Similarly, self-regulatory competencies ensure that when employees grapple with challenging, individual-oriented tasks, they remain in a state of flow. Self-regulatory competencies are also useful when alternating from individual tasks that require a narrow focus to tasks that require attention and awareness of external stimuli, such as dealing with a socially oriented situation. In summary, employees with high trait-based mindfulness are more likely to self-regulate by alternating psychological states to match the task at hand through their enhanced meta-awareness and reduced automaticity.

Future Research

These arguments highlight two areas for future researchers to consider. First, future research should evaluate the extent to which mindful states enhance performance in a variety of work tasks. Such research will clarify the boundary conditions of mindfulness and offer insight into the underlying psychological processes connecting states of mindfulness to performance. Second, future research should simultaneously investigate trait-based and state-based mindfulness. Although we know that trait-based mindfulness and state-based mindfulness are correlated, it would be helpful to understand whether individuals with high trait-based mindfulness are more likely to regulate their state of consciousness toward a state of mindfulness as well as away from a state of mindfulness.

Conclusion

As highlighted by Hyland and colleagues, the study of mindfulness at work is at a critical juncture. It is time to broaden our understanding of mindfulness by evaluating its relationship with similar consciousness constructs and clarifying the relationship between state-based and trait-based mindfulness.

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Explaining these areas will strengthen future theorizing of mindfulness at work and increase its practical utility.

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A Deeper Dive Into the Relationship Between Personality, Culture, and Mindfulness

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The focal article by Hyland, Lee, and Mills (2015) ends with several important questions and suggestions for future research. Although the review opens new avenues of investigation for industrial and organizational (I-O)

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