

Meditation Offerings Can Help Employees in Difficult Times

By Karen J. Bannan

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Employees of connectivity services provider LogMeIn have an outlet for their stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 emergency: Any of the company's 4,000 employees can log on to a company-sponsored meditation program and get their on on.

LogMeIn started a corporate meditation program in March 2019. Liz Raymond, the company's director of global talent acquisition operations, got the idea after taking a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course at the University of Massachusetts. Soon after, she was certified as a meditation teacher.

She saw how MBSR helped quell her own stressors and decided she would see if employees in the Boston-based headquarters might be interested in meditating, too. After discussing the topic with her wellness team, she scheduled several introductory classes during the company's open enrollment period, making it available to all of the nearly 800 employees who worked in her office.

In March 2019 she rolled out an official weekly program to her team in the Boston office. Since the group didn't have much space, they used the boardroom for the 30-minute classes.

"The first classes had maybe 10 people show up, but then the invite started getting forwarded out. It got sent to managers and executives. My CFO started attending. The head of mergers and acquisitions now attends whenever she's around," Raymond said.

Today, she offers the classes virtually over the company's own GoToMeeting platform and records them on GoToWebinar so people can practice meditation at their leisure. The videos were created by employees in LogMeIn's Tempe, Ariz., and German offices. It has been invaluable during the pandemic, she said. "We really just rolled it out globally, but it's a resource that's consistent and available for our employees."

Meditation in the Age of COVID-19

Meditation has been around for thousands of years, and researchers have documented its value in a variety of settings and applications. Mindfulness meditation in particular is proven to help reduce stress and anxiety (https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2017-01/gumc-mmt012017.php), reduce blood pressure and risk of death (https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2012-11/aha-mm110812.php) from heart attack and stroke, minimize the chance (https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2019-11/msu-hmc111119.php) of making mistakes, reduce (https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2012-08/uoc--mrl081412.php) loneliness, and improve (https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2019-11/msu-hmc111119.php) cognitive function. One review (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206315617003>) of meditation studies found that there is a direct link between the practice and positive workplace outcomes.

High-tech companies such as Google, Apple and Adobe introduced employer-sponsored meditation years ago, and the practice is gaining popularity. According to one recent report (https://www.nihcm.org/categories?task=download&collection=presentation_slide_x&xi=0&file=presentation_slide&id=940), more than 52 percent of employers added mindfulness classes to their employee benefits in 2018 and another 23 percent considered it for 2019.

Getting started with a new meditation benefit in the middle of a pandemic might seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be.

"Going to a room and doing more intense practices might not seem feasible right now given that most people are working from home ... but there are ways that HR managers can give employees access to meditation tools right now that they can use wherever they are," explained Lindsey Cameron, assistant professor of management at The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, who was involved in several meditation studies.

For example, security technology provider Okta helps its employees meditate at the office *and* while working from home. "In order to support a positive mental health state, we made the decision to invest in a global partnership with Headspace," explains Okta's chief people officer, Kristina Johnson. Okta subsidizes 12-month subscriptions for anyone who wants to join the meditation app, she said.

Like dozens of other meditation apps such as Calm, Insight Timer and Aura, Headspace is designed to help people learn the essentials of meditation and mindfulness. Most apps cost between \$2 and \$20 per month and offer guided meditations that focus on specific topics such as stress reduction, better sleep and improved mental focus.

In addition to Headspace, Okta's remote employees get access to remote exercise offerings from ClassPass and mental health support and tools from Modern Health, Johnson said. "Through this partnership, employees can match with certified coaches and therapists who can support them with everything from stress management and healthy living to financial wellbeing," she said.

Small Ways to Bring Mindfulness to Employees

HR managers with limited time or resources can introduce small activities to bring mindfulness to employees, Cameron said. She suggests starting meetings with a "moment of centering," asking employees to take a few collective deep breaths or adding a photo and tagline to e-mail signatures. "A photo of nature and a line that says, 'Take five breaths,' can help people start thinking about meditation." She also suggested curating a list of YouTube meditation videos from meditation experts such as Jonathan Foust and Jon Kabat-Zinn and sending it to employees with some research about the practice.

One important thing HR managers can do today is give employees—at home or still working in an office—the permission to meditate.

"Employees need to know that they are allowed to take a 15-minute break to pause time," Cameron said.

Buchanan agreed: "Tell them that you are offering them this opportunity, and you want them to give it a chance if they are interested. I would also add that any human resources person should be willing to be doing it themselves so they can understand the value of meditation and can communicate it to employees. You have to put your money where your mouth is."

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