



## MARKETING &amp; TECHNOLOGY

## Service, emotional labor, and mindfulness

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**Abstract** From the seclusion of monastic life to the noise of Silicon Valley, the ancient practice of mindfulness has ‘come out of the cloister.’ As an antidote to mindless cognition and behavior, the practice of mindfulness—with its principle of grounding attention in the present moment—has been shown to have powerful and positive effects at both the individual and the collective level and in fields as wide-ranging as medicine, schooling, prison programs, law and negotiation, business, and even the army. This installment of Marketing & Technology introduces mindfulness to managers and explores its potential for enhancing the service encounter. We begin by reviewing the two main conceptualizations of mindfulness: the cognitive and the contemplative. We then explore the service encounter from the perspective of emotional labor and show how mindfulness can change surface acting into deep acting, thereby significantly improving the service encounter for both the consumer and provider. We also explore the other benefits of mindfulness and their application to the service encounter: adaptability, flexibility, and creativity. We conclude by sharing resources for managers interested in implementing mindfulness training.

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## 1. Mindfulness: Monastery to main street

When we are in a state of mindlessness, we act like automatons who have been programmed to act according to the sense our behavior made in the past, rather than the present. Instead of actively drawing new distinctions, noticing new things, as we do when we are mindful, when we

are mindless we rely on distinctions drawn in the past. We are stuck in a single, rigid perspective, and we are oblivious to alternative ways of knowing. When we are mindless, our behavior is rule and routine governed; when we are mindful, rules and routines may guide our behavior rather than predetermine it. (Langer, 2000, p. 220)

Much has been written about Steve Jobs as an innovator, visionary, and leader. What is now emerging is that Jobs was a long-term practitioner of what is now termed mindfulness. In Jobs’ own words (Isaacson, 2011, p. 48):

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If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is. If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there's room to hear subtler things—that's when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more. Your mind just slows down, and you see a tremendous expanse in the moment. You see so much more than you could see before.

Today, mindfulness is increasingly transitioning from the monastery to the mainstream. It has been shown to be beneficial in a wide range of fields, such as medicine, sports, education, and, more recently, management. Studies have explored the effect of mindfulness on psychological and physical well-being (e.g., [Brown & Ryan, 2003](#)), as well as task performance (e.g., [Dane & Brummel, 2013](#)). Faced with the empirical evidence of the positive effects of mindfulness, large corporations such as Google and General Mills now offer mindfulness training to their employees.

In this article, we introduce managers to the two main views of individual mindfulness and discuss their effects on service encounters, including the personal interaction between consumers and service providers ([Guiry, 1992](#)).

## 2. What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a multi-dimensional concept with a rich and evolving history. For centuries, “sages across many cultures have trumpeted the benefits of mindfulness” ([Dane & Brummel, 2013](#), p. 106). There are two main views on individual mindfulness. One emerged from contemplative psychology (e.g., [Kabat-Zinn, 1994](#)), the other from social psychology (e.g., [Langer, 1989](#)). We now explore these in detail and discuss their similarities and differences.

### 2.1. Contemplative perspective of mindfulness

The modern term, ‘mindfulness,’ has its roots in the Buddhist notion of *sati*, the Pali word meaning awareness or skillful attentiveness. Although the term is of Buddhist origin, very similar practices and notions can be found in virtually all the contemplative branches of the world religions—from Hinduism to Taoism, Christianity to Islam, and Judaism to Shamanism ([Plante, 2010](#)).

Contemplative mindfulness emphasizes a nonre-active awareness and concentration of the body and the mind in the present moment. For example, [Kabat-Zinn \(1994, p. 4\)](#) argues that mindfulness

refers to the awareness that arises through “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” Similarly, [Bishop et al. \(2004\)](#) define mindfulness as a kind of non-elaborative, nonjudgmental, and present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises is acknowledged and accepted as it is. This tradition maintains that clearing the mind and living in the moment enables an individual to access the world directly as it is. It is a notion known in psychology as honest perception, in contrast to interpretation (judgment), projection, introjection, illusion, and hallucination (e.g., [Yeganeh, 2006](#)).

The other important element of this perspective is that mindfulness is deemed to be a self-regulated attention that can be cultivated as a virtue by some form of reflective practice ([Baer, 2003](#)). This kind of attention is moment-to-moment and ongoing, alert to mental contents and aware of internal and external phenomena. The practice of mindfulness involves keeping the mind grounded in the present moment and—over time—reducing reactivity to what arises in the moment so that interpretations are increasingly decoupled from automatic mental processes, such as impulses or heuristics that are often biased or inaccurate ([Dane, 2011](#)).

### 2.2. Cognitive perspective of mindfulness

The second view of mindfulness comes from social psychology, and specifically from the pioneering work on mindlessness and choice by Ellen Langer (e.g., [Le, Ngunumen, & Langer, 2014](#)). Langer's concept of mindfulness emphasizes cognitive differentiation, the active drawing of new distinctions. [Langer \(1989\)](#) argues that mindfulness is a basic state of mind, a state of alertness and lively awareness. This manifests in three ways: (1) the creation of new and the refinement of existing categories and distinctions; (2) the creation of new, discontinuous categories out of streams of events; and (3) the more nuanced appreciation of context and alternative ways to deal with it. Here, mindfulness is seen as a meta-process that interprets external and internal stimuli with a focus on drawing new distinctions.

### 2.3. Contemplative and cognitive perspectives: Differences and similarities

Compared with the contemplative perspective of mindfulness, the cognitive perspective focuses more on the way people cope with new, ambiguous, and ill-defined situations. Mindful individuals, from the cognitive perspective, resist relying on old habits when faced with change and are not constrained

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