Digital mindfulness could help reduce the effects of technostress at work

March 26 2024, by Elizabeth Marsh

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Technology-related stress, overload and anxiety are common problems in today's workplace, potentially leading to higher burnout and poorer health. Many of these issues are likely to have increased since remote working became much more widespread following the pandemic.

In 2022, along with colleagues at the University of Nottingham, I conducted a review of the academic literature on the downsides of digital working. We looked at nearly 200 studies from over the past decade, which revealed extensive evidence of negative health impacts of technostress and related "dark side of digital workplace" effects.

Building on that research, our next study, published in 2024, investigated whether mindfulness and digital confidence—the ability to apply existing digital skills to new devices, apps and platforms—might help reduce these negative effects.

We found that being more confident and mindful when using technology could help protect the health of digital workers.

Mindfulness is a technique to develop an nonjudgmental awareness of one's feelings, thoughts and surroundings in the present moment.

It can help some people to avoid negative habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts and emotions and tune in to the breath and body as an anchor. Becoming aware of habitual reactions in this way can help us to respond in a calmer, more effective manner.

Our latest study adds to evidence collected through many decades of workplace mindfulness research, which has demonstrated its potential to reduce stress and anxiety among workers, as well as promoting better mental health and improving work engagement.

While our research did not investigate specific mindfulness techniques, our interview participants talked about ways that being mindful helped them to reduce stress in the digital workplace.

This could be as simple as pausing for a few deep breaths or stepping away from the technology for a short period. Checking in with their own mental, emotional and physical state while working digitally was also something that people said really helped them.

Participants with higher levels of mindfulness tended to be less overwhelmed by technology. They talked about avoiding multitasking online—for example, reading emails while on a video call—as well as establishing clear boundaries around its use, such as only using technology at certain times of the day.

It is worth noting that some workers were uneasy about taking time to disconnect, noting that they feared being seen as slacking or falling behind.

Overall, workers who were more confident with technology experienced less anxiety. And those who were more mindful appeared better protected from the negative aspects of digital working.

Our results suggest that although digital mindfulness and confidence are both important for employee well-being, ultimately, mindfulness is more effective than confidence with technology in protecting against technostress.

Change perceptions to improve well-being

In our analysis we explore the idea, based on previous studies, that mindfulness can help reduce anxiety by altering employees' perceptions of digital stressors.

For example, researchers from the University of Turin in 2019 found that higher mindfulness among teachers was associated with a more positive workload stress appraisal and lower rates of subsequent burnout.

In our study, we found that digital workers who were more mindfully and digitally confident appeared to have a greater sense of agency when working digitally. They were also better equipped to change their digital habits for the better.

These changes involved setting boundaries by implementing rules for how and when to engage in the digital workplace. For example, turning off notifications, batching email or shutting down devices at the end of the working day.

Some participants also used short mindful practices to regulate their engagement with technology and take care of physical and mental health while working digitally. Beneficial activities included taking a short break from technology, going for a walk or making a cup of tea.

Reflection is key to healthy digital habits

To help employees thrive during the ongoing digital transformation of the workplace, organizations should consider ways to support staff with digital skills and mindful practices. Otherwise, they risk workers suffering further negative effects.

Conducting this research made our team think about our own digital practices and identify areas for change. For instance, being setting clearer boundaries around reading and responding to emails outside of work hours and taking more pauses while working digitally.

There are opportunities for all of us to grow our own skills in these areas, for example by engaging with training or self-learning to raise our digital competencies for work and learn some basic mindfulness practices.

Reflecting on what is and isn't working in your digital work day can be a great place to start in fostering healthy digital work habits.

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