

**MINDFULNESS AS A MEANS FOR ENHANCING WORKPLACE PRO-  
ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIORS: THE NORWEGIAN HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY  
PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** Humanity has caused more ecological damage during the past five decades than any other timespan in history (Ericson, Kjørstad, and Barstad 2014). Given the alarming rate of ecological degradation in this anthropogenic era, it is necessary to find ways of encouraging pro-environmental behaviors (Robertson and Barling 2015). Though regulations and laws exist toward environmental protection, these involuntary measures are useful, but not enough to bring about sufficient pro-active behaviors to conserve nature (Hedlund-de Witt 2012). To compliment passive compliance through laws, we suggest that a changed mindset can encourage voluntary pro-environmental behavior (drawing on Ryan and Deci 2000; Macy 2007; van den Muyzenburg 2015). As organizations are the leading actor of ecological destruction, we choose to study individuals within them engaged in mindfulness training programs, to find ways of ameliorating workplace pro-environmental behaviors (WPEBs).

We explore the role that mindfulness can play in bringing about a changed mindset. While mindfulness has been explored in several streams of literature, it is as of yet largely unexplored as a way of encouraging WPEBs. Informed by theories of PEBs from Organizational Behavior and Industrial Organizational Psychology literature, we empirically test propositions detailing the role that practicing mindfulness plays in enhancing propensity to engage in WPEBs through a series of interviews with employees within the healthcare industry in Norway participating in a year-long mindfulness training program.

**Literature Review:** *Mindfulness:* A multitude of practices exist to cultivate mindfulness, including awareness of the present moment (Brown and Ryan 2003; Kabat-Zinn 2005) and actively noticing new things (Langer 1997). Mindfulness has been shown to contribute to various outcomes (see Good et al. 2016), including lessened emotional disturbance, improved social relations (Baer et al. 2004; Brown and Kasser 2005), and making managers more alert and adaptive to potential environmental changes (Fiol and O'Connor 2003; Gärling, Fujii, Gärling and Jakobsson 2003; Gärtner 2013).

*Mindfulness and Pro-Environmental Behaviors (PEBs):* Studies relating mindfulness to PEBs are rare. Among the few scholars who have explored the topic, many focus on sustainable consumer

behavior or sustainable choices individuals make in their daily lives (Steg and Vlek 2009; Stern 2000; Barbaro and Pickett. 2016).

*Values-based frameworks of PEBs:* Values are important because their nature allows them to influence varied beliefs and behaviors simultaneously (Rohan 2000; Rokeach 1973, Shultz 2002). Most studies grounded in values-based frameworks of PEBs rely on Schwartz's Value Theory (1994), which categorizes values into two dimensions: openness to change versus conservatism, and self-transcendent value orientation from self-enhancement value orientation (Schwartz et al. 2001).

**Methodology:** To explore question: *What role does practicing mindfulness play in enhancing propensity to engage in WPEBs?* – we conduct an empirical study within a year-long mindfulness program, of professional healthcare workers in Norway. Our data consists of questionnaires, observations, as well as group and individual interviews with the 45 participants in the program and its three instructors. Near the beginning, a group interview introduces the study and explain the researchers' interest in the participants' reflections regarding their values and behaviors related to sustainability. Then semi-structured individual interviews take place at the middle and end of the program. In addition, we conduct an experiment at several intervals through the program to evaluate WPEBs.

Based on this data, we test the four propositions of Patel and Holm (2016) to discover to what extent these arguments hold in practice, as well as supplementary and contradictory aspects and areas of tension that might arise: addressing how practicing mindfulness leads to strengthening three pro-environmental values (connectedness with nature, non- materialism, and openness to change) among healthcare professionals, and consequently how these values enhance their propensity to engage in WPEBs, and, the direct impact of mindfulness on their propensity to engage in WPEBs, assuming that some may not subscribe to pro-environmental values.

**Results and Contributions:** Informed by various theories of PEBs from OB and IO literature, the present empirical paper elaborates on direct and indirect mechanisms through which practicing mindfulness enhances WPEBs in a European context in practice. In so doing, this paper expands

on the gradually increasing OB and IO literature on how WPEBs may be encouraged in modern commercial organizations despite their many constraints.

This paper contributes to the broader stream of literature relating mindfulness to PEBs by exploring this question within the workplace context. It also contributes to extant literature outlining various theories of PEBs by showing that some of the same theories that apply to the private domain also apply to the workplace context, despite the many distinguishing features of the latter. Finally, our paper contributes to extant literature on varied interventions to enhance WPEBs in practice by exposing underlying mechanisms of how mindfulness enhances employee engagement in WPEBs.

**Implications and Value:** Since practicing mindfulness facilitates WPEBs among employees, we call for companies to offer mindfulness-based training programs, and highlight that such initiatives complement existing laws, regulations, and other interventions, and serve to expand the repertoire of tools supporting WPEBs. Through this paper, we aim to contribute to the burgeoning dialogue among OB and IO scholars regarding the role that organizations and organizational actors may play toward protecting the environment.

This study explores only one context, and certainly a wider range of industries and locations need to be evaluated to reach more far-reaching and generalizable implications. Nonetheless, this potentially adds value toward how developing a changed mindset, of mindfulness, can assist toward addressing the current ecological crisis.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, pro-environmental behaviors (PEBs), non-materialism, connectedness with nature, openness to change.