Mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale: conceptual analysis to address the “new normal”

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the inter-linkages of mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale as a solution to new normal, during the turbulent times of the pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach – Remote engagement is the biggest challenge that is faced by many organisations with their employees working remotely. This paper examines the relevance of mindfulness amidst all distractions that obstruct the employees to stay focussed in their work assignments while performing remotely. Therefore, a thorough literature survey has been made to analyse the conceptual relationship among mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale. Based on the conceptual analysis, a set of possible frameworks linking the three constructs has been stated for future research.

Findings – This conceptual paper has come up with few possible frameworks to model the assertions by investigating and corroborating it with quantitative or qualitative studies by the future researchers.

Research limitations/implications – This paper has tried to advocate the linkage of the three constructs, which is the need of the hour for setting the organisation to the new normal way of work.

Practical implications – The current paper suggests that the organisations can deal with the toughest challenge of engaging people remotely by practising mindfulness technique, and thereby, it would result in high morale leading to improved performance. This approach paves the way for leading a “new normal” even post-pandemic.

Originality/value – Due to the prevalence of the unforeseen situation of pandemic, organisations have no other way but to resort to remote work. Through the practice of mindfulness, the engagement of employees can be adhered to an extent, which results in enhanced employee morale, which can help the organisation to achieve its business objectives amidst this turbulent time and gradually resorts to function in the new normal.

Keywords Mindfulness, Remote engagement, Employee morale, New normal

Paper type Conceptual paper

“He whose mind is concentrated sees things as they really are.”– Buddha

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Introduction

Employee morale is a state of mind that reflects enthusiasm, zeal, satisfaction, contentment and overall attitude at one’s work. It is said to be the driver of productivity, as contented employees are likely to perform high. When the morale of employees is high, the organisation reaches to its full potential in terms of its business and profitability. But when the employees are working remotely, efforts need to be taken by the organisation to maintain, nurture and boost the morale of the employees and to cope with the remote work environment (Mishra and Jena, 2020). The organisation needs to create a positive culture wherein the individual employee feels as a vital part of the work teams, even in their own homes. From an employee’s perspective, working remotely at times lead to long working days spent at home, which eventually may lead to feelings of isolation and disconnect, resulting in a sharp drop in employee morale. To quell the impact of isolation and boost the morale, an equal amount of effort is also required by employees, both in a personal and professional capacity. Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) mention that a human mind keeps on wandering frequently, irrespective of what the person is doing now. This “wandering mind” keeps on considering events that has happened in the past or may happen in the future, leading to an unhappy mind. Thus, mindfulness is considered to make headway in organisational settings. It is quite essential to cultivate a mindful approach particularly in the context of remote working wherein distractions are inevitable.

The rapid evolving nature and spread of the pandemic, “COVID-19”, has reshaped the way business was being conducted in sweeping ways. In many affected countries, governments have mandated or advised work from home for all employees that resulted as an unanticipated situation for most organisations. The findings of one of the world’s leading research company state, after conducting a survey of 229 human resource leaders across countries, that nearly 50% of organisations reported 81% or more of their employees are working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis further reveals that post-pandemic, 41% of employees are likely to work remotely may be for a period (Gartner Inc Survey, 2020). Many companies including the tech giant, Facebook, are planning to adopt remote work on a permanent basis even after this pandemic ends.

There is a dire need to analyse responsibilities, tasks and roles to determine which work lends itself to a remote model and to review it quickly by bringing certain modifications in the existing policies of the organisation (Gartner Learning and Development Research Team, 2020). In this line, the IT company Facebook has planned to roll out a policy allowing employees to apply for permanent remote work arrangements. Many benefits accrue to being a remote worker, which includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions by avoiding the commute to work, increasing flexibility by saving time, enhancing quality of life and helping in concentration and accomplishment of work. This often translates into greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism and higher employee retention. For organisations, benefits include increased productivity, improved customer service and lower real estate costs. On the other hand, both employees and companies face challenges of this intervention. Employees report liabilities to work remotely, the most serious being workplace isolation and a sense of insecurity for lack of visibility (Larson et al., 2020; Osborne, 2020).

Companies engaged in managing remote employees cite loss of organisational synergy, increased concern about data security and a loss of management control over remote employees. In a study conducted by Buffer.com (2019), the state of remote work mentions that the employees working remotely have responded their top three major concerns as: inability to unplug, loneliness and lack of collaboration and communication. Moreover, amidst uncertainty, there exists fear, stress and a high amount of anxiety within the minds of the employees that may keep diverting them from mainstream work. The most
challenging task for a manager while managing remote employees is to engage them, particularly when it is driven by circumstances (in response to COVID-19) rather than choice. It may seem exciting for some time but gradually the concerns increase when employees are not engaged, resulting in lower motivation and in turn lessens productivity. It is common phenomenon for remote workers to feel less engaged, unfocussed and disconnected from the job and the organisation, as they are not in the office or with their teams. This will substantially have a detrimental effect on employee morale and thus affect productivity.

Hence, we tried to bring a conceptual derivation of the impact of mindfulness on remote engagement that would consequently affect employee morale. This paper suggests an interrelationship among mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale. The authors have tried to elaborate bring out the necessity of remote engagement as an essential business imperative in recent time of pandemic. Mindfulness as a pivotal concept got adopted to induce calmness and composure avoiding distractions and its relevance in the remote work environment. The rest of this paper discusses the interrelationships of the three constructs using a thorough literature survey. Finally, a conceptual framework has been proposed by interlinking all the constructs of the paper – mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale, providing sufficient platform for corroborating the possible frameworks as suggested both empirically and conceptually in future research.

Mindfulness as cognitive construct
The concept of “mindfulness” is not only pertinent to life domains such as health and well-being (Brown et al., 2007) but also has acquired an equivalent relevance in the field of industrial and organisational psychology in recent times. Having its roots of evolution from Eastern traditions (Conze, 1956; Hanh, 1976; Kabat-Zinn, 2005), this concept has an immense applicability in clinical and personality psychology. Mindfulness is well-thought-out to be the natural human capacity of being in a state of awareness and giving utmost attention to what is taking place in the present moment. The human mind is anticipated to ramble roughly half of the waking hours (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010), but mindfulness can stabilise attention to be in the present (Mrazek et al., 2012). Brown and Ryan (2003) defined mindfulness as “receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experiences”. We have considered mindfulness as an intrinsic state characterised by present-oriented consciousness.

A mindful individual does not ever reside on past happenings nor do they ponder about future actions. They are only concerned about the events or actions happening in the present moment. Mindfulness is a state of mind in which there exists an intense awareness of both internal experiences such as emotions, thoughts and behavioural intentions and the external happenings around an individual. A mindful person processes information at a preconceptual stage. Thus, an individual in a mindful state is immersed in experiencing the present situation or action too intensely without being judgmental about it. Referred as an innate human capacity, mindfulness differs in degree of its presence both in terms of persons and situations (Brown et al., 2007). It has also got an attitudinal element through which mindfulness gets permeated with the conviction of open-minded curiosity, compassion and kindness (Gunaratana, 2011). The classical understanding of mindfulness reflected in available literature hauls substantial ambiguity for understanding how mindfulness navigates in organisational functioning.

Research findings state that the evolution of the concept has been traced across religious philosophies. The spirit of it is deeply rooted in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Trousselard et al., 2014). Mindfulness has been knotted with Hinduism since
ages. From Upanishads to the Indian Holy Script of Bhagavad Gita, it has emphasised on yoga and Vedic meditation embossing mindfulness. The traditional Hindu concept of mindfulness restrains the movements of the mind during our everyday activities. It has been found that people practicing yoga regularly have higher levels of mindfulness than with those who are slightly involved or not involved in the yoga practices (Gaiswinkler and Unterrainer, 2016). Mindfulness is a key element in Buddhist meditation too. Hanh (1999), the world-famous Vietnamese Buddhist teacher for world peace and justice, designates mindfulness as being “at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings”. According to Buddhism, mindfulness involves “attention to the present moment”, it is “inclusive” and “it accepts everything without judging or reacting” (Hanh, 1999). Similar to Buddhism and Hinduism, the essence of mindfulness appears in the Bible and Islam also. Both Christianity and Islam believe that through prayer one can apply mindfulness to daily life. Hanh (1999) highlighted that when right mindfulness is present, it influences thinking process leading to right thinking, right speech and so on. Thus, right mindfulness is the energy or vigour that keeps us immersed in the present moment. It is a cognitive state of awareness that keeps an individual focussed, attentive and absorbed in his present action or event.

Research reveals that meditation practices and techniques enhances mindfulness (Chiesa and Serretti, 2009; Gross et al., 2004) resulting in variation of mindfulness among individuals. This perspective brings forth trait mindfulness (Brown and Ryan, 2003; Brown et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2007). Yet, at the core, it has been argued that mindfulness is a psychological state that varies from moment to moment within an individual and does not require meditation (Allen and Kiburz, 2011; Bishop et al., 2004; Brown and Ryan, 2003; Dane, 2011; Glomb et al., 2011) reflecting state mindfulness. The intensity in which an individual gets fully engrossed in the present event and the duration till which he is engrossed varies between-person level (trait) and within-person level (state) categorisation (Hülsheger et al., 2013). Research reveals that, because of its dispositional properties, individuals may differ in the capacity of being mindful (Baer et al., 2006; Giluk, 2009; Walach et al., 2006), indicating that, mindfulness, primarily a state-level construct, can also be evaluated at the trait level.

With an attempt to bring together the entire above discussion, we define the construct of mindfulness as a state of consciousness, focussing on both mental and physical phenomena occurred now. Thus, it is validated as a cognitive construct that has immense relevance during unprecedented challenging and uncertain times to reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms. It drives in positivity, attentiveness and well-being. Given the wide attentional breadth of the concept of mindfulness, this paper also examines the influence of mindfulness on remote engagement level of employees, which is the need of the time.

**Remote engagement of employees**

Remote work implies changing the central location of work away from the usual office space. It is basically a work arrangement in which the employees do not have to commute to a central workspace such as an office. Remote work is defined as “working outside the conventional workplace and communicating by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology” (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Remote employees have the privilege to work on their job assignments without having to travel to an office each day from nine-to-five timings. They can have their own personal flexibility while earning a living. Factors such as long hours of commutes, dwindling of office space and overuse of open workspaces do not allow the employee for focussed work. With the advancement in technology, the benefit of remote working is being capitalised by both the employees and employers resulting in a win–win situation. This remote location working has become the new norm across
workplace in response to the critical and extraordinary time that we are witnessing now during the pandemic. Even the workplace will never be the same post-pandemic.

Companies such as Google, Apple Inc., Facebook Inc. and Amazon.com prefer their employees to do their jobs from home. Tech analyst Gartner has mentioned that many companies are planning to shift 20% of their onsite employees to permanent remote positions as a direct result of COVID-19. The digital tools are facilitating live-stream events and online meetings resulting in increased employee productivity and saving on unnecessary travel, time, costs and carbon miles. Many cutting-edge research findings reveal that remote working not only affects employee productivity but also influences employee creativity and morale. A study conducted by the Owl Labs State of Remote Work (2017) mentions that employees prefer remote work because of some significant tangible benefits such as reduction in daily commutes and workplace distractions. Moreover, the employees consider it as an effective tool to improve work–life balance that allows them to fulfil family care responsibilities. These benefits boost the employee morale and lift the employees’ spirits for better performance. Knowledge workers such as computer programmers, academicians, researchers, call centre executives who mostly perform their work on laptop—tasks such as creating software code, reports or spreadsheets and writing manuscripts—tend to be slightly more satisfied thus resulting in higher performance and increased morale. The jobs that are highly complex in nature and require more concentration can be performed better when the distractions of the office are eliminated (Golden and Gajendran, 2019). Golden and Gajendran (2019) conducted a study comprising 273 remote working employees from sales, marketing, accounting, engineering and other departments of an organisation. The study reveals that employees whose jobs were highly complex in nature and also do not require significant collaboration or social support performed better in a remote environment than in the office set-up. Away from the traditional work environment, there arises an essential requirement for the employee to be motivated and engaged to maximise the effectiveness of the remote work setting.

Employees are said to be engaged when they are enthusiastic, passionate, committed and deeply immersed in their work (Gallup, 2017). It is therefore considered as a prominent construct for promoting organisational success (Ghadi et al., 2013; Kahn, 1990; Malinowski and Lim, 2015; Rich et al., 2010), enhancing organisational commitment (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008) and job satisfaction (Rayton and Yalabik, 2014). Employee engagement is a psychological state of the employee that is characterised by passion, commitment and willingness to invest one’s discretionary effort while rendering his/her job (Erickson, 2005). It is an emotional state of employee that is described as a state of vigour, dedication and absorption while executing his job in the organisation (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). Kahn (1990) mentions that an employee is said to engaged implicitly when he is physically, psychologically and emotionally present in the work, implying he is attentive, focussed, connected and integrated in the role that his job demands.

Thus, employee engagement can be defined as the “discretionary effort” portraying extreme passion and absorption in the work, pride and identity in the organisation, enthusiasm and alertness in the job. This concept has wide implications, as it is considered as an important predictor of the individual employee’s, team and organisational outcomes (Bakker and Albrecht, 2018). In their study, Bakker and Albrecht (2018) have highlighted the top-down and bottom-up approaches to influence the engagement level of the employees. At the organisational level, human resource management system and practices such as training and development, performance management system and so on influences the levels of engagement. This is considered as top-down approach. Similarly, individual employees also influence their own engagement levels through job crafting. Job crafting
refers to the physical and cognitive changes that the employees make while performing their job on a regular basis (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). It serves as an effective bottom-up strategy that results in higher engagement levels and enhanced performance (Gordon et al., 2017; Van Wingerden et al., 2017). An engaged employee being open to new experiences generates new and creative ideas that enables entrepreneurial traits (Gawke et al., 2017; Orth and Volmer, 2017). In this context, when the employees operate remotely that too in challenging times, the organisation needs to reinvent various strategies and techniques to induce genuine excitement and enthusiasm within the employees that would curb the fear of unknowns of tomorrow and would help them to keep focus in the present moment.

**Remote engagement as imperative for business**

Remote engagement is one of the toughest challenges faced by the organisation in the latter part of 21st century. Reports mention that employees spending 60%-80% of their time working remotely are most likely to be engaged (Gallup.com, 2020). Remote engagement, similar to the employee engagement in the physical workspace, creates a level of personal commitment and involvement of employees towards the organisation, its mission, values and ethics. It serves as an opportunity to achieve better work–life balance and maximise productivity for each hour worked. Thus, employee engagement in remote workplace drives organisational performance. It is obvious that isolation, loneliness and lack of visibility would affect the employee morale while working away from the workspace for a longer time, thus making them unfocussed and inattentive. Working remotely for a longer period makes the employee feel alienated and depressed whereby his performance gets affected. Remote working implies detachment from office atmosphere, which not only affects interoffice relationship but also influences the engagement level of an employee. Thus, remote engagement can be defined as the agility, sense of communality and encouragement the workforce exhibits while they operate from a remote location.

Engaging the employees at the workplace seems easier than engaging them in a remote location. The physical proximity of supervisor and the teammates adds to an employee’s passion, involvement and desire to align his own goals with that of the organisation’s goals. But in the case of remote working, there is a lack of physical proximity between the employee and his supervisor. Therefore, engaging remote employees is a challenge at the best of times. The drivers of remote engagement have been under-researched as compared to the drivers of employee engagement at the workplace. Trust plays a major role in virtual employment relationship. Trust begets faster decision-making and creates an environment that fosters greater creativity among remote employees (Derven, 2007).

In remote work environment, effective communication helps in maintaining trust between an employee and his supervisor/team/co-workers. Transparent and consistent communication results in efficient team collaboration. Kerber et al. (2004) mentions that remote employees stay more committed to team goals if they are in constant connection with each other. Establishing communal feelings to stay connected with the team and developing bonds amongst each other enhances engagement of remote employees. Embracing remote learning platforms to reskill and upskill will instinctively keep the employees engaged while working remotely. These learning opportunities can be expanded to segments such as employee health and well-being, which may be of immense help for the employees working remotely. Greater autonomy and flexibility empower the employees to feel more connected to the organisation thereby exhibiting enhanced engagement in remote work environment. Finally, every team manager has to be an effective leader to drive its team virtually by offering encouragement and emotional support. It is the manager that must establish “rules
of engagement” to drive his team by reducing isolation and thereby promoting a sense of belongingness that ultimately result in enhanced employee morale.

Remote work at some point of time may seem very secluded and lonely because of lack of physical proximity, particularly in an uncertain time, wherein gloom shades have surrounded the entire business environment. Fear of job loss, feeling of insecurity and lack of visibility may lead to feel less vigorous, less dedicated and less absorbed, thus affecting the performance of the employee (Sonnentag et al., 2010). This anxiety and fear can be better managed by adopting mindfulness techniques to build more resilience, and moreover, a mindful employee stays focused in the present assignment, actively listens to his colleagues and efficiently navigates from conflicts, thus increasing the level of engagement amongst remote employees. Enhanced engagement level leads to a high morale of employees, resulting in an increase in production level.

Mindfulness at work

There has been an increase in the popularity of the concept of mindfulness within an organisation for its usefulness and applicability to workforce dynamics. Deriving consensus from varied literature, mindfulness encompasses being attentive to and aware of the present-moment experiences. Glomb et al. (2012) mention that mindfulness improves social relationship, resilience and task performance. Research findings also reveal that mindfulness adds on to task commitment, enjoyment and memory (Levy et al., 2012). Contemporary organisations have resorted for mindfulness training interventions that have led to enhanced perception and behavioural approach of employees and have also influenced work productivity (Hyland et al., 2015). The most significant and large companies such as Google, General Mills, Intel and Abode (Gelles, 2015; Schaufenbuel, 2015) have implemented various mindful training programmes and have documented the benefits they accrued in terms of meeting employee well-being and raising personal and professional effectiveness of their workforce.

A wide range of industries across sectors – hardware and software development companies such as Microsoft, Apple, Cisco and SAP; social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter; clothing and furniture companies such as Nike and IKEA; global financial firms and insurance companies such as Goldman Sachs and numerous prominent organisations offer mindfulness-based programmes to their employees (Vonderlin et al., 2020). Research reveals that mindfulness covers numerous benefits from the aspect of workplace functioning (Hulsheger et al., 2013). Such mindfulness programme raises self-regulating the attention in the present moment (Glomb et al., 2011) and therefore enabling individual to focus on the task at hand, without getting them distracted to extraneous stimuli (Good et al., 2016). Mindfulness results in the improvement of three important aspects of attention, that is, stability, control and efficiency. Mindfulness stabilises the human mind to remain vigilant for longer hours both in visual and listening tasks. As an individual trait, mindfulness suggests that it influences interpersonal behaviour and thus workgroup relationships (Beard, 2014).

Mindfulness sparks curiosity (Baas et al., 2014), unlocks new perspectives (Jacobs and Blustein, 2008), develops problem-solving approach (Lebuda et al., 2016) and eases handling uncertainties (Ostafin and Kassman, 2012). Chaskalson (2011) mentions in his research that mindfulness has a positive impact on a variety of prominent workplace-related outcomes including creativity, innovation, resilience, work engagement, productivity, communication skills, reduced conflict, absenteeism and turnover. Further, Levy et al. (2012) asserted in their research findings, by comparing both an experimental group with the control group, that mindfulness meditation enhances task endurance and dedication but declines the rate of
multitasking. Mindfulness discourages pessimistic thinking and results in a better goal attainment. This has been found in a research conducted by Seligman (2006) in a large insurance company. He found that employees practising mindfulness had better sales performance than the ones who did not practice. Moreover, other than performance-based outcomes, mindfulness also impacts job-relevant outcomes. Several researches reveal that it promotes job satisfaction and helps in the prevention of burnout from emotional exhaustion (Krasner et al., 2009; Oman et al., 2008; Roeser et al., 2013). Thus, workplace mindfulness not only enhances individual well-being and performance but also improves the productivity, agility and innovative strength of organisations overall (Greiser and Martini, 2018). Our observation from the above literature reinforces that mindfulness, as a cognitive construct, has a tremendous impact over business success.

Mindfulness enables employees in the organisation to concentrate in the “here and now”, and this concentration is best described as a broad attentional aspect of an individual (Dane, 2010; Singh et al., 2008). As a result, mindfulness allows employees to give due attention to the tasks they are engaged in, without compromising their situational awareness and cognitive functionality of the task in which they are immersed. Workplace mindfulness is not only meant for individual employee only, but it must be within and across teams. This implies that it is a multi-level concept, associated with benefits for individual employees and for the organisation.

Significance of employee morale
Employee morale is one of the most essential components of business operations. Bowles and Cooper (2009) defined employee morale as, “the state of individual psychological wellbeing based upon a sense of confidence, usefulness and purpose”. It is stated as the employees’ capacity to keep their faith in their organisation and its goals. Haddock (2010) mentions that employee morale refers to the positive and supportive feeling of employees towards their organisation. Morale is considered as a mental state of an employee that encourages him to perform his job efficiently and effectively. Employee morale is a personal phenomenon that leads to job satisfaction. Employee morale is a group concept, as it describes the general attitudes of employees working in an organisation. Further, Johnsrud (1996) states that employee morale is characterised with positive emotions of excitement and enthusiasm, resulting in increased commitment and loyalty to the organisation.

Research reveals that the three most important characteristics of an organisation with high morale are:

1. freedom and autonomy to the employees to perform their tasks;
2. rewarding the employees for exceeding the organisational expectations; and
3. providing immediate attention and solution to the grievances of the employees (Ransom, 1995).

Fard et al. (2010) state that employee morale plays a vital role in setting a healthy workplace. He further has mentioned in his research that a high level of employee morale is associated with creativity and innovation, job satisfaction and employee commitment for the organisation, thus leading to an increase in organisational performance. Thus, employee morale is associated with persistence and energy, cohesion and cooperation and enthusiastic striving (Hart, 1994; Hart and Conn, 1992; Hart et al., 2000; Smith, 1966). Therefore, we define employee morale as an employee’s positive state of mind comprising a blend of emotions and attitude that results in high level of energy, spirit and willingness to render his job leading to organisational performance. Employee morale may vary in its degree of presence
ranging from very high level to very low level. High morale is evident from depiction of positive feeling of the employee such as enthusiasm and willingness to cooperate. Similarly, low morale portrays negative feelings of employees such as dissatisfaction, discouragement and dislike for the job resulting in increased employee attrition level (Kanimozhi and Vinthukumar, 2018). Employees with a high morale are more engaged depicting a strong willingness to work harder and are more committed to the organisation’s goals than the ones with low morale (Bowles and Cooper, 2009).

It is examined that a high moral accords high work effort resulting in enhanced organisational commitment, increased job satisfaction, induced creative initiatives, developed sense of pride in one's job and an upsurge in the desire to put the attainment of group goals ahead of personal goals, thereby enhancing an organisation’s performance (Abbott, 2003; Griffin et al., 2004; Hart et al., 2000). Similarly, low morale corresponds to high absenteeism, labour turnover and unsettled grievances, thereby obstructing the achievement of the desired outcomes of the organisation (Burke and Nelson, 1998; Cappelli et al., 1997; Firth et al., 2004). Low morale hampers company income, productivity, financial competitiveness and organisational objectives (Sauermann and Cohen, 2010). Low morale can be an outcome of abusive managerial behaviour and disrespect (Chungsup et al., 2012). Sometimes low morale also results in loss of interest of the employees, especially when they do not receive appreciation from managers for their efforts and tasks performed (Zeynep and Huckman, 2008). Few vital consequences of low morale are employee turnover and absenteeism (Abbot, 2003). Ngambi (2011) identifies the leadership approach as one of the factors that influences employee morale in the organisation. Several research studies have identified a strong correlation between morale and productivity (Akintayo, 2012). One of the most prominent benefits that accrues from high employee morale is enhanced performance. Improved performance is a result of performance both at the individual level and that of the organisation as a whole (Bowles and Cooper, 2009). This accentuates the importance of boosting the morale of employees to drive performance and grow more stronger, by developing vigorous organisations (Shirom, 2011). These organisations are expected to be highly innovative to respond to the changes in the environment in a proactive manner.

Theoretical integration and development of conceptual model
Mindfulness implies to have complete focus and full attention on present moment. It is also termed as the ability to regulate attention. “Attention” is termed as the process of focussing conscious awareness over a continued period on the present experience (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown and Ryan, 2003). “Present experience” is often referred as “present focus” (Feldman et al., 2007) and is stated as being “here and now” (Kabat-Zinn, 2000) to restrain mind from wandering. Focussing in the present moment has improved individual employees’ creativity (Haas and Langer, 2014) and decision-making skill (Dane and Brummel, 2013). Mindfulness also results in improved employee resilience leading to better job-related performances (Kroon et al., 2015). In this turbulent time of global pandemic, a mindful individual reflects a better understanding of work environment that results in remote engagement.

Thus, a mindful employee contributes immensely to develop better interpersonal relations and to enhance the level of engagement that would later result in a positive organisational culture. A positive organisational culture implies creating an environment where employees are valued, secured, supported and respected. It fosters a culture that keeps employees happy, engaged, focussed and content. A positive work culture alleviates emotional exhaustion and promote an environment that consistently supports joy at workplace. It has been empirically found that mindfulness has a negative relationship with emotional exhaustion, thereby equipping the individuals to cope with challenging situations.
proactively (Reb et al., 2015). Alexandra Croswell, Assistant Professor of psychiatry at Weill Institute for Neurosciences at the University of California, San Francisco, stated:

“When you’re focused on what’s going on in the present, you can receive information to the highest degree possible”.

“But when we are spending our brainpower on what’s happened in the past or going to happen in the future, it limits the information that we’re gathering from the present moment”.

“Being engaged and present in the workplace”, she adds, “means that you’re able to be more aware of the situation at hand and have higher levels of emotional intelligence”.

The rapid shift to remote working arrangements has emerged because of the pandemic that has disrupted the business activity across the globe. Still, 70% of employers are struggling to adapt to remote work (SHRM COVID 19 report, April 2020). Many organisations and their employees are still transitioning to this new way of working. This compulsive and unexpected remote working set-up may get prolonged even post-COVID-19 period. Ascertaining remote employee engagement is a challenge for many organisations, as there tends to be enormous distractions relating to the uncertainty prevailing in the recent times. These startling crises may serve as a huge hindrance on employee morale. Thus, the related challenge that arises, if employees remain disengaged and affected by the unsettling and frustrating time, is low morale, which ultimately affects productivity. A recent survey by SHRM reveals that most organisations are finding it tough to maintain employee morale during the pandemic. Research reveals that employee engagement serves as a vital component in boosting employee morale (Yeh, 2013). Thus, the priority of all businesses while operating in a remote environment is to maintain high employee morale, which in turn results in positive organisational culture.

The survey of literature suggests that there has been a reasonable amount of research on both mindfulness and engagement level of employees. Similarly, literature findings advocate the positive relationship between engagement levels and employee morale. However, we assert here in this study the inter-connectedness of these constructs and their relevance prevailing in the context of remote working culture. Thus, we have attempted to conceptualise the relationships among mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale. Here, we have intended to derive a conceptual model by stating the consequences that are more likely to get reflected as the spillover effect of mindfulness at work on remote engagement resulting in high employee morale. The lack of research is even more pronounced in the context of the workplace. The current paper conceptually analyses the three concepts and identifies few elements common to them.

One factor possibly common to the three constructs – mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale – is creating a positive organisational culture. A positive organisational culture encompasses shared vision, purpose, beliefs and values. It results in improved teamwork, enhances employee morale, increases productivity and enhances retention of the workforce. Similarly, we have identified joy at work as a possible common consequence derived from the interrelationship among mindfulness, remote engagement and employee morale. Joy at work focuses on the outcome of positive psychological experience at personal, interpersonal and organisational levels (Jena and Pradhan, 2017). It measures all the positive experiences that an employee witnesses such as gratitude, compassion, tranquillity and inspiration from his work. Thus, it is considered as a positive cognitive feeling of satisfaction derived from
workplace. Table 1 below portrays an overall understanding on the relationships among the constructs in workplace settings that have been derived from extensive literature survey. The framework suggested various possible relationships that are expected to generate as competing models after being explored through qualitative, quantitative or mixed interventions.

**Implications for “new normal”**

In today’s difficult time, during the pandemic, remote working is the new normal. Businesses are adapting to the critical situation by leveraging technology for collaboration to ensure uninterrupted work. Organisations are proactively developing new policies to make remote working effective and efficient. During this critical phase, organisation is looking at new ways to ensure its workforce functions seamlessly and maintains business continuity. For constant vying of employee focus, a conducive work environment is an absolute necessity. In case of remote working, the work environment is completely beyond the control of the organisation. This has encouraged the requirement of mindfulness to deepen employee engagement that can actively encourage creative work and would serve as a hindrance against distractions.

Mindfulness encourages employee engagement, boosts work productivity and creates a strong employee experience. Mindfulness is a technique that drives our focus and full attention only on the present state. Dr Tara Swart, a neurologist and MIT Sloan Lecturer, states that humans are bad at multitasking. He further stated that mindfulness builds mental resilience and enables to bounce back faster from distractions. Mentioning about distractions, at this juncture where the entire world grapples with the pandemic, feeling anxious about health and safety, insecurity about the job and many other factors leading to fear, anxiety and stress among the employees may impact productivity. The unprecedented times requirement of remote work was a sudden transition for many employees. Therefore, it is essential for the organisation to keep its employees focussed and engaged in their work. The prevalence of this tragic threat of the disease and increasing number of casualties may destabilise the level of concentration and attentiveness of employees. Moreover, staying away from customary official set-up for a prolonged period may also affect the employee morale adversely. As per a recent SHRM survey report, 71% of organisations are trying hard to get themselves equip and adopt to remote work culture, and in addition to it, 65% of the organisations mentioned that keeping the employee engaged in a remote set-up and at the same time maintaining their morale high are top challenges.

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<td>Employee retention</td>
<td>Causal relationship considering any other related construct in terms of intervening variable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MF → ? → EM</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MF → RE → ?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** MF stands for mindfulness; EM stands for employee morale; RE stands for remote engagement; “?” refers to currently unknown constructs that may play a role in the relationship among the constructs mentioned above
Therefore, during these times of distress, it is highly essential for the organisation to adopt certain practices that would help in enhancing engagement level of employees boosting up their morale for improved performance. It is essential that both the organisation and the employee need to adopt various mindfulness techniques to keep employee focussed and engaged, gearing them with high morale, thus encouraging business operations to run smoothly by helping it to navigate into the “new normal”.

**Conclusion and scope for future research**

A wide spectrum of research reveals that a mindful employee stays engaged, focussed and productive. Moreover, the relevance of this technique increases when most of the workforce has undergone a complete transformation by being forced to operate remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has posed a tough call for the organisation to undergo deliberate changes in policies and processes to engage the remote employees curbing their distractions.

At this juncture of despair, where remote working becomes the sole solution to continue business operations, mindfulness techniques adopted by the employees and engagement practices adopted by the organisation would raise the employee morale, thus contributing to productivity. This paper, therefore, has attempted to highlight the interconnectedness of the constructs that would create a conducive platform to elevate the business organisation to operate in the “new normal”.

The third annual Future Workforce Report – 2019 estimated that by 2028, 73% of all business teams will have remote workers to deliver higher productivity at lower costs. The recent survey report conducted by employee recognition and rewards company O.C. Tanner mentions that post-crisis, both employee and organisation would have positive perception about remote work culture. The report findings also mention that while welcoming the culture and practice of remote work, still there is prevalence of “anxiety”, “fear” and “isolation” in the minds of the employees. Thus, to deal with, organisations need to adopt various mindfulness techniques and practices to keep the employees focussed, positive, energised and proactive. Organisations need to inculcate a very engaging culture by providing amicable balance between the personal and professional life of the employees. Even if working from remote location, proper techniques and strategies need to be adopted for providing continuous learning opportunities through e-learning platforms. Similarly, transparent communication channels and proper team collaboration also need to be fostered by the organisation even if the workforce operates virtually.

This paper explores the relationship of the constructs, and based on the review of literature, a conceptual analysis has been presented. The summary suggests that mindfulness is a key element for engaging an employee and in turn also boosts employee morale for enhancement of employee performance at this perilous time. To have a better clarity of their relationship, a conceptual framework has been suggested and several possible models have been stated that can be investigated and validated in future research studies.

**References**


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Further reading


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