

Mindiac: Mindfulness for the Sustainability Professional

Executive Summary

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Kaylin Ayotte & Isabel Burdge

In recent years, contemplative discourse has guided fields as diverse as psychology, medicine, and spiritual practice. With sustainability's emergence as a caring profession, we believe mindfulness can contribute to the conversation. Exercises that develop skills such as active listening, preventative self-care, and self-awareness are explored through the five facets of mindfulness: non-reactivity, observing, acting with awareness, describing, and non-judging of experience (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietmeyer, & Toney, 2006). Thus, we have created an online publication called Mindiac that utilizes the five facets of mindfulness to help sustainability professionals develop and refine intangible skills that will help them solve sustainability problems. Through interviews, framework identification, research, and online publishing software, fifteen articles on mindfulness were created. The six-part publication will equip sustainability professionals with tools to navigate complex situations in applied settings. The publication can be accessed using this link: <https://joom.ag/G9fa>

The success of sustainability professionals is mainly measured by the real-world change they enact (Brundiars, Wiek, 2017). This success depends heavily on developing professional skills like active listening, empathy, self-compassion, self-care, self-awareness, and battling burnout (Brundiars, Wiek, 2017). Although academic settings excel in providing content knowledge and methodological expertise, academia is not proficient in guiding students in the acquisition of these skill sets. Therefore, students are often thrown into learning these skills through volunteering, internships, or employment opportunities. While all are valuable experiences, these opportunities are insufficient in providing self-guided practices to sharpen skills, reflection, peer mentoring, and evidence-supported practices (Brundiars, Wiek, 2017). Plus, while many enter the field because that want to make a positive impact, they often find themselves overwhelmed while tackling sustainability challenges. They experience mental and emotional distress because of the urgency, complexity, and interconnectedness inherent in sustainability issues (Brundiars, Wiek, 2017). Mindiac focuses on enhancing inner sustainability through mindfulness, which emphasizes beneficial elements for the social pillar of sustainability. Exercises included in the publication like active listening and empathy foster increased social abilities. The same intangible skills learned through mindfulness also enhance productivity in the workplace. Through improved self and emotional awareness, preventative self-care, and observation, mindfulness practitioners learn skill sets that help with negotiation, effective

communication, handling high workloads, and improve self-confidence in decision making abilities. A study by Slutsky, Chin, Raye, and Creswell (2018) found that employees who participated in a six-week mindfulness training seminar displayed higher levels of focus, conflict resolution, job satisfaction, rational thinking, and emotional resilience when compared with employees who only participated in a half day mindfulness seminar. Simply put, happy, productive workers are better for the company, individual, and economy as a whole. Although mindfulness training has a focus on internal sustainability, environmental attitudes and behaviors are brought to the forefront when internal awareness of values are discovered. A study by Ericson, Kjørstad, and Barstad (2014) suggests that, “Well-being, empathy, and awareness of values can in turn lead to more sustainable behaviors.” Assuming our intentions align with environmental stewardship, mindfulness can improve the individual’s impact on the environment. Hence, providing a publication with the tools and resources needed to work on a diverse range of skill sets is necessary for success in the sustainability field.

Initially, we developed and administered a survey to gauge the interest in and general knowledge about sustainability among millennials. Our stakeholders are our readers, but as the project progressed, our audience shifted from millennials to sustainability professionals. However, parts of the data collected is still relevant. The survey group showed a preference for online articles versus printed articles, with 68.7% of millennials rarely reading printed magazines and 66.3% reading articles online regularly. As a result, we changed the format of our publication to be online. Respondents were familiar with present awareness (the observation facet) as an aspect of mindfulness, but were not inclusive of the other four facets: non-reactivity, non-judgmentalism, acting on autopilot, and describing and labeling with words. The publication aims to provide our audience with a more complete picture of mindfulness. Only 14.5% of respondents were not interested in reading a mindfulness magazine, so we expect the publication to be well received. As independent project managers, we did not work with a direct partner. However, the survey provided us with valuable information about what our readers know about mindfulness, that they are interested in reading about mindfulness in an online publication, and that they desire to incorporate sustainability into their lives further.

We created our own tool to help us defend specific connections between facets and skills using psychological data, formal mechanisms, and exercises that improve those mechanisms. We start with the facets, which we learned from the Baer et. al (2006) framework. Then, we identify the mechanisms behind each facet using a paper from Hölzel et. al (2011). Next, using cross-checked psychological data research, we addressed how each mechanism affected specific areas of the brain. Then, we researched self-guided mindfulness exercises that impacted the associated brain area. Finally, we connected the exercises to skills they directly improve using the Brundiers-Wiek (2017) framework and evidence supporting the exercises. Additionally, the exercises were a useful tool in bringing the psychological concepts to life. The key intervention points in the publication are the practices, so the tool we created to formulate arguments supporting those practices was significant.

The scope of this project was creating a publication, and did not include measuring outcomes. Our key benchmarks for the publication included: evidence based interventions, engaging content, credible and diverse perspectives from experts, and a storytelling dynamic. These benchmarks resulted in a mindfulness toolkit for sustainability professionals. After reading the publication, a sustainability professional will be informed about mindfulness, why it matters, and how the practice impacts brain function. With consistent practice, the exercises provided

within the publication will enhance the five skills (active listening, self-compassion, empathy, preventative self-care, self-awareness) – elevating the sustainability professional’s performance. The next steps would be to test the effectiveness of the project. The publication features pop-up rating screens that encourage readers to provide feedback on the content. Analysis of the in-publication responses would be a first step in evaluating the success of the publication. We envision outcomes to be measured by focus groups on user experience, effectiveness of content, barriers of implementation, and validation of intervention points.