

# Why Companies Are Turning To Meditation And Yoga To Boost The Bottom Line

07/11/2013 12:38 pm ET | Updated Apr 01, 2015

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MADISON, Wis. – As a half-dozen women filter into a yoga studio on a recent afternoon, passing glowing candles and Buddhist statuary, they absorb the ethereal voice of a woman crooning praises to the earth via a boombox set on a bare wooden floor. They sit on yoga mats, gaze toward foliage outside and draw in a collective breath, echoing the instructor leading this midday meditation class.

They are not here on vacation. Nor are they at a spa or a gym. For the women gathered here, this is part of the workday at Promega Corp., a biotech company on the outskirts of this university town. They are here on company time, paying rates heavily subsidized by their employer, because the people running Promega have concluded that meditation classes -- along with yoga, ubiquitous fitness centers, workspaces infused with natural light, and healthy meals -- contribute to a happier, healthier working experience. And happier, healthier workers make for a stronger business.

In other parts of Promega's expansive campus, scientists are scribbling on whiteboards in pursuit of fresh applications derived from the genome. Line workers are inspecting DNA analysis kits used by crime scene investigators, then depositing them into orange boxes bearing the company logo. Executives occupying conference rooms plot the conquest of new markets in the Middle East and Asia.

All of these pursuits are central components of a private business that employs 1,200 people worldwide and claims \$300 million in annual revenues. So, too, is the scene in the meditation class, Promega executives assert.

"You create a culture of wellness," says Promega's chief medical officer, Ashley G. Anderson Jr. "If you create a culture in which vibrant physicality is an admired thing, you've achieved a lot. A healthy workforce is a productive workforce."

Across a widening swath of the American corporate landscape, meditation, yoga and other practices once confined to the bohemian fringes are emerging as new techniques toward the harvesting of profit. Promega is among the increasing ranks of companies that have come to embrace so-called mindfulness activities -- concentrated meditation aimed at sharpening focus and reducing stress -- in a bid to improve the well-being of their workforces and, by extension, the bottom line.

This is no gut-level gamble. A growing body of research suggests that yoga and meditation may reduce the stress that tends to assail bodies confined to desks for hours at a time. Companies are investing in the notion that limiting stress will translate into fewer employee absences, lower health care costs and higher morale, encouraging workers to stick around.

Many of the companies that have launched such programs have stripped meditation of any hint of Eastern spiritual provenance, reducing it to a management elixir aimed at capturing the full potential of the people cashing the paychecks. Chade-Meng Tan, a widely celebrated Silicon Valley meditation teacher whose specially designed unit, Search Inside Yourself, has been taught to more than 1,000 Google employees, describes the objective as cultivating "emotional intelligence," or EI.

"Everybody knows this EI thing is good for their career," [Meng recently told Wired magazine](#). "And every company knows that if their people have EI, they're gonna make a shitload of money."

No one really knows how many companies have adopted meditation and yoga practices, but the number is clearly on the rise. Approximately one-fourth of all major American employers now deliver some version of stress reduction, [according to journalist David Gelles](#), whose forthcoming book, Mindful Work, explores the spread of meditation and yoga inside the business world -- a trend now reaching beyond Silicon Valley.

At Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, workers begin shifts with breathing exercises designed to focus them on the task at hand and clear their minds of distractions. General Mills, the food behemoth, has infused much of its corporate culture with mindfulness meditation.

"It's about training our minds to be more focused, to see with clarity, to have spaciousness for creativity and to feel connected," the company's deputy general counsel Janice Marturano tells Gelles. "That compassion to ourselves, to everyone around us -- our colleagues, customers -- that's what the training of mindfulness is really about."

The programs available to employees are as varied as the individual philosophies of their employers, but they share one basic understanding: Stress is an expensive threat to the balance sheet. Mindfulness is an antidote to stress.

Stress harms human health, resulting in higher medical bills borne by employers. Stress interferes with sleep, yielding employees whose judgment may be impaired, making them prone to costly mistakes. Stress shuts down the sort of creative thinking that can generate profitable ideas.

Workplace stress respects no boundaries, following workers home and reconstituting itself as family stress that then finds its way back to the cubicle in a feedback loop of tension. Unchecked, this sort of stress can fill an office with burnt-out people consumed with managing dread, anger and anxiety instead of the company's business.

"When people go home and they have had a stressful day, that influences the family," says Bill Linton, Promega's founder and chief executive officer. "The dog gets kicked. It has an effect in the community. That's not a good outcome."

## WELL-BEING AS A SKILL

Mark Bertolini, chief executive officer of Aetna, the medical insurance giant, frequently tells the story of the broken neck he suffered in a skiing accident nearly a decade ago. The resulting pain was excruciating. So excruciating that it set him on a desperate search for any therapy that might provide relief. This is how he stumbled into yoga and meditation. This is how he eventually came to have his company make meditation and yoga classes available to employees.

"Some people think I'm weird," Bertolini says. "They say I'm only doing it because of my own experiences. And I say, 'I may be weird, but I'm also in charge of the company.'"

But to those who may claim the boss is being frivolous, Bertolini emphasizes that the program was provoked by concern for the sorts of corporate interest that get captured in a spreadsheet: Aetna determined that workers in its most stress-prone positions were racking up medical bills that exceeded those of other employees by an average of \$2,000 a year. [Last year, Aetna reduced its](#)

[health care costs by 7 percent](#) -- a savings the CEO pegs in part to limiting stress through meditation and yoga.

Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has emerged as an authority in the nascent field of studying the effects of Asian-inspired meditation practices on the traditionally un-Zen-like domain of the business world. In the summer of 1997, he led a research project that studied the impacts of a limited meditation program on the brain and immune system functions of workers at Promega.

One team of workers engaged in a weekly meditation class led by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the medical professor celebrated as a pioneer of mindfulness training. A control group went about their lives as usual, without meditation. Following the eight-week class, Davidson's researchers hooked up the participants' to an EEG machine to record their brain activity. The team gave participants flu shots and then took blood samples. The people who got the meditation showed "changes in their brain function toward ways associated with well-being and resilience," Davidson says. They also showed "improved response to vaccine."

For Linton, Promega's CEO, those findings merely reinforced what he accepted as truth. "It affirmed for me the value of mindfulness and meditation," he says.

Davidson is the founder of [The Center for Investigating Healthy Minds](#), a Madison research entity that has become the center of efforts to study the impacts of meditation and yoga in schools and in the business world. Many of the corporate programs the center is pursuing involve quick sessions of meditation incorporated in the workday at regular intervals -- perhaps three minutes of every hour.

"In the workplace, we think these kinds of strategies improve efficiency, improve attention, fostering emotional balance, facilitating interpersonal interest and teamwork and cooperative activities more generally," Davidson says. "Those 21 minutes taken out of a day will more than pay back in terms of attention productivity and wellness, with fewer absences."

Davidson's center operates on an assumption that forms a central tenet of many of the Asian-inspired practices at play -- the idea that meditation is a means of cultivating a better state of being, a space of greater clarity and less stress that ultimately produces mental and physical health benefits.

"We consider well-being to be a skill," Davidson says. "We can actually practice to enhance our well-being. Every strand of scientific evidence points in that direction. It's no different than learning to play the violin or play golf. When you practice, you get better at it."

The scientific literature has already demonstrated that meditation reduces stress and anxiety, says Davidson. Evidence suggests that it also boosts the immune system and reduces markers of inflammation associated with a range of ailments from ulcers and diabetes to asthma and cardiovascular stress. For Davidson, the key question is whether these basic linkages mean that a concentrated meditation program deployed at the company level can yield savings in health care costs.

"The evidence at this point is modest," Davidson says. "This kind of an approach is more of a promissory note than one based on hard scientific evidence, but we're interested in gathering evidence. But there's good reason to believe that this might be true."

As Lucy Kubly arrives for the noon meditation class at Promega on this recent afternoon, she requires no proof.

An administrative manager, she spends her workday overseeing the schedules and inboxes of two busy Promega executives. Her brain struggles to keep pace with an unrelenting gusher of correspondence, meetings needing to be arranged, travel emergencies to fix. Her 45 minutes spent breathing and making her mind go blank is her means of getting the static out of her thinking, freeing her to excel at her job.

"I have so many action items on my plate at all times that I can't ever get my brain clear," Kubly says. "This is a chance to just clear out. If you're doing what is right for yourself, then you're doing what is right for your organization. You get clarity, and that helps you make better decisions."

## CAPITALISM WITH A SOUL

Ask Linton what prompted Promega's push into yoga and meditation, and he quickly rejects the notion that it was about making more money.

"That's a byproduct of what the purpose is," the CEO says. "When everything's all about the bottom line, that creates stress."

Trim and unassuming, with silver hair parted on the right side, Linton, 65, is partial to khakis and navy blue button-down shirts, a style that blends easily into the Midwestern background in which he has spent the last four decades of his professional life. He is fond of extolling the virtues of a cold beer at the end of the workday. But his easy demeanor and everyman sartorial bent mask a mind inclined to

challenging traditional conceptions about seemingly established things -- not least, the nature and function of business.

In Linton's accounting, a business is merely one component of its surrounding community. It ought to be engineered in the interest of collective well-being.

"Work should be much more than a job," Linton says. "It should be meaningful for those who work at a company and help them develop as people."

Such views fit into a new school of corporate thinking that (at least rhetorically) builds on the supposed failings of business to address the needs of society. Whole Foods Market's [John Mackey](#) [has emerged as a proponent of what theorists have called "conscious capitalism,"](#) an entrepreneurial mode that puts social and environmental concerns alongside the usual aspirations of profit-making commerce. Starbucks CEO [Howard Schultz is in this camp, too](#), publicly urging business leaders to push for more than profit while working for improvements in education and expanded access to health care.

Far from revolutionaries intent on waging Marxist struggle, such executives are card carrying capitalists who see free enterprise as a crucial artery of innovation and fortune. But they critique the role that capitalism has come to play in determining how we live. They assail the short-term thinking that has too often driven corporate strategies, sometimes sticking the public with unaccounted for costs in the form of pollution, joblessness and economic anxiety -- often to the long-term detriment of the businesses themselves.

In short, they want a new kind of capitalism, one that places well-being alongside revenues and market share as objects of prime consideration.

In Linton's reckoning, the basic organizing principles that govern many businesses have become disconnected from the needs of employees and the broader public. He is particularly impatient with one idea that has long dominated conventional thinking about business -- that corporate managers must focus like a laser on returning value to a company's shareholders. Executives generally care about the value of a company's stock because their compensation often includes stock options, but ordinary workers typically see few benefits when share prices rise.

"If you try to maximize shareholder value," says Linton, "you set up a system in which the interests of executives and workers are not aligned."

Linton also disdains the idea that businesses must seek to maximize cash flow above all. Cash flow is imperative for any company that wants to keep the lights on, something Promega has managed to do since Linton founded it 35 years ago. But a business has to have productive uses for its money, or cash flow is pointless.

Promega's bottles of chemical solutions are used by research labs and folded into the manufacture of other biotech products. Promega's expertise in DNA technology has generated kits used in paternity testing and in crime scene investigations, a growing area of its trade. But having a portfolio of useful wares is merely a beginning, Linton says. The question that provokes his imagination is one not typically encountered in business school: What's the point of it all?

"A business enterprise can be far more than a bunch of numbers that create a bottom line and return profit to shareholders," Linton says. "Businesses have an opportunity, just like people, to say, 'What are we here for?' My goal is to align the self-actualization of the business with the self-actualization of the people who actually work here."

Self-actualization is a word that gets a vigorous workout in the Linton lexicon. (Transformation is another.) He is partial to the [hierarchy of needs as delineated by the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow](#), whose pyramids famously laid out an architecture of human concern -- base needs such as breathing, water, sex and sleep at the bottom, and the loftiest need at the top: "self-actualization," in Maslow's initial conception later swapped out for "transcendence." This, says Linton, may as well be Promega's organizational chart.

This is why he has made meditation and yoga available to all of his employees, Linton says. This is why every building on campus has a fitness center available for free to every employee. This is why the campus guesthouse where he puts up visiting customers comes equipped with a sauna. ("We want to give them an unforgettable experience," Linton says.)

This is why every building on Promega's campus -- an architectural stew of Frank Lloyd Wright, Swiss ski chalet and Japanese pagoda that is the base for some 700-plus employees -- is full of what interior designers call "third spaces," meaning areas neither home nor office, such as bright, informal cafes and banks of soft-backed chairs where people can hang out or mingle, still creating but freed from their cubicles. This is why every building contains a mother's room, a private place where a nursing mother can pump breast milk.

This is why Promega's chefs oversee their own on-site organic garden, using it to supplement a subsidized menu of restaurant-worthy healthy food. And this is why a new \$130 million factory set to

open on the Promega campus later this summer contains restrooms worthy of a Four Seasons hotel, a cafeteria with granite countertops, double-high atriums, cherry wood accents over the entrances, and a living wall composed of real plants and trickling water -- a concentrated attack on the long grey winter that seizes Wisconsin.

"We want to bring the outdoors inside as much as possible," Linton says.

All of this lavish treatment is why Linton has resisted a former temptation to take his company public, a step that would have handed a measure of control to people who manage money on Wall Street, and who would ask simpler questions than those that consume him. Questions like: Why does a factory need natural light and marble floors beneath the urinals? How many cents per share in earnings did all that cost?

He gets that Wall Street would not like his answers: Because he wants the people who work in that factory to be happy.

Given multiple opportunities to make the point that happy factory owners make for long-term profit, Linton demurs.

"I can't necessarily tie this self-actualization to helping us gain cash flow or develop better products," Linton says. "You can't calculate the return on investment."

#### 'IT HELPS THE BOTTOM LINE'

But the people Linton oversees at Promega are not so reluctant. Many assume that limber bodies and calmer minds -- the fruits of yoga, meditation, cardiovascular exercise and nutritious food -- are indeed spilling into the results of the business.

"People are more engaged," says Sharon Sheridan, who oversees the company unit that produces genetic identification instruments. "There's a general sense of positivity here. I absolutely do think it helps the bottom line. When people are more engaged, they're more collaborative."

The popularity of the wellness initiatives amounts to a recruiting tool, say the company's human resources people. Such programs also help explain why 91 percent of Promega's employees stick around from one year to the next, according to the company, minimizing disruptions and holding down training costs.



"Healthy employees, engaged employees, they are here for the long term," says Darbie Miller, a Promega human resources officer. "And if they're here for the long term, the company wins."

Michael Slater, a senior research scientist at Promega's research and development center, takes time to teach yoga to his colleagues in addition to his primary pursuit surveying laboratory results. He sees this not as an extracurricular activity, but at least in part as a means of helping Promega produce its best work.

"I've always felt that if people were better attuned to nature and their inclinations, the community would benefit," Slater says. "I have no metric to prove that, but that's my belief."

Slater, now 58, has a silver goatee and wears round wire-rimmed glasses. He stumbled on yoga in the 1990s as a means of alleviating excruciating hip pain. He later dabbled in meditation as a participant in the research project conducted on the Promega campus by Davidson, the University of Wisconsin research scientist. At the time, Slater was mourning several deaths in his family and struggling to handle the responsibilities of freshly becoming a father.

"I was kind of primed for it," Slater says. "I was looking for a little help, just coping."

He threw himself into the classes with Kabat-Zinn. His wife, a poet, pronounced him easier to live with.

"My wife was really happy with me, because I got much nicer," Slater says, somewhat bemused. "Apparently, I lost some of my edge."

Like many technology companies, Promega is at peace with flexible time. No one counts how many hours people sit at their desks. No one seems to raise an eyebrow when an employee turns away from a computer screen to pick up a yoga mat and head to the Mind and Body studio. If anything, a collective understanding has emerged that stepping out in this way is an intrinsic part of the work.

"Some people think you can't get good thinking out of people unless you really apply the screws," Slater says. "I think of it differently. Unless you get to a really clear, still place in your mind, you can't think effectively."

The result of this is a fitness ethic that permeates the Promega culture. While many companies offer employees fitness centers and inducements to ride their bicycles to work, with rewards ranging from T-shirts to cash bonuses, what is striking at Promega is the extent to which these pursuits have

reversed the usual dynamic. In many companies, employees sneak off to the gym with a sense of guilt. At Promega, it's the desk-chained set that harbors a sense of doing it wrong.

"No one ever really pressures you to be fit, but you see how much effort people put into being fit," says Mike Rosenblatt, who dropped 50 pounds after joining a company-organized weight loss class at the Wellness Center. "Unless you embrace it, too, you're almost on the outside looking in."

Some here say organizing life around exercise has made them more concentrated and focused. Monika Wood, a scientist who oversees data projects, rides her bicycle between work and home, a trip of 16 miles that takes her about an hour. The exertion not only keeps her fit, but also places an imperative on being more organized while helping her avoid procrastinating.

"I tend to get all my things done much more efficiently," Wood says, "because I don't want to bike home in the dark."

## A HEALTHY SUBSTITUTE

Five years ago, after the birth of her second daughter, Lucy Kubly, the executive assistant, found herself chronically devoid of energy.

"I was struggling all morning," Kubly says. "Then, 1 o'clock would hit and I'd feel like I was not getting anything done. I'd find myself staring at a blur of email, just looking and not really doing anything."

She often recharged with a can of Coke and a candy bar, relying on a sugar rush. The pounds she added while pregnant never went away.

Then, she began going to company-subsidized aerobics classes held in the Mind and Body studio in the basement of the research and development building.

"It was amazing," Kubly says. "It motivated me and made me healthier and more energetic."

She stopped snacking, began eating more fruits and vegetables at home, and dropped 15 pounds. She began sleeping better and feeling less stressed throughout the day. Her cholesterol improved. Her high blood pressure returned to normal.

How does one measure these impacts to Promega's business? The accounting is more art than science. But Kubly says she sees a doctor less frequently and brings greater energy to her work.

Soon, she began going to meditation classes. On a recent Thursday afternoon, she's among the six women being led in deep breathing by instructor Joyce Lyle.

"If at any point during our meditation you feel yourself losing focus, like you feel the workday creeping back in, the breath is always available," Lyle says. "The breath can anchor us into the moment."

The women in the room have assumed the lotus position atop cushions stacked on their mats.

"Let those sitting bones sink down," the instructor says. "And now the shoulders that have been holding so much today, just let them relax."

She turns off the music. "Notice your breath," she says.

In this room inside this company that makes its money deriving products from the ticking engine of life itself, everything is still.

"It just helps you feel at peace," Kubly says later, back at her cubicle. "I always leave and have this tremendous sense of clarity."