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INSTITUTE FOR
QUALITY OF LIFE
sodexo

Work in the 21ˢᵗ century: agile and mindful

As an in-house 'think-tank', the Sodexo Institute for Quality of Life is inspired by Sodexo's deeply held conviction that improving Quality of Life leads to the progress of individuals and contributes to the performance of organisations. Its role is to gather and develop insight to help Sodexo understand better what are the levers of Quality of Life.

This report is inspired by the round-table 'Dialogue' organised by Sodexo's internal think-tank, the Institute for Quality of Life, that took place in Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France, on 28 June 2016, and whose participants were:

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Introduction

We live in an era of many technological advances and disruption associated with their use. We seem headed towards a 'virtualisation' of certain aspects of the world of work, beginning with communication. Indeed, in addition to this virtualisation, communication faces important strains which represent major challenges. These include increasing international and intercultural exchanges, also pressure to be constantly connected or 'always on'. International working relations often include very little face-to-face contact. Communication software is becoming a significant part of the common language that links workers across the globe. The pace at which we live and work seems to be accelerating and many appear to struggle to keep up at a time when human longevity is also increasing.

The need for a more humane approach or more humanity is often raised; what is its place in today's world of work? As individuals, we seek to be innovative, creative, agile and flexible, and yet, as workers, we are called on to promote standardisation, processes, efficiency and predictability; how can we resolve this apparent paradox?

The aim of this report is to facilitate a better understanding of the evolution of organisational typologies and behaviours, to explore the role of the human factor in today's work, and see how and where mindfulness can contribute.

In the first section of this report, we find that the common feature of recent developments in the organisation of work is the breaking down of barriers and the increasing need for agility. In the second, we address three main principles which characterise this evolution. While the breakdown of barriers and the increasing focus on agility represent some elements of change, the change is marked by a pace which is challenging individuals and organisations. In the final section, we will see how the practice of mindfulness can serve as a point of reference in relation to the demands of agility and consider how to promote it within an organisation.

1. The recent evolution of organisational typologies

In a hundred years, the way organisations are shaped and managed has evolved very significantly. It has developed from a mechanistic conception, characterised by a culture of mistrust which considered the human being a 'loafer' to be controlled and organised, to an organic design that is dependent on the motivation and satisfaction of its people. Today, elements of various 20th century typologies can be found within organisations. They are juxtaposed to new models and collide with the opportunities presented by technological progress. An overview of five developments over the last 30 years gives us an idea of the speed of evolution:

1st evolution – the 'network' organisation of the 1980s. Companies found that they were no longer able to face the market and its competition alone without support from partners. They had to be part of a network, for example relying on subcontractors for activities that are peripheral to core business. For employees, this evolution already implied a new kind of flexibility and adaptability, as well as the need to get used to networking with people from other companies.

2nd evolution – towards a 'transversal' organisation. This is characterised by a move away from organisation based on sequential steps: the lifecycle of activity is increasingly short and there is a growing need to create new services in ever shorter time-frames. This is an issue that requires working in project teams, multi-disciplinary groups that share a common vision. There is also more contact with hierarchical superiors across several different departments or business units.

3rd evolution – towards an 'agile' organisation. If flexibility and responsiveness were the highest priorities in the early 1990s, companies then developed by operating proactively and creatively through highly collaborative work. With agility, the objective became to offer new services in order to lead or quickly establish a position in promising markets. Agile leaders and managers have to work collaboratively. They are no longer able to manage everything but need to delegate and share more. There is some discomfort at work owing to changes in managerial practice. Indeed, the increasing delegation of power is accompanied by a delegation of stress and pressure.

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4ᵗʰ evolution – towards a 'liberated' business. This type of organisation is founded on the accountability of each employee. Motivated by a desire to 'change everything', leaders empower their team members, diminish control mechanisms and modify checks in favour of self-organisation and evaluation based on common sense and personal engagement at all levels of the organisation.

5ᵗʰ evolution – towards the 'cellular' organisation. Very well studied in Australia, Switzerland, Germany and the USA, less so in France, the purpose of the cellular organisation is to revive the entrepreneurial spirit that is lauded as one of the strengths of SMEs or start-ups. This type of organisation is based on 'cells' with significant autonomy that operate in a spirit of friendly internal competition. The scale of these cells seems more human even if their results are shared more widely within the organisation. Several organisations may also join forces in cells around common objectives and in so doing rekindle entrepreneurial spirit at a human level.

Organisations have evolved considerably from the 'network' organisation of the 1980s to the emergence of the cellular organisation of recent years. Throughout these evolutions, there is a constant theme: the breaking down of barriers. This is best summarised through four changes:

1. from a culture of retaining information to a culture of sharing information

2. from a culture of avoiding face-to-face contact to a culture of 'real' and 'virtual' face-to-face engagement

3. from a culture of mistrust to a culture of trust

4. from a culture of hierarchical, formalised, controlled, siloed, specialised organisation to a culture of democratic, autonomous, transversal, flexible and agile organisation

2. From the breakdown of barriers to agility

To face challenges linked to the breakdown of barriers, the business world relies on 'agility', a concept that can be applied to organisations as well as individuals; but what does it imply? Three major principles of agility derived from our round-table are:

- a common orientation towards organisational goals

- an emphasis on teamwork

- a principle of adaptive performance

a. A common orientation towards organisational goals

In an agile organisation, everyone must know the strategy and direction of activity, advances and obstacles, to progress towards its goals. All key management data must be shared, from turnover to profit, from stock to bonds. Beyond this organisational vocabulary that serves as a common ground for the organisation's employees, HR training and organisational development provide support for employees during periods of leadership change and transformation.

Nevertheless, agility itself may be demanding: it encourages and rewards proactivity and creativity while asking employees to comply with organisational norms. It is the responsibility of senior leadership to manage any imbalances in that paradox, also to help maintain efficiency by removing barriers. To do this, leaders must be aware that rules support employees who need structure, predictability and guidance to reassure them without enslaving them. A model that combines direction (the role of the manager) and goodwill (in relation to the individual) can help identify the bounds of employee discretion and maintain the balance. By recognising the existence and value of such discretion, we accept that each employee can adapt and shape their role; every employee contributes something personal to their environment.

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To cope with change and address the hardship that emerges from the gap between expectation and the reality of employees' experiences, agile organisations emphasise the value of sharing the rationale for change. Far from imposing the leaders' direction mechanically, they also encourage distributed accountability throughout the organisation's ecosystem so that every employee feels involved.

b. An emphasis on teamwork

Leaving one's workstation to join a project team is the norm in agile organisations. It is the result of managers' encouragement as they are aware that information or knowledge is ephemeral and has no value unless shared. However, spontaneity, a key component of team spirit, requires employees to be familiar with each other and feel comfortable. This gives rise to two questions:

- how to deal with the increasing physical delocalisation of the workplace and the virtualisation of teams?
- how to rebuild and develop the spirit of comradeship borne of the social and sporting events previously organised at the workplace?

We must continue to admit life into work, to have fun and celebrate successes, important milestones of the organisation's life and that of its employees. This includes managing the risk of occasional outbursts or overflows. It also means leaving room for vulnerability. Indeed, without any sharing of life and its joys, also its pain and suffering, without spontaneous behaviour in team work, the space for humanity and authenticity shrinks. The organisation of an annual event at which employees must feel like enjoying themselves at a given date and place is insufficient. Space for wellbeing must exist and be available on a daily basis, even if it requires self-management by employees.

c. The principle of adaptive performance

To be able to contribute to team work, even virtually, it is essential to continue learning, to know how to ask for training spontaneously, and to self-develop continuously. In a 'learning' organisation, training empowers employees to be held accountable at all levels of the organisation and to share stress.

If contributing to a team's collective performance depends on individuals' adaptability, an evaluation of individuals' capability to adapt is necessary. This capability is enhanced by real and symbolic events that help to ensure the implementation of these abstract concepts into the organisation's culture.

Agile management principles tend towards sharing and the objectives of the agile organisation are well known by its employees. Employees are people who know each other, trust each other and work in teams where each individual adapts their performance to evolving needs. For their part, leaders accept that they may be disagreed with in meetings.

Nonetheless, one of leaders' prime responsibilities is still to make decisions, regardless of their teams' proposals and the range of more or less agile or liberated approaches that mean they have to consider them. Even when most decisions are made collaboratively, doubts may persist regarding the merit of a decision on the part of a leader who may struggle to apply this model. How can this doubt be addressed, how can the model be adhered to and become better aligned with the decision-making process?

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3. Mindfulness: a grounding reference point for agility

The practice of mindfulness consists in developing a quality of voluntary and intentional attentiveness. It is characterised by the active observation of direct and immediate experiences without adding or removing anything from the physical, mental and emotional phenomena in evidence. When asked in training about the reason for using mindfulness practice at work, managers often refer to decision-making situations rather than wellbeing or performance. Why? Because the calming of mental activity during decision-making allows 'weaker' signals to be heard. As decision-making is fundamentally even more emotional than rational, hearing weaker signals increases the ability to reach a decision that is more equitable in relation to all concerned and therefore more easily justified. Beyond managers, the democratisation of mindfulness may help even more people feel at ease with being accountable and making decisions. As the executive director of a multi-national company explains:

> *"One of our strengths is this ability to work together for the common good; very few decisions are made individually. Foremost, my role is to ensure that efforts are geared towards the common good. Mindfulness can help individuals' judgment in decision-making even when the right one is not so easy to reach."*

When the decision-making process becomes collaborative and concerns the common good, leaders must develop on the one hand and, on the other, identify and cast aside any reactions that stem from fear or personal interest.

In many organisations, the uncertainty of transformation is exacerbated by an economic and political climate characterised by volatility, complexity and ambiguity. As individuals' capability to challenge themselves in favour of the common good increases, the need to take a step back may become more important. Those who are better able to self-reflect on external circumstances are likely to be seen as 'pathfinders' by their peers and teams.

When organisational change is on the *agenda*, there are several ways to engage employees: through numbers, rational reasoning and arguments, certainly, but it is also necessary to feel 'at ease', in other words to have a profound conviction with regards to the basis of decisions. To feel at ease involves the entire body as well as the mind's reflection. Yoga and meditation are among activities that help to regain a sense of one's own body and the practice of mindfulness helps to raise awareness of one's own experience.

Reliving inside one's own body is a way to establish a relation with oneself via the somato-visceral system (through which the physical body influences the function of internal organs). The functioning of this intuitive intelligence pulls us back from the emotional bubbling of the surface to reconnect with oneself at decision-making time. In so doing, we seek a better understanding of what emotion can teach us about ourselves, rather than denying it. As emotion combines information from the body and mind, our attention can be intentionally and consciously directed inwards.

The ability to derive meaningful information from the body regarding what is right for oneself and for others requires practice. Our passion, automatic responsiveness or just thinking are not always sufficient to guide us. They can become a source of pressure which renders us incapable of feeling our body, though the latter will always have the last word when it is ignored – hence the physical symptoms of stress and 'burnout'. To perceive internal stimuli, even if one deliberately decides to ignore them, is to be connected to reality.

Collectively, healthy, caring and unbiased listening requires a non-responsive presence which leaves space for reflection combined with intuition for the response to be given. When reality is evolving as rapidly as the world of work today, every individual needs trust and security as a condition of expression of the authenticity that allows us not only to 'do' but also to 'be'. Listening to accommodate others is not the same as listening to understand, or listening to respond – which is what we tend to do most often.

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The transition from the 19th to the 20th century was marked by a shift from physical work to knowledge work. Organisations in the 21st century are marked by a need for humanity as each situation is unique and the long advocated 'automatic' mode often shows its limits. If organisations can benefit from the discovery of a practice such as mindfulness, how can they move forward? How can organisations become more 'conscious' without people feeling forced into mindfulness?

a. The practices that lend support to agile behaviours should be no mystery

No new ideology or religion is needed but a body-centered activity whose benefits are proven by advances in neuroscience.
Mindfulness is a type of voluntary, intentional mental training and attention control that can influence daily life. Focusing on bodily sensations, on the external environment or on breathing, may help to achieve mindfulness. The psychological benefits have been demonstrated through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) carried out by neuroscientists who have noticed that the wandering of the mind, of our thoughts, is lower among those who practice mindfulness; they are less distracted, more fully present in the moment.

b. An impulse such as the challenges of organisational transformation or simply the acceleration of life/work is enticing

Mindfulness can be a space for balance, a counterweight to the excesses of information, complex content, form and rhythm that are likely to generate a sense of being overwhelmed, of frustration and even disengagement at work. It offers an opportunity to return to the sensory world, to our emotions and intuition to decode the more subtle messages, the organisational environment, the sense and direction of change, to escape the 'noise' and identify the 'melody' of sense. Mindfulness is a practice that supports resilience, that helps leaders to face challenges better, that helps organisations to evolve by looking for the best in everyone through empathy arising from listening.

Opportunities to change perspective and break free from our own profound representations with regards to change – individually or collectively – are as rare as they are precious at work. Putting

matters into perspective regarding time, making space for reflection and project iteration, pausing to let intuition reappear and leave space for its emergence, means letting oneself question what may have been decided by a 'soft' consensus or one which ignored the sometimes weak signals of the common good.

c. Training for a practice such as mindfulness should be initiated by someone with high visibility within the organisation; a beacon who can show his/her own conviction to add momentum.

Internal and external communication should put forward the facts and avoid esoteric vocabulary. To facilitate mindfulness practice by employees, a place and time dedicated to it helps translate the beacon's invitation and conviction into concrete steps.

As with any other practice put forward by the organisation, structuring through repeated group experience (for example at the beginning of meetings) leads to the evolution of culture and acceptance. To contribute to the sustainability of mindfulness practice, some organisations have successfully implemented a network that inspires sharing and helps to normalise it internally. This process needs to be repeated into different contexts to be accepted into the organisational culture.

Despite its potential and the good intentions of its followers, the practice of mindfulness must remain an individual choice though it depends on the organisation for enabling conditions. A person preferring to spend time when others practice mindfulness to refocus some other way should have that possibility.

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Conclusion

For many employees and organisations, technological progress impacts communication and Quality of Life, both at work and outside. New tools and modes of communication are offering unimaginable possibilities in an era characterised by a wide variety of organisational models. While technological advances are happening at a very fast rate, the adaptation of individuals and organisations is somewhat slower, resulting in an offset / delay / discrepancy. Individuals and organisations should therefore explore new approaches to adapt and evolve.

To avoid the frustrations that can arise in individuals, to progress and contribute to the performance of organisations, agility is on the agenda but its adoption as a principle of organisation and behaviour is not always clear. The practice of mindfulness is a way to facilitate agility. By enabling individuals to take a step back from the immediacy of their experience, it can help them to feel more at ease, in body and in mind.

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