Mindful Living, one of our 10 Trends for 2014 and Beyond, points to consumers developing a quasi-Zen desire to experience things in a more present, conscious way—that is, more mindfully. To explore this topic, we interviewed pioneering mindfulness researcher Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychology professor and author of 11 books, including the best-seller *Mindfulness*, which has been translated into 18 languages. She discussed what it means to be more mindful, how to go about it and what advantages it brings—including its many benefits for businesses—as well as why mindfulness is now finding a foothold in the West.

*Can you explain what you mean by the term “mindfulness”?*

Mindfulness, as I have studied it now for over 35 years, is a remarkably simple process of noticing new things. When you notice new things, what happens is that it puts you in the present—oddly, everybody says we should be in the present, but when we are not in the present, we are not there to know we are not there. This is the way to be there. You notice new things, then that makes you more sensitive to context and perspective.

The act of noticing new things feels enlivening and is literally, not just figuratively, enlivening. As you notice new things, you come to see that you didn’t know this thing as well as you thought. Then with this modicum of uncertainty, your attention naturally goes to whatever is the topic.

It is not at odds with meditation, but it is very different. Meditation is a tool that sets you up for post-meditative mindfulness. There are two ways of getting to the same place, and the place you get to is a place where you’re responsive to the world around you but not reactive. Right now, people are pulled: When they think something is good, they must have it. When they think it is bad, they must stay away from it. However, evaluations are in our heads and not in the things we are evaluating. The more mindful you become and the more you look at this thing and you see, “Well, in these ways it is good, and in these ways it is bad,” then you are not pulled in either direction, and you can just be.

Mindless, by contrast, here you are letting the past overdetermine the present. You are not there, and, again, you are not aware you are not there. Your behavior is dictated by the sense it made at an earlier time. Therefore, you are trapped in a rigid perspective, and you are oblivious to the fact that you are not seeing much of what is there to be seen. When we are mindless, we are acting like robots, more or less. We don’t hear what is being said that is slightly different from what we expected. We don’t see what there is to be seen, we don’t taste, we don’t feel, and so on—the past governs what we are doing.

*Would you say mindfulness stems from meditation, or is that just one route to mindfulness?*
[My study of mindfulness] is not based on meditation at all. It is very different. Mine comes from a Western scientific perspective. It was very rewarding for me studying this from this Western scientific perspective to say that I come to so many of the same conclusions as the old masters in the East. There are ways of becoming mindful without drawing new distinctions or meditating, and that would be if we learned about the world in a conditional way from the start. That means that rather than see things as they, in a particular way, we realize that it is only one of several ways it could be.

For instance, in schools—which are the major culprits in teaching people to be mindless—you have so many things like, “Here are the three reasons for the Civil War,” without a statement from whose perspective those are the reasons. When you are taught conditionally, then you walk around knowing that, “Well, it could be this way, it could be that way”—so you stay attentive. You don’t end up with this illusion of certainty. The illusion of certainty is mindless. Schools teach us to be mindless; schools teach us there are right answers irrespective of context.

There are no right answers irrespective of context. For example, if I said to you—and I use this example frequently—“How much is 1 and 1?” We have all been taught to say 2, but if you add one wad of chewing gum to one wad of chewing gum, 1 plus 1 is 1. The way we learned, we seek certainties. Oddly, we seek certainty so that we will be able to control our world. If I could pigeonhole you, I know how to respond to you, for example. However, it’s the very process of holding things still and thinking we know it that actually robs us of control.

When did you first strike on the concept of mindfulness as an area of research?

When I moved to Cambridge from New York, very strange things seemed to be happening. I had the mindset that everybody in Cambridge was so smart because of Harvard. Then I saw these things—you would be in the bank and there were five tellers, and you would have many people on one line and nobody on another line, or very few; that would never happen in New York. In New York, people would quickly find the best way. Then I started noticing that if I walked into a mannequin, I would say, “Excuse me.”

It was clear that this mindlessness was pervasive, and over these many years, sadly, I have come to the conclusion that virtually all of us are mindless most of the time.

Back in the early ’70s, I did a study with Judy Rodin where we gave elders in nursing homes choices and a plant to take care of, and that ended up resulting in them living longer—so a very little thing with very large consequences. I started to think about, what is the essence of this thing called “choice”? That’s what got me to study mindfulness. Since no matter what you are doing, you are doing it mindfully or mindlessly. It doesn’t matter what I end up studying, it always seems to come back to mindlessness and mindfulness.

It seems like the concept of mindfulness is on the rise in the West. Why do you think that is?

Well, I would like to think I have had some influence, as one of several people. I have hundreds of papers and four books on the topic. I am pursuing it, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, from a different perspective, is pursuing it.
I also think we are in the midst of an evolution in consciousness that was just a matter of time. As the world becomes smaller, we see people doing things that we, ourselves, don’t do; and when you have whole cultures doing it, you would be less likely to cast aspersions. Over time, because the world has gotten smaller, it has given rise to some alternative explanations, which then means we are less judgmental, and it all works together.

Also, the population around the globe, and certainly in our country, has an increase in the number of old people. You have a lot more wisdom. Then we have people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and the people who haven’t taken the traditional routes through school who become phenomenally successful. So that leads to even more questioning and an awareness that there are many ways of getting to the same place. All of this works together to help cultures around the globe become more aware that there is more going on than we had thought.

Business leaders in tech companies and across industries are trying to bring mindfulness initiatives to their companies. What do you think of those programs?

To make people more aware, no matter what the program is, is going to be in everybody’s best interest. The materials that are used to teach people their jobs or textbooks in schools can be written based on our work to promote mindfulness. As I said before, we present the information conditionally. By presenting it conditionally, people who are learning have a greater feel for the information, and it stays more interesting. When they are older and they are taught their jobs in this way, it gives rise to a greater responsibility for what they are doing, more caring, because they are making these choices.

If you were taught how to play tennis, in the past and probably still today, you would be told, “This is the way to hold the tennis racket.” Well, it is not; it depends on a host of factors. Basically, you want to say it is sort of like, “Depending on your own physique, depending on how well you slept, depending on the weather conditions, you want to vary the way you are holding it ever so slightly so that you can take advantage of opportunities or the dangers not yet arisen.” If everybody is taught in this more conditional way, it is much easier to do this than to take time out in all these companies to have people meditate. But again, these two approaches are not at all at odds with each other.

In your book Mindfulness, you mention that advertising effectively caters to mindlessness. How do marketers cater to a mindful person instead of trying to trap the mindless?

As the culture becomes more mindful, people are going to be less likely to be fooled. When people are mindless, pretend and are inauthentic, they’re less attractive, less trustworthy, less liked by other people. And I would think the merchandise that the inauthentic are trying to sell would also become suspect. Our mindfulness leaves its imprint on the products we create. As the culture becomes more mindful, its products should become superior.

If it is the case that [a product] may break, why should somebody buy it? Perhaps because it is inexpensive. I think it would be better to say, “This will get the job done for six months” rather than pretend the product is something it is not.

That would be advocating for transparency.
Exactly, because when you are talking about an educated consumer, a mindful consumer, the consumer is
going to have a different relationship to these products.

_Last year we outlined a trend that we termed Play As a Competitive Advantage—the idea that adults are increasingly adapting play for themselves, because they realize that unstructured time begets more imagination, creativity and innovation. In your book, Mindfulness, you mention play being tied to mindfulness._

Once you put evaluation aside, the distinction between work and play is artificial. It is nonsense. Those of
us who are the most likely to succeed are the people who are enjoying what we are doing. When you
enjoy it, you are more present. When you are doing it, you tend to spend more time with it, and that is
going to lead to superior performance, or superior outcome. For example, we have a study where we have
symphony musicians where we teach them to be mindful. We compare their performance to the mindless.
The mindless group simply is told, “Try to remember a performance you were pleased with that you gave
when playing this particular piece.” The mindful group is told, “Make it new in very subtle ways that
only you would know.” Then we play that piece for people who have no idea about the study, and they
overwhelmingly prefer the mindfully played piece.

What is interesting about that for business is the hidden finding that I didn’t think about until after I started to write the
paper, which was, what you have is everybody in some sense doing it their own way and you get better coordinated
behavior, performance. People in industry are often afraid to let the people who are not very high up in the organization
exert any individuality, any thinking about what they actually are doing, which is a shame because the people on the front
line are the ones who know the small aspects of the product best.

There are so many ways that mindfulness adds to the bottom line in business that it is hard to enumerate
quickly all of them. Let me go through a few. You are going to have fewer accidents; you are going to
have better products; you are going to have a happier workforce; you are going to have a healthier
workforce. We have lots of data, much of it reported in my book _Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and
the Power of Possibility_. When people are mindful, they are not just happier but actually healthier—it
means it is going to cost insurance companies less money; it is going to cost companies themselves less
money for health care costs.

_With mindfulness, some large companies are embracing it, and it’s showing up in schools, but at the
same time, it’s not mainstream yet._

I think it would become more mainstream if people recognize some of the alternative ways of bringing it
about. For example, for some, you are rushing through your life to take 20 minutes twice a day to
meditate, which leaves lots of people to think they just don’t have time for it. But as I said initially, there
are many other ways. You don’t have to take time out to withdraw from everything to regain your peace
of mind. All you need to do is this: The noticing of new things gives you a modicum of uncertainty, but
then makes everything old feel new again and exciting.

_Are there any last thoughts on mindfulness you’d like to mention?_

As industry is concerned, I wrote this blog post for the _Harvard Business Review_—the bottom line was,
when you look closely at all of this, what seems to be the case is that the main job in the future for a
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leader is going to be to enhance the mindfulness of those being led, which is very different from the way we currently see our roles as leaders.

Ellen Langer, Harvard University psychology professor, author of ‘Mindfulness’

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