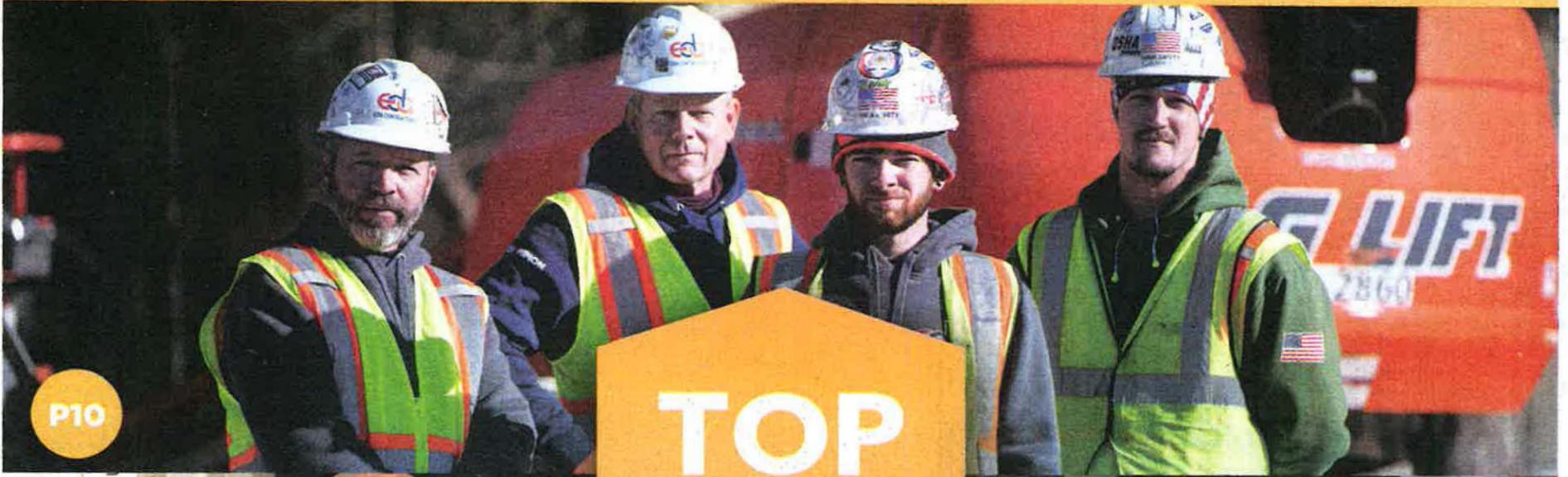


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OUR CHANGING WORKPLACE

DOGGED DETERMINATION MEETS MINDFUL MEDITATION IN STRESS-RELIEF PROGRAMS

By Lini S. Kadab, FOR THE INQUIRER

For an accountant, nothing is more taxing than, well, tax season.

Anthony Speakman knows all about that. The 35-year-old senior accountant works at Bala Cynwyd-based Isdaner & Co. CPAs, spending the crunch time of recent weeks compiling financial statements for privately held companies and preparing individual tax returns.

But a few Fridays ago, he took a deep breath and relaxed, if only for an hour, during the 2019 Top Workplace company's fourth annual meditation session, intentionally offered during the demanding tax-prep season. The following week, Speakman took a short break from his pile of work to pet a goldendoodle therapy dog that visited.

"It's a brief time during the work day to focus on you," he said. "For me, the meditation session helps to alleviate stress, helps focus my breathing, and it is relaxing." In fact, he often turns to the practice during stressful moments, taking a couple of minutes to breathe deeply "in order to get through the day and to focus on servicing the clients of the firm."

As part of a national trend, more work-

places are turning to mindfulness programs that include meditation sessions but also on-the-job acupuncture, massages, silent retreats, support groups, and more — all part of an effort to reduce stress, help employees balance work and life, and ultimately improve productivity.

According to the National Business Group on Health, emotional support programs continue to grow in the workplace. One of the hottest is mindfulness — a business buzzword these days that means training the mind to be present in the moment without judgment. A 2018 survey of 163 companies by the business group and Fidelity Investments reported that 52 percent provided mindfulness classes or training last year and nearly a quarter more were considering such programs for this year. Even more companies had stress-reduction programs last year (61 percent), and many offered happiness programs (29 percent).

Isdaner's director of marketing, Jill Lock, plans lots of morale-boosting events throughout the year. Chocolate fondue. Free car washes. Ice cream truck. But tax season calls for a focus on mindfulness, especially this go-round, when keeping up

with new federal tax rules has added to already difficult workdays, she said.

"This seems to be helpful, to take an hour out of the day," Lock said. "It just helps you relax and helps you become sharper and more focused."

The Myrna Brind Center for Mindfulness at Jefferson Health offers Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction programs that include workshops, multi-week courses, and retreats to the public, including workplaces.

"Mindfulness has taken over everywhere," said Aleezé Sattar Moss, the center's associate director.

Of course, the Buddhism-derived practice has been around for thousands of years. But more recently, it seems, the business world has caught on to the benefits for employees and, arguably, the bottom line.

According to Moss, research suggests mindfulness training can reduce burnout, improve mood, increase concentration, and hone thoughtful communication, executive function and leadership skills — all beneficial to better work. This type of awareness may even lead to structural changes in the brain, such as increases in

gray-matter density in areas associated with emotional regulation and perspective taking, she said, citing neuroscience studies.

"The research is very promising," Moss said. "That's a large part of what's helped mindfulness become so popular. More and more people are seeking out mindfulness for their own wellbeing, and workplaces for their employee wellbeing."

A few years ago, a center instructor visited CardConnect over multiple weeks at the payment-processing company's King of Prussia headquarters. Each Monday for an hour, employees at the Top Workplace trained in mindfulness, breathing deeply, visualizing relaxing scenes, and communicating and listening more intentionally and thoughtfully. At the end of the course, participants went on a silent retreat in Swarthmore where they partook in yoga, mindful eating (savoring the smell, appearance and taste of food), and long walks — all while silent.

"It was such an amazing experience," said Jen Ireland, vice president of human resources.

Since 2015, CardConnect has turned in-

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Handout photo

Enjoying a visit with Maggie, a therapy golden-doodle, at Isdaner & Co. are employees Melike Ekitz (left) and Munira Cason, flanking Maggie and her owner, Naomi Svéd.

house to encourage attention to the moment and improve employee well being. Weekly yoga is held at the office, as well as twice-a-month acupuncture to help with wrist or neck pain and monthly table massages to, what else, relax — all at no cost to employees.

"This is an occasion to step away, sit in a dark room, and have someone guide you through a practice," said Ireland, who has taken advantage of the perks herself. The instructor "gets us focused on our breath and not the meeting at 3 p.m."

At Top Workplace Duane Morris in Philadelphia, the national Mindful Return program that the law firm began rolling out in 2017 through this year offers e-courses, workshops, and online community support for mothers to prepare for maternity leave and the return to the office. The initiative also has resources for working dads and parents with special-needs children. Last year, Duane Morris earned recognition for the program, which has a 38 percent participation rate, from the San Francisco Gender Equality Principle Initiative.

"It's a great retention tool," said Peggy

Simoncini Pasquay, manager of attorney recruitment and relations.

Mindful Return's goals of helping parents feel "more calm, empowered and connected" also fit with Duane Morris' — and the high-stress legal profession's — greater emphasis on mindfulness, she said.

Among the firm's other efforts are quarterly newsletters that include articles on mindfulness; promotion of apps, such as Calm and Breathe; partnership with Milk Stork, a breast milk shipping company to support new mothers on business trips; and, most recently, the addition of the parental leave program Ramp Down/Ramp Up that reduces billable hours expectations.



Isdaner & Co.'s Anthony Speakman gets a smooch from Maggie the goldendoodle. Therapy dogs and meditation sessions are among the company's tax-season offerings.

"It's OK to push the pause button if you're having a busy day," Pasquay said. "Being mindful allows you to be more creative and more focused on your work as opposed to being stressed and-caught in the moment."

Nonprofits are paying attention as well.

Philadelphia's Congreso de Latinos Unidos, for one, added guided meditation, yoga, and wellness lunches last year.

"It was really born out of recognizing self care is critical," said Carolina DiGiorgio, CEO of the Top Workplace nonprofit that works in the Latino community, "especially in the social services arena, where we're out there providing services to clients and need to be performing at our best."

Andrea Martinez, Congreso's executive administrator and board liaison, helped develop the programs and volunteers to teach monthly sessions in meditation and in yoga.

"It's a very intense environment," she allowed of work. The mindfulness programming "is something that's bringing us back to earth."