

Issue: The Meditation Industry

The Meditation Industry

By: Hannah H. Kim

 **SAGE** businessresearcher

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Will success turn it into “McMindfulness”?

Executive Summary

Meditation, a cornerstone of Eastern philosophy and a part of American culture since the 1960s, has developed into a major business enterprise. Supported by an increasing number of scientific research papers quantifying its effects, meditation, often called mindfulness, generated \$1.2 billion in revenue last year. Four in 10 adults in the United States say they meditate at least weekly, and major companies including Google, Apple, General Mills, Goldman Sachs and Aetna have adopted meditation programs for their employees. The industry has attracted \$260 million in investments since 2012.

Here are some key takeaways:

- Health insurance giant Aetna reported that employees’ annual productivity rose by about \$3,000 each after they participated in a mindfulness training program.
- Headspace, the largest of nearly 1,000 mindfulness apps, raised \$36.7 million in funding in 2017. The company offers in-flight meditation channels on eight airlines and released plans for public, phone booth-sized relaxation “pods.”
- Experts say the industry’s growth raises concerns about the need for credentialing. Founders of new, for-profit mindfulness services say they are modernizing ancient teachings to make them accessible to the general public.

Full Report



BrainTap, a device designed to induce a meditative state, is part of a mindfulness industry that is growing steadily. (Glenn Chapman/AFP/Getty Images)

When Eric Chang, a software engineer at [Google's](#) Silicon Valley headquarters, enrolled in the company's [Search Inside Yourself](#) (SIY) meditation course, he wanted to see hard evidence that showed the benefits of the program.¹

Chang said he had been pushed to a breaking point from the intense pressure of the company's fast-paced and demanding culture of 80-hour workweeks. He was experiencing stress-related back pain, could not take time off to visit his dying mother in Toronto and often vented his frustrations at his family.

"I'm from Taiwan," he said. "It's the immigrant mindset to thrive on stress, go to the best schools, work hard. No one realized that way of working was really unsustainable."

Through SIY, Chang said he found camaraderie among the other participants and learned so-called mindfulness techniques, or meditation methods that helped him become noticeably calmer, more patient and better able to listen.²

SIY is part of a meditation industry that is experiencing steady growth as more companies offer mindfulness programs as part of employee wellness plans. The U.S. meditation business generated \$1.2 billion in revenue in 2017 and is projected to grow at an annual rate of 11.4 percent, reaching \$2.08 billion in revenue in 2022, according to the market research firm Marketdata Enterprises.³ The industry encompasses meditation studios, retreat centers and product and app companies; the leading app, [Headspace](#), raised \$36.7 million in funding in 2017.⁴

Google's SIY was founded in 2007 as a six-week mindfulness course by veteran engineer Chade-Meng Tan. It quickly grew in popularity, and in 2012, Tan, along with Zen teacher Marc Lesser, established it as an independent nonprofit to bring two-day mindfulness workshops – at a cost of up to \$35,000 for 50 people – to corporations such as [American Express](#), [Ford](#), [Comcast](#) and [LinkedIn](#).⁵ In 2015, the organization's revenues grew by more than 50 percent.⁶

Other companies have integrated their own in-office mindfulness resources as a permanent part of company culture:

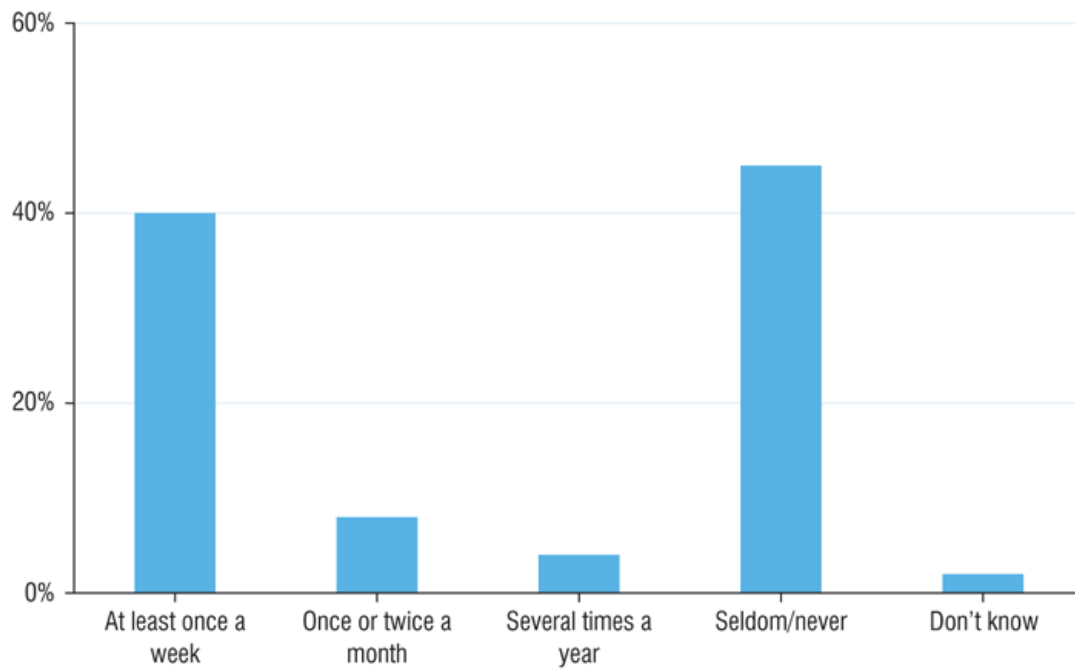
- [Apple](#) co-founder Steve Jobs studied Zen philosophy in the 1970s and became one of the first CEOs to introduce meditation into work culture.⁷ Apple now offers employees an on-campus meditation room and half an hour a day to meditate.⁸
- [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) have implemented in-office contemplative practices.⁹
- Cloud computing company [Salesforce](#) opened meditation rooms on every floor of its corporate office in 2016.¹⁰
- Foods giant [General Mills](#) set up its first mindfulness program in 2006.¹¹
- Wall Street investment bank [Goldman Sachs](#) developed "resilience" mindfulness training for employees during the financial crisis in 2009.¹²

According to a 2017 survey by Fidelity Investments and the National Business Group on Health, 35 percent of employers responding had incorporated mindfulness training in the workplace, and another 26 percent were considering adding it in the future.¹³ Since 2012, the meditation industry has attracted \$260 million worth of investments, with [HealthX Ventures](#), [500 Startups](#) and Emergic Venture Capital as the top investors.¹⁴

There were 2,450 meditation studios in the United States in 2017, generating \$659 million in revenues, and at least 14 residential meditation retreat centers, generating \$70 million, according to Marketdata Enterprises. Meditation books, CDs, DVDs and magazines produced \$112 million, while apps, websites and online courses generated more than \$100 million.¹⁵

Four in 10 Meditate Weekly

Percentage of U.S. adults who meditated, 2014



Source: "Frequency of meditation," Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, May 30, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/ydyhj588>

A majority of U.S. adults – 52 percent – said they meditated at least occasionally, while 45 percent said they seldom or never meditated, according to a 2014 Pew Research study.

Most of the different types of meditation originated from ancient religious traditions. In the United States, one of the most popular forms of meditation is mindfulness, a key practice of Buddhism. In mindfulness meditation, the practitioner focuses attention on the flow of breath and by doing so learns to observe thoughts and experiences without immediately judging or reacting to them. Mindfulness meditation is designed to help the practitioner eventually develop greater psychological stability and acceptance of the thoughts and feelings that arise in daily life.¹⁶

Though there is debate among scholars, Buddhism is thought to have first come to North America in 458, more than 1,000 years before Columbus, when a monk named Hui Shan traveled by sea from China to what is now California.¹⁷ In the early 1800s, travelers and traders introduced Hindu and Buddhist texts to the eastern United States, and by the mid-1800s, the influence of Buddhist and Hindu thought became evident in the work of American transcendentalist writers.¹⁸ After gold was discovered in California in 1848, Chinese Buddhists joined immigrants from other countries who came to the Golden State to seek their fortunes. The first Chinese Buddhist temple was built in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1853.¹⁹

Many historians consider the World Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Chicago World Fair in 1893, the key event introducing Eastern religions, including Buddhism, to U.S. culture. Two Buddhist teachers – Japanese Zen master Soyen Shaku and Sri Lankan Buddhist teacher Anagarika Dharmapala – participated in the event and later returned to lecture extensively around the United States.²⁰

In the 1950s and '60s, several notable Buddhist teachers, including Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Dae Soen Sa Nim and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, immigrated to the United States to establish centers of their respective schools of teaching. The experimental counterculture of the 1960s and '70s also enabled the popularization of Buddhist teachings.²¹

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Zen student, founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He developed what is known today as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction. Kabat-Zinn removed Buddhist language from the practice of meditation and made scientific, evidence-based investigations into mindfulness techniques to help people manage chronic pain.²²

"It became very credible to the scientific and medical community, to the point where it's an acceptable prescribed, therapeutic offering," says Mark Blumenfeld, a senior teacher at Shambhala International, a nonprofit community of 220 meditation centers and groups headquartered in Nova Scotia, Canada. "Culturally, it's not unconventional to think of meditation as a way to train your mind as you would train your body. It's widely accepted, but that was a big change."

In the last 20 years, the number of scientific and academic research papers quantifying the beneficial effects of meditation has grown exponentially.²³ The American Psychological Association, for instance, has published papers on the benefits of mindfulness meditation in

improving emotional regulation, anxiety and depression.²⁴ The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a federal government agency that investigates alternative medicine, has suggested links between mindfulness and improved physical health, such as lowering blood pressure in people at risk for developing hypertension.²⁵

In addition, Sara Lazar, an assistant professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School, has published findings showing that “meditation might offset age-related cortical thinning,” which suggests long-term practice may result in physical changes in the brain.²⁶



Mark Blumenfeld

Workplace Mindfulness

Growing public awareness and acceptance of meditation have contributed to rising corporate spending on mindfulness programs. In 2014, management consultant Vy V. Le founded the San Francisco Bay Area’s [Wave Group](#), which offers corporate mindfulness programs. She says she has seen a dramatic shift in attitudes toward meditation in the last three years, which she credits to scientific support for the benefits of meditation and the dissociation of the practice from religion.

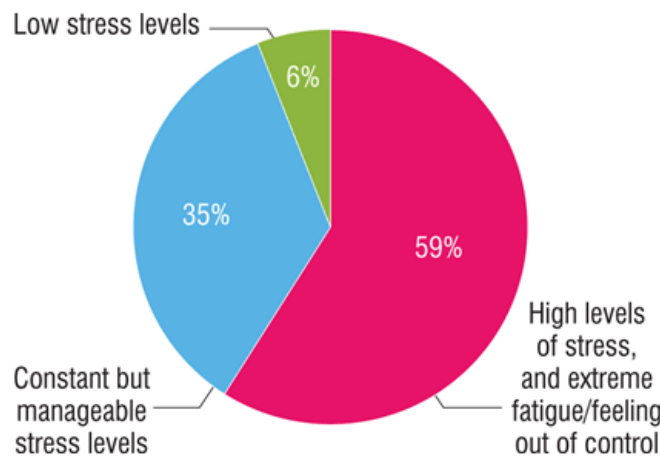
Company human resource departments have been able to justify the cost of mindfulness programs – from \$500 to as much as \$35,000 for large group sessions – by focusing on meditation’s beneficial impact on productivity and the bottom line.²⁷ The World Health Organization has called stress “the health epidemic of the 21st century,” costing U.S. businesses up to \$300 billion a year.²⁸ And the federal government’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that “productivity losses related to personal and family health problems cost U.S. employers \$1,685 per employee per year, or \$225.8 billion annually.”²⁹ Chronic stress, which mindfulness training is designed to help employees manage, has been shown to contribute to health problems by adversely affecting the immune, cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and central nervous systems.³⁰

Blumenfeld, who was a business executive for more than two decades, says: “From a bottom line perspective, it’s easy to make a compelling argument. When a company looks for ways to improve productivity, and sees how they have a lot of turnover, sick days and problems with employees, a lot of this is related to different kinds of stress and unhappiness. Meditation is one of the few offerings you can make as a corporation to try to decrease productivity loss because of high employee stress levels.”

Mark T. Bertolini, CEO of health insurance giant [Aetna](#), implemented a wellness training program for his company’s employees after he experienced a near-fatal skiing accident in 2004. The program trained employees to take short breaks and offered free yoga and meditation classes.³¹ In 2015, Aetna reported that more than a quarter of its 50,000 employees had participated and, in calculating savings to the company, found that “on average, mindfulness participants gained 62 minutes of productivity a week, which is an estimated \$3,000-per-employee increase in productivity for the company each year.”³²

Majority of Employees Experience High Stress

Only 6 percent report low stress levels



Source: “Three out of Five Employees Are Highly Stressed, According to ComPsych Survey,” ComPsych, Oct. 30, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybmxpxmn>

Fifty-nine percent of employees are highly stressed, according to a 2017 survey by ComPsych, an international provider of employee assistance programs. These employees also report they feel extreme fatigue and loss of control.

Le says that since mindfulness is still a relatively new phenomenon in U.S. culture, it can be difficult to quantify how it can directly benefit businesses. “With selling any kind of service, you need to give data, because it’s what convinces the decision makers,” Le says. “A backlash comes from having to oversell with discrete data. Mindfulness isn’t for everyone. A lot of it is personal experience in how it helps you, and that’s not something we can easily quantify.”

Mindfulness training can also run counter to a corporation’s goals. An article published by the journal *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* in 2015 suggests that because mindfulness encourages employees to act in line with their values and interests, it may elicit behaviors that are not in the best interests of organizational performance.³³

For example, the first corporate mindfulness program in the United States was implemented in 1996, when [Monsanto](#) CEO Bob Shapiro invited a mindfulness instructor to lead top executives through a three-day silent retreat. At the time, Monsanto was the world’s largest agricultural company and had patented genetically modified plants that were resistant to Monsanto’s pesticides.

After the retreat, which included meditating on the value of all living beings, including the insects Monsanto’s products were intended to eradicate, one executive said he had suddenly realized that “when people came into his office to voice their concerns [about Monsanto products], he couldn’t even hear what they were saying, because he was already rehearsing the script he had prepared on behalf of Monsanto.”

Mindfulness programs began to gain momentum as Monsanto employees arranged their own weekly sittings and retreats. However, the programs were discontinued in 2000 by Shapiro’s successor, who sought to eradicate his predecessor’s management style.³⁴

Commercialization Challenges

As mindfulness meditation becomes increasingly commercialized, many meditation experts worry that the practice can be diluted into “McMindfulness” – an easily packaged, marketable commodity with exaggerated claims of benefits and minimized emphasis on the discipline required in traditional contemplative practices.³⁵ Most of the long-established meditation organizations in the United States – monasteries, nonprofit centers and charities – train meditation facilitators through intensive courses of study and practice to retain the integrity of their schools of teaching.

“Right now anyone could hang up a shingle and say they are an expert in providing mindfulness,” says Blumenfeld. “Some of the major traditions are looking at coming up with a credential, so people looking for training could know they are receiving it from someone qualified.”

Le, of In Wave Group, also believes that credentialing will be required before health insurance companies will pay for meditation services. Although some insurance plans may cover the cost of mindfulness-based therapy, most insurers do not cover mindfulness programs or products. Employees may find ways to be reimbursed through flexible spending or professional development credit.

Most companies pay for group mindfulness programs out-of-pocket, but Le is seeing an increasing number of self-insured companies that are opting for additional wellness insurance, which subsidizes costs of mindfulness-based programs for employees. Self-insured companies may also underwrite their health insurance contract to include a plan that offers mindfulness-based programs for employees. “That’s cutting edge, but having professionalization in the industry will help move that along,” Le says.

In light of the growing popularity of mindfulness, several psychologists and neuroscientists have warned that the “hype is outpacing the science” and the potential benefits of mindfulness are “oversold for financial gain.”³⁶ An article published by the Association for Psychological Science discusses poor research methodology associated with past studies of mindfulness, including lack of standardization, varying definitions of mindfulness and the lack of control groups. Less than 25 percent of meditation trials funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health assessed adverse effects, and instead relied on “spontaneous reporting” from self-reported questionnaires.³⁷

In 2014, researchers at Johns Hopkins University published a systematic review that examined 47 well-designed and reliable studies. They determined that meditation programs can show “small improvements in anxiety, depression and pain,” but found no evidence that suggested meditation as more effective than any other active treatment, such as drugs, exercise or other behavioral therapies.³⁸

Despite such criticisms, founders of for-profit meditation services assert that they are modernizing ancient teachings to be accessible for busy, modern people. In New York City, for instance, founders of the for-profit mindfulness studios MNDFL and Inscape said they wanted to create modern, non-religious spaces where consumers could meditate. They have adopted for-profit business models similar to yoga studios and offer a la cart classes or paid memberships for short meditation sessions throughout the day.³⁹

Mindfulness is also used to sell products. There are foods labeled as Mindful Mayo and Mindful Meats, a clothing company called Mindful Supply and a paint color called Mindful Gray.⁴⁰ In 2015, adult coloring books, intended to promote mindfulness, contributed to the first increase in print book sales in eight years in the United Kingdom and also sold well in the United States.⁴¹ Currently, nearly 1,000 mindfulness smartphone apps – some of which offer free samples of guided meditations – are available for up to \$94.99 a year for packages or subscriptions.⁴²

App developers believe technology is key in a future where meditation is ubiquitous worldwide. Headspace has been downloaded more than 18 million times, has partnered with eight airlines to create an in-flight meditation channel and has plans for public, phone booth-sized meditation “pods” that can be installed in high-traffic areas such as airports, offices, schools and parks.⁴³

“Right now anyone could hang up a shingle and say they are an expert in providing mindfulness.”

Yunha Kim, founder of the app Simple Habit, believes mindfulness meditation could become widely popularized by corporate marketing campaigns. Decades ago, she said, “people didn’t run or brush their teeth on a daily basis – it was toothpaste companies and lifestyle companies like Nike who made that happen. We want to do the same for mindfulness.”⁴⁴

Diversity Will Drive Growth

Future growth of the U.S. meditation industry is linked to increased public interest and awareness of the alternative healthcare sector as a whole. According to the market research firm IBISWorld, the meditation industry makes up about 7.4 percent of the growing \$16.2 billion alternative health care sector.⁴⁵ Alternative health care includes services outside the scope of conventional medicine, such as yoga, acupuncture, herbal and massage therapy. Beginning in 2012, the value of the sector is predicted to grow 3.6 percent a year to reach \$19.1 billion by 2022, outpacing the projected 2.1 percent annual growth in U.S. GDP during the same period.⁴⁶ Although mindfulness is more accepted and popular in the United States, close to half of Americans say they do not meditate, creating significant opportunities for industry growth.

Rohan Gunatillake, the U.K.-based creator of the app [buddhify](#), says mindfulness is “still maturing as a marketplace.” As awareness grows, there will be more opportunities for app developers to innovate and create more diverse and interactive experiences that go beyond the “1990’s technology” of “listening to an MP3.”

Watch video with Judson Brewer of UMass on mindfulness mechanisms:



A key factor for sustained growth may lie in the industry’s ability to make mindfulness accessible to a more diverse group of people. Apps are in danger of building an “exclusive mindfulness culture” by targeting the same demographic: English-speaking, middle-class and financially stable people, said Gunatillake. The dominance of the subscription-revenue model may lead to a “lopsided app market” where the products with highest visibility are led by companies funded by venture capital that are obligated to maximize returns for investors, he said. A financing model that takes into account social impact as well as financial return may allow for mindfulness apps to be priced more affordably, Gunatillake wrote.⁴⁷

According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, the typical American meditator is “middle-aged, white, female, college-educated, and living in the Western United States.”⁴⁸ A study published by the Pew Research Center, a Washington-based research organization, found that among U.S. practitioners who meditate at least once a week, 60 percent are white and 73 percent are at least third-generation Americans.⁴⁹

Ironically, while contemplative traditions originate from the East, Asian Americans are the least likely to meditate, Pew found.⁵⁰ Le believes mindfulness has been adopted primarily by a white, middle- to upper-class demographic because “the teachers within the western mindfulness community come from that background.” In order to make mindfulness more accessible, “we have to start with diversifying the mindfulness teacher base,” she says.

Many industry experts agree that increasing the diversity of mindfulness teachers is crucial in making meditation more accessible to other communities. The Holistic Life Foundation, based in inner-city Baltimore, is a nonprofit organization that integrates mindfulness teacher training within the local community. Gunatillake says the influence of such programs can have a massive impact.

Last year, Gunatillake’s team experimented with translating guided meditations into seven languages and faced challenges in authentically marketing mindfulness in a nuanced way to different cultures. “Mindfulness has become mainly an English experience,” Gunatillake says. “How would the strong Catholic culture in Latin America relate to mindfulness? I think that would be very different to the mindfulness that grew out of the secular U.S. or U.K.”

Throughout history, he adds, mindfulness has evolved and changed in whatever culture it was being practiced. “So how do we empower different entrepreneurs, teachers or communities to present mindfulness in their own way?” he asks.

Mindfulness training among facilitators of various backgrounds and in various industries may be key for the future development of meditation in the United States. For instance, meditation programs among health care providers and medical students are projected to increase acceptance of mindfulness practice within traditional hospitals, which will also lead to an increase in referrals.⁵¹

Since 2007, there have been more than a dozen grassroots initiatives in the U.S. that train elementary, middle, and high school teachers in mindfulness practice and curricula development.⁵² The adoption of mindfulness courses within business schools also mirrors the integration of meditation in Fortune 500 companies and reflects a future change in workplace dynamics.⁵³

“There is a more compassionate leadership coming forth, where people recognize that they need to give employees time to rest and recharge for their overall well-being and productivity,” says Le. “I’m thrilled that more businesses are interested in it. Right now, it’s the wild, wild west of mindfulness, and it’s going to be a really intriguing to see how it all develops.”

About the Author

Hannah H. Kim is an independent business journalist and ghostwriter. She has written for Vice, Broadly, Korea Daily Newspaper, Isthmus Newspaper and Kenyon Review. She has also ghostwritten several business books. She is from Los Angeles and is an Iowa Writers’ Workshop graduate and a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Learn more about her work at www.hannah-h-kim.com.

Chronology

Fifth to 20th Centuries

Meditation from monks to Monsanto.

458

Though debated among scholars, Buddhism is believed to have first come to North America when a Chinese monk, Hui Shan, lands in modern-day California – more than 1,000 years before Columbus – probably to engage in missionary work among the indigenous Mogollon, Aztec and Mayan people.

Early 1800s

Hindu and Buddhist texts are introduced to the eastern United States by travelers and trade through the British East India Company.

1836–1855

Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes “Nature” in 1836 and, along with other writers, begins the transcendental movement, which integrates Eastern meditative influence with Western philosophy. Henry David Thoreau publishes “Walden Pond” in 1854 and poet Walt Whitman publishes “Leaves of Grass” in 1855.

1848–1870

Chinese Buddhism is established in San Francisco, where the Chinese immigrant population grows from less than 100 to 63,000 after discovery of gold in California.

1893

The World Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Chicago World’s Fair, introduces Eastern religions, including Buddhism, to U.S. culture at large.

1950–1969

A number of notable Buddhist teachers, including Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Dae Soen Sa Nim and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, immigrate to the United States with the intention of establishing Buddhist centers in the west, or to escape foreign occupation in their native countries.

1960–1979

Experimental counterculture develops and popularizes Buddhist teachings. Apple co-founder Steve Jobs is introduced to the Zen school of Buddhism and eventually incorporates meditation practice into the culture and design at his company.

1979

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Zen student, removes Buddhist language from meditation to make mindfulness practice more applicable to everyday American life. Kabat-Zinn makes scientific investigations into how mindfulness techniques can help manage chronic pain, developing what is known today as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

1996–2000

Bob Shapiro, CEO of agribusiness giant Monsanto, implements corporate mindfulness programs. They are eradicated by Shapiro’s successor.

21st Century

Meditation takes off as an industry.

2000–2015	The number of original scientific articles with “mindfulness” or “meditation” in the title, abstract, or keyword grows from less than 100 to more than 32,000.
2006	Cereal maker General Mills sets up a corporate mindfulness program.
2007	Google engineer Chade-Meng Tan creates the course “Search Inside Yourself” (SIY) at the tech company.... The first major mindfulness-in-schools initiative begins in the United Kingdom and leads to more than a dozen similar grassroots programs in the United States.
2009	Investment banking firm Goldman Sachs develops “resilience” mindfulness training for employees.
2011	Software developers create the first versions of modern mindfulness apps, such as buddhify and Headspace.
2012	Tan and Zen teacher Marc Lesser establish SIY as an independent organization to bring mindfulness training to corporations, nonprofits and government organizations.
2015	The health insurance firm Aetna reports an estimated \$3,000-per-employee annual increase in productivity for the company after implementing mindfulness training programs.... SIY increases revenue by more than 50 percent.
2016	Meditation becomes a billion-dollar industry in the United States, according to market research firms IBISWorld and Marketdata Enterprises.
2017	The number of mindfulness apps grows to more than 1,000. Headspace creates in-flight meditation channels on eight airlines and releases plans for public, phone booth-sized relaxation “pods.”

Resources for Further Study

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Productivity

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Organizations

Center for Mindfulness – University of Massachusetts Medical School

222 Maple Ave., Shrewsbury, MA 01545
1-508-856-2656

www.umassmed.edu/cfm

Medical research and training center for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

Headspace

701 Sutter St., San Francisco, CA 94109
1-855-432-3822

www.headspace.com

Digital service that provides guided meditation sessions online or via their mobile app.

In Wave Group

1693 Flanigan Drive, Suite 101, San Jose, CA 95121
1-415-793-3180

www.inwavegroup.com

Company that offers mindfulness training and professional development for the workplace.

Mindful Awareness Research Center

UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, 740 Westwood Plaza, Rm. C8-237, Los Angeles, CA 90095
1-310-206-7503

www.marc.ucla.edu

Mindful awareness research and educational center that offers certification in mindfulness facilitation.

Mindfulness Everywhere

South Block 221, 60 Osborne St., Glasgow G1 5QH, United Kingdom
+44-0-141-552-5554

www.mindfulnessseverywhere.io/

Studio that has created mindfulness apps such as buddhify, Sleepfulness, Kara and Meditate Now.

Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute

1003A O'Reilly Ave., San Francisco, CA 94129
1-415-561-7851

www.siyli.org

Organization that originated at Google and offers mindfulness training to corporations, nonprofits and government organizations.

Shambhala International

Sovereign Place, 5121 Sackville St., Suite 601, Halifax, N.S. B3J 1K1, Canada
1-902-425-4275

www.shambhala.org

International meditation community of 220 centers and groups.

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