

# The case for making workplace coffee drinking a mindful exercise

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Willow Aliento | 19 November 2018

**OPINION: Professional services firm PwC is piloting a coffee exchange program that supplies and washes reusable coffee cups for its workers. It sounds like a good idea, but we were left wondering that maybe it's good to take a break and come face-to-face with our consumption habits in our super busy modern lives.**

PwC is trialling a new start-up subscription service called The Cup eXchange at the cafes in its Sydney and Melbourne offices, according to [Fairfax Media](#). Staff get their coffee in a reusable cup instead of a paper one, which they can then return dirty and get a fresh, clean one with their next coffee. The cafe does the washing up part.

PwC estimated that around 450,000 paper cups are used across all its on-site cafes nationwide, and over 90 per cent go to landfill. In eight weeks of using the service, around 25,000 cups have been diverted.

One comment in the article that raised our eyebrows a little was that the service is an alternative to relying on “busy professionals to wash their own cups”.

Is life so frantic in corporate Australia that taking a minute to wash out a coffee cup is a major hassle? Surely it's not a major productivity drain to take a quick timeout to wash a cup, especially when there's a major planetary plus for doing so in terms of reducing waste and carbon emissions!

**Could it even be good for our individual well-being to wash out a cup?**

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Charlotte Thaarup principal consultant of The Mindfulness Clinic told The Fifth Estate that it brings into question who we are as human beings when the basic cycles of life are not owned by us, and when we are “disconnected” from waste and our own mess.

One angle on the mindfulness connection with waste is illustrated by a new approach to general waste bin signage in New Zealand Thaarup noticed on a recent business trip. The bins are now labelled “landfill”.

This reminds people that their choices – for example, throwing a coffee cup away – have consequences, she says.

Mindfulness is a way of bringing us back into awareness and connection – and Thaarup says the act of washing out a coffee cup can be a mindfulness practice.

“Everything can be a practice – life can be a practice. Mindfulness just requires us to be aware.”

So being present in the moment at the sink, appreciating the bubbles, appreciating the cup and the coffee that has been had from it, can be a mindfulness moment.

And having those moments has been proven by thousands of research studies to lead to improved wellbeing.

It’s also something that has been implemented by industries including manufacturing, construction, finance and technology.

Her company’s clients in Australia have included firms such as Leighton, CommBank, Mercer, Birdsnest, Temple + Webster, Liberty Finance, Rapid Insurance and the Australian government, including the Department of Defence.

Thaarup says that for some companies, the recognition that mindfulness increases an individual’s ability to recognise when they are at greatest risk of accident or injury has resulted in them adopting the practice and seeing a reduction in injuries and accidents.

Other firms are recognising the wellbeing dividend or seeing it as a way of making the company a place that works for the people it employs.

## **The case for tea ladies**

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There’s another dimension to the whole corporate coffee culture, and that is the hurried and individualised nature of it.

UNSW Canberra ADFA School of Business Professor Jenny Stewart in her book, *The Decline of the Tea Lady – management for dissidents*, notes that in the 1980s, as part of a management approach that was all about efficiency and staff cutbacks, the tea ladies that used to be a staple feature of government offices and other white-collar habitats were made redundant.

No longer could everyone look forward to a shared break for cuppas served in china cups –

which the tea ladies also collected and washed – instead everyone brought their own mugs and tea bags and braved the office kitchenette and then took the cuppa back to the desk to enjoy in splendid isolation.

Stewart points out that while this was seen as a positive measure from a budget point of view, the result was actually people making lots of other excuses to go and talk to each other, so no genuine productivity was gained.

What we are seeing now is also an enormous amount of waste!

Thaarup says there were some aspects to the tea lady type arrangement that were valuable, including the value of taking a break, and the value of a shared experience and ritual.

The bottom line is, trying to be non-human doesn't work so well for humans, she says.

We are social beings. The enlightened workplaces are now looking for ways to make it a sphere that is positive for people.

Coffee is about energy – and the coffee habit in corporate Australia might just be propping up a way of working that is not sustainable, Thaarup explains.

“Has anyone really measured the human cost of the corporate life?”

It is known that depression, stress and other conditions have a cost, but Thaarup says there has been insufficient research on the real overall cost to people of the contemporary office work life.

The whole idea of taking a break that has no purpose other than being a break just isn't on many people's radars any more. Leaving at 5pm is also rare for many, so they arrive home at the end of the day with nothing “left in the tank” for family life.

Thaarup gives an example that if a worker was to say they were ducking off for a quick 10-minute nap, they'd get some odd looks, but saying they are ducking off for a coffee even though that might take 15 minutes, is seen as normal and acceptable. That's because coffee is seen as fuelling productivity.

But taking breaks, even without the excuse of getting coffee, is important Thaarup says. Shifting out of the “drive” space to the mindfulness space is good for us, and it also has some benefits for a company.

Dr Paul Zak, author of *The Neuroeconomics of Trust*, has identified the role oxytocin plays in building trust and engagement in the business world.

Oxytocin is “the trust hormone”, Thaarup says, and having a little break such a coffee break or stepping away from the screen to wash a coffee cup, might just mean connecting with someone, a little chat, a smile and the subsequent release of oxytocin.

Being in the productive mode, the “drive state”, is one where there are low levels of oxytocin, as it squeezes out connecting, the only concern is “me and my task”. Low levels of the trust hormone, in turn, lead to low levels of engagement and less ability to build relationships.

So, if a company wants to build staff engagement – maybe encouraging breaks would help.

Thaarup describes it as like “the little oasis of a cup of tea, a breather. It’s an antidote to the drive space.”

“Who knows what connections and ideas could arise out of that.”

Tags: coffee cups, mindfulness, recycling, The Cup eXchange, waste