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Acceptance and Commitment Training in the workplace

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Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACTraining) aims to improve performance and reduce stress for workers by supporting the development of psychological flexibility at the jobsite. Psychological flexibility is the ability to be in the current moment, mindfully aware of thoughts and emotions, and committed to valued goals. ACTraining is based on the six interactive processes highlighted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy — contacting the present moment, acceptance, defusion, perspective taking, values clarification, and committed action — and has been efficacious in many occupational environments. This paper will review the principles of ACTraining and psychological flexibility, and survey the literature of this effective consulting approach.

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Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACTraining) [1] is an evidence-based consulting approach aimed to improve performance and reduce stress in the workplace. ACTraining is founded on the principles of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) [2], a cognitive-behavioral therapy shown to be efficacious for treating many clinical concerns [3–18]. The ACT model, whether applied in the clinic or the workplace, leads to measurable behavior change and focuses on improving *psychological flexibility*.

Defining psychological flexibility

Psychological flexibility describes the capacity to contact the present moment while also being aware of thoughts and emotions — without trying to change those private experiences or be adversely controlled by them — and depending upon the situation, persisting in or changing behavior in the pursuit of values and goals [19–21]. In other

words, individuals with greater psychological flexibility are focused on the ‘here-and-now,’ agile when dealing with emotions [22], and personally motivated to achieve significant objectives. Further, greater psychological flexibility implies people have a willingness to change their action plan when it no longer serves valued ends or persist in important behaviors in the face of adversity.

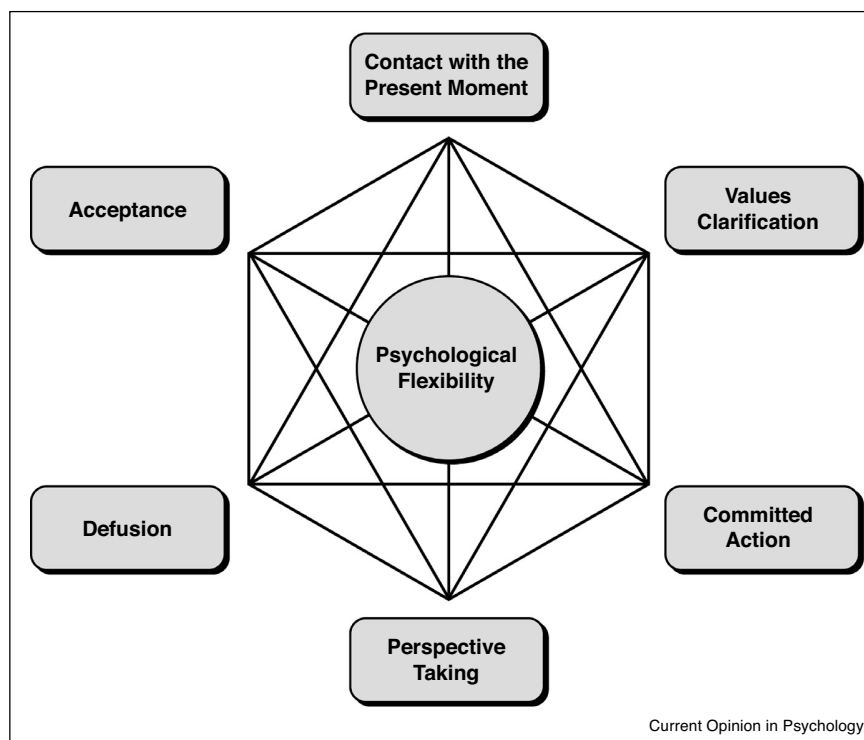
Organizations and corporations benefit when leaders, managers, and front-line workers are psychologically flexible. Research suggests that psychological flexibility, and the ACTraining that accelerates this characteristic, improves work performance, job satisfaction, mental health, training outcomes, and propensity to innovate, while reducing work stress, absenteeism, burnout, and job-related errors [23*].

ACTraining: an overview

ACTraining is based on six interactive processes that support the development of psychological flexibility: contacting the present moment, acceptance, defusion, perspective taking, values clarification, and committed action. These processes will be defined throughout this article. The traditional ACT hexagon model (Figure 1) represents the six components and how the combined relationships between them contribute to psychological flexibility [24].

Contacting the present moment resonates with the core concepts of mindfulness training that have recently become popular in the workplace. The present moment is the only time an individual can engage in any chosen behavior, including productive action at work, but almost half of the day individuals are thinking about something other than what they are doing [25]. The ability to think and use language allows people to remember past events, compare the current situation to ideals, and plan for future actions and outcomes, and thus pulls workers out of attending to the current moment. Despite these side effects, language is clearly a powerful tool with great survival value, and critically essential for optimizing workplace performance, but language can have a downside. Throughout the day, certain thoughts can influence workers to focus on things that are not in their present control, and reduce their dedication to executing behavior that is in their control. Doing mindfulness skills-building exercises guides workers to attend to the here and now, which is the only time they can take effective action. Contacting the present moment is a crucial skill to productivity because ‘now’ is the only time workers can engage in job-related tasks.

Figure 1



The traditional ACT hexagon model.

Acceptance skills build psychological flexibility by teaching workers how to behave effectively even in the presence of emotions and sensations that are typically judged as stressful [26]. In ACTraining, individuals learn that feelings, urges, memories, and other private psychological experiences naturally arise throughout the workday, and that these feelings do not need to be eliminated or avoided. This approach suggests that willingly contacting psychological experiences is healthier and ultimately allows the worker to be more effective. Engaging in actions to avoid private experiences can actually lead to problematic behavior [27–29]. ACTraining helps foster a willingness to experience a range of psychological events so that they do not sidetrack the person's performance. Consider a company owner who has significant anxiety related to public speaking. Her anxiety might influence her to cancel giving an important speech, or in order to 'calm her nerves' she might self-medicate or take prescription drugs that ultimately have a deleterious impact on her performance. ACTraining provides a different context for 'negative' feelings so that they are perceived as less toxic, and do not have to be avoided in order to engage in appropriate work actions.

Defusion is the ability to observe one's thoughts without being governed by them. In contrast, cognitive fusion is when thoughts rigidly influence a person's actions [30].

People do not have complete control over their cognitions, and occasionally have unhelpful or unproductive thoughts. For instance, suppose a lone worker on an oilfield thinks to herself, 'It's too hot to wear my hardhat! I won't put it on today.' If that worker is fused to her cognitions, it might occasion her to behave unsafely. ACTraining provides defusion skills to help workers mindfully observe unhelpful thoughts, and invites workers to engage in productive action even in the presence of these cognitive obstacles. The ACTraining model will encourage workers to notice that they can engage in goal directed behavior even while having distracting cognitions. For example, during ACTraining, a worker can be asked to raise her right hand above her head, and then say aloud, 'I can't raise my right hand. No matter what I do, I cannot raise my right hand.' This is a simple demonstration to the worker that language does not actually have to control actions. When defusion skills are combined with mindfulness skills and generalized to the jobsite, this worker can observe she is having an automatic unsafe thought about not donning her hardhat, and can simply notice the self-talk while acting safely in the presence of this unhelpful cognition.

Perspective taking is another ACTraining process aiming to help build psychological flexibility [31]. Workers are cautioned about how their own perspective on who they

are and how they describe themselves can sometimes have a harmful impact on their actions. For instance, when a seasoned manager is summoned to attend a company-wide training, she may say, 'I'm a veteran around here. I don't need anymore training on how to do my job!' This leader believes certain self-descriptors that could negatively influence her psychological flexibility and potentially affect her future job performance. ACTraining invites people to 'step back' to notice their unhelpful self-concept, and take a broader perspective on who they are. Trainees learn to identify that they are not their roles, titles, emotions, sensations, thoughts, or urges, but that these are simply experiences they have. This perspective allows the worker to behave more flexibly in the presence of these psychological events that could impede productivity or increase stress levels.

Values clarification in ACTraining invites workers to explore the meaningful purpose of their lives and their choices. Values refer to verbally-constructed, chosen directions for action that establish reinforcement for engaging in those personally-relevant actions [32]. For example, when a hospital CEO articulates his sincere motivation to reduce suffering in his community, and acknowledges this to be his purpose for choosing how he behaves in his profession, he is clarifying his values, and linking those verbalizations to his professional endeavor. The ACTraining model posits that such elucidation of occupational and vocational values can strengthen psychological flexibility in the workplace. ACTraining sets the occasion for workers to explore the purpose of their choices, and articulate why they do what they do. Values clarification helps workers develop their own personal mission statement, while the ACTraining consultation approach helps harmonize the personal mission statement with the organization's mission statement. When people can connect their values to the company's action plan, they are likely to have increased motivation to achieve relevant goals, persist when there are obstacles to that meaningful goal, and stay focused — through the skills of perspective taking, defusion, acceptance, and mindfulness — on their own committed actions.

Committed action is defined as measurable behavior in the service of values, and ACTraining links these behaviors to the key performance indicators for the company's objectives [1,21]. In order to observe worker effectiveness and psychological flexibility, the organization and worker need to define objective job tasks and expected results. Companies typically use contracts to define deliverables, or establish task lists and position descriptions to communicate the committed actions that will be expected on the job. Having a clear 'to-do list' assists workers in being successful in the workplace. A worker efficiently executing a meaningful to-do list, while managing stress and distractions in a healthy manner, is displaying behaviors emblematic of psychological flexibility and accomplishing the end goal of ACTraining.

The six core processes in ACTraining work together providing skills for workers to purposefully commit to personally important accomplishments while mindfully observing thoughts, self-descriptions, emotions, and sensations that can become obstacles to optimum performance. Industry leaders interested in accelerating work performance would benefit from ACTraining's effectiveness in improving psychological flexibility, and should consider the evidence supporting how this consulting approach leads to important organizational outcomes.

Survey of the ACTraining research

Bond and Bunce [33] investigated the behavior of a financial institution's call center operators, and demonstrated that higher levels of psychological acceptance predicted better work performance and mental health. Operators scoring higher on the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire [34], a measure of psychological flexibility, were less likely to commit work-related computer input errors. There was also a significant positive correlation with acceptance and job satisfaction. In a replication [35] with a different financial institution, higher levels of psychological flexibility again predicted better mental health and job performance on a newly trained task. This research suggests that when training workers to perform a new skill, those who are not distracted by or avoidant of the frustrations with the learning curve have better training outcomes. Additionally, this replication suggested that psychologically flexible workers have a greater ability to detect and respond more successfully to goal-related opportunities.

When workers receive ACTraining, they are more likely to adopt new initiatives in performing work tasks than workers not receiving ACTraining. For instance [36], mental health workers in an organization were awaiting training in evidence-based pharmacotherapy, and prior to the training, one group of those workers received ACTraining and the other received an educational control workshop. After they both received the pharmacotherapy trainings, the mental health practitioners who received prior ACTraining made significantly more referrals to evidence-based pharmacotherapy than the control group at a three-month follow-up. In other words, the employee training 'stuck' for professionals in the ACTraining. Furthermore, the ACTraining group rated the psychological obstacles that might impede them from adopting best practices as less believable after ACTraining, and showed greater psychological flexibility than the control group directly after the training and at a three-month follow-up. In a similar investigation [37], counselors who received 90-minute ACTraining for 8 weeks were more likely to adopt principles from a continuing education workshop, and continue to utilize those skills, than counselors who did not attend ACTraining workshops. ACTraining appears to embed newly trained skills into workers' repertoires and help those skills endure.

Another experiment at a corporate call center [38] showed that workers having higher levels of psychological flexibility perceived that they had greater job control, which describes a person's perceived capacity to have influence over their work environment to make it less threatening and more rewarding. The researchers posit that 'it was this greater perception of control that led these people to experience even greater improvements in absence rates and mental health' (p. 652).

Shoring up psychological flexibility can also influence employee burnout. Burnout is a response to chronic interpersonal and emotional stressors on the job, and is defined by exhaustion, inefficacy, and cynicism [39]. Having lower levels of psychological flexibility has been shown to be a significant predictor of burnout [40]. However, in another study, service industry workers with greater psychological flexibility not only report lower levels of emotional exhaustion at the end of the workday, but also an ability to attenuate their exhaustion level during more stressful workdays [41]. The service industry representatives in this sample experienced interpersonal stress when dealing with customer complaints, but were still required to follow company policy for projecting a positive emotional display to the customer despite this stress. According to the researchers, higher psychological flexibility 'redirects energy and attention away from the intensive regulation of emotions... and toward other more professionally relevant and less psychologically consuming tasks' (p. 1274). In other words, workers' psychological flexibility contributed to healthfully accepting the interpersonal tension and frustrating emotions implicit in the work while committing to optimal service.

Fortunately, ACTraining can help workers increase psychological flexibility to assist with workplace stressors. In a randomized controlled trial targeting stress management for 90 workers in a large media organization [42], participants were randomly assigned to either ACTraining, an Innovation Promotion Program (IPP) that aimed to help workers identify and change stressful events at work, or a wait list group. There were three half-day group interventions throughout 14 weeks. ACTraining showed significantly greater improvements than the waitlist and the IPP groups on a general measure of stress and psychological health. Interestingly, the innovation-based group and the ACTraining group were equally effective at increasing the propensity to innovate new approaches to reduce worksite stressors, even though ACTraining did not intentionally target innovation as an outcome. In another study, researchers gave three half-day ACTrainings to government workers, and found a significant rise in psychological flexibility and reduction in emotional exhaustion when compared to a control group [43]. Subsequent research testing ACTraining for stress management showed a significant effect for improving mental health for that sample of employees, and specifically demonstrated that it helped particularly distressed workers [44].

Additional research outcomes have supported the use of ACTraining to mitigate stress levels for university personnel [45], early childhood special education teachers [46], and staff members working with individuals diagnosed with intellectual disabilities [47,48]. Mental health workers receiving six ACT-related phone consultations reported improvement in dealing with burnout and a significant progress in personal accomplishment [49]. In addition, an ACT-based smartphone app was used by middle-managers to successfully deal with stress in the workplace [50]. These latter interventions demonstrated that ACTraining can be delivered quite efficiently at the worksite.

Future directions and summary

Large organizations and Fortune 500 companies have capitalized on ACTraining to accelerate the achievement of key performance indicators in a variety of industries [51]. ACTraining has been used to help industrial workers behave more safely [52], software start-up engineers stay dedicated to innovative problem-solving and creating technological advances [51], and leaders adopt better leadership repertoires [1,23,53]. Like any applied behavioral science endeavor, more research on the impact of ACTraining is warranted. The ACTraining approach creates a practical context for companies who are embracing the recent surge in mindfulness at the workplace. To summarize, ACTraining assists workers to not only mindfully contact the present moment, but also accept troublesome emotions, defuse from distracting thoughts, notice unhelpful self-descriptions — all which could impede optimal job performance — while engaging in measurable and meaningful committed actions. These outcomes and processes deserve significant attention from corporate leaders interested in creating high performance, psychologically healthy workplaces.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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