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To cite this article: Isabel Barbosa & Elizabeth Real de Oliveira (04 Mar 2026): From scarcity to abundance: Reimagining workplace culture and its impact on cognitive function and well-being, Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health, DOI: [10.1080/15555240.2026.2632809](https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2026.2632809)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15555240.2026.2632809>



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Published online: 04 Mar 2026.



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From scarcity to abundance: Reimagining workplace culture and its impact on cognitive function and well-being

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformative effects of shifting workplace culture from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset on employees' cognitive function and overall well-being. The scarcity mindset, characterized by limited resource perception and heightened stress, can impair productivity and mental health in professional settings. Drawing on cognitive load theory and organizational culture research, this qualitative study employs in-depth interviews and focus groups to analyze how an abundance-oriented culture fosters reduced cognitive load, greater cognitive flexibility, creativity, and psychological wellness. Findings reveal emergent themes linking cultural shifts to enhanced cognitive performance and improved employee well-being, supported by case studies of organizations undergoing this transition. The study discusses the theoretical and practical implications for organizational leadership and provides recommendations to cultivate an abundance mindset that promotes healthier, more effective workplaces. Limitations and directions for future research are also considered.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 21 August 2025
Accepted 11 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Scarcity; abundance;
workplace culture; well-being; cognitive function

Introduction

In contemporary professional environments, the scarcity mindset—a cognitive framework centered on the persistent perception of limited resources—has become a prevalent force shaping workplace culture and employee behavior. Rooted in beliefs that resources such as time, recognition, or career opportunities are insufficient, scarcity thinking often generates competition, stress, and a focus on short-term survival rather than long-term

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growth (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2012). This mindset narrows attention around perceived deficits, elevates cognitive load, and can impair decision making, creativity, and overall productivity, with downstream effects on psychological well-being and morale (Sherman et al., 2024). Extending this logic to workplace culture, research on cultures of health and supportive organizational climates suggests that environments characterized by trust, psychological safety, and shared growth foster better mental health, higher engagement, and stronger well-being outcomes for employees (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Arnold et al., 2023; Bridger & Brasher, 2011). These findings collectively indicate that shifting from scarcity-based to abundance-oriented cultures has the potential to alleviate cognitive strain, enhance cognitive flexibility, and promote psychological resilience in professional settings.

Despite growing conceptual interest in abundance thinking and positive workplace cultures, empirical exploration of how transitions from scarcity to abundance unfold in practice and how these shifts influence employees' cognitive functioning and well-being over time remains limited. This study addresses that gap by investigating the following research question: How does shifting from a scarcity to an abundance mindset impact cognitive function and well-being in workplace environments? Through qualitative inquiry involving in-depth interviews and focus groups with employees in organizations undertaking cultural transformation initiatives, the research elucidates the mechanisms, experiences, and outcomes associated with these shifts, offering insights that advance organizational theory and inform workplace behavioral health practice.

Literature review

Scarcity mindset: Definition and implications

The scarcity mindset refers to a psychological state in which individuals perceive a chronic insufficiency of critical resources, such as time, money, or social capital, leading to tunnel vision focused on managing immediate shortages (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This cognitive framework leads to a preoccupation with scarcity-related concerns, often resulting in reduced cognitive bandwidth and impaired decision making (Shah et al., 2012). Scarcity not only denotes the actual lack of resources but also the perceived limitation of those resources, which profoundly influences how individuals allocate attention and prioritize tasks.

In workplace settings, this mindset often manifests as competition for limited opportunities, job insecurity, and heightened stress, creating an environment where employees operate defensively rather than proactively (Koen & van Bezouw, 2021). The psychological strain induced by scarcity

can exacerbate cognitive load, resulting in diminished working memory capacity and reduced complex problem-solving skills (Chakraborty et al., 2025). Moreover, the scarcity mindset has been associated with adverse emotional outcomes such as anxiety and reduced well-being, as the constant demand to manage perceived deficits overwhelms mental resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The implications of the scarcity mindset extend beyond individual cognitive and emotional impairments. At the organizational level, scarcity thinking can undermine collaboration, inhibit innovation, and perpetuate a culture of scarcity that stifles growth and employee engagement (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Understanding the dynamics of the scarcity mindset is thus essential for devising interventions that enhance both cognitive performance and psychological health in professional environments.

Cognitive load theory and its application to workplace productivity

Cognitive load theory (CLT), initially developed within educational psychology, provides a framework for understanding how the human brain processes and manages information under varying levels of mental demand (Sweller, 1988). It posits that working memory has a limited capacity to hold and manipulate data, and when cognitive load exceeds this capacity, learning and performance suffer (Sepp et al., 2019). CLT distinguishes between three types of cognitive load: intrinsic load, related to the complexity of the task; extraneous load, imposed by the way information is presented; and germane load, which refers to the cognitive resources allocated to processing, constructing, and automating schemas (Paas et al., 2003).

In the workplace, cognitive load theory has critical implications for productivity, decision making, and overall job performance. Complex or poorly structured tasks can impose high intrinsic and extraneous loads, leading to cognitive overload and diminished efficiency (Eese et al., 2025). For employees, excessive cognitive load results in mental fatigue, errors, and reduced capacity for creativity and problem solving. This is especially relevant in high-stress environments or when workers face multiple simultaneous demands, conditions often exacerbated by a scarcity mindset, which narrows attention and further constrains cognitive resources (Chakraborty et al., 2025).

Effective management of cognitive load in organizational settings involves designing workflows, communication, and information systems that minimize unnecessary cognitive burden while supporting meaningful cognitive engagement (Arnold et al., 2023). For example, simplifying task instructions, reducing distractions, and providing appropriate tools for information processing can improve employees' cognitive capacity and,

consequently, their productivity and well-being (Bridger & Brasher, 2011). Integrating CLT with workplace psychology thus offers valuable insights into optimizing organizational culture and practices to support sustainable employee performance and mental health.

Organizational culture and its influence on employee mindset

Organizational culture is widely recognized as a critical determinant of employee attitudes, behaviors, and overall workplace climate. Defined as the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape how work is conducted within an organization, culture profoundly influences how employees interpret their environment and engage with their roles (Schein, 2010). The prevailing mindset within an organization, including whether it fosters scarcity or abundance thinking, often reflects its culture.

Research indicates that positive organizational cultures that promote trust, psychological safety, and open communication tend to foster adaptive, growth-oriented mindsets among employees (Akanke & Furnham, 2025). Such cultures encourage collaboration, innovation, and resilience, which are essential for maintaining cognitive flexibility and well-being in the workplace (Spreitzer & Cameron, 2012). Conversely, cultures characterized by fear, competition, and resource protectionism may reinforce scarcity mindsets, leading to stress, diminished motivation, and impaired cognitive function (Kahn, 1990). Employees internalize these cultural cues, which in turn shape their perceptions of resource availability and influence their mental frameworks.

Beyond individual effects, organizational culture mediates how teams coordinate and share knowledge, further impacting collective cognitive resources and well-being (Schein, 2010). Culture-driven mindsets also influence leadership styles and decision-making processes, which shape the strategies organizations use to manage challenges and opportunities. Therefore, understanding and intentionally shaping organizational culture is crucial for fostering mindsets that enhance cognitive capacity and employee well-being, potentially transitioning from scarcity toward abundance thinking.

Abundance thinking in professional contexts

Abundance thinking represents a cognitive and cultural shift from focusing on limitations and competition toward recognizing and embracing possibilities, opportunities, and collaborative potential within professional environments. Rooted in the belief that resources, ideas, and success are not finite but can expand through shared effort and creative engagement, research on

an abundance mindset in workplace contexts has gained traction as organizations seek to cultivate innovation and well-being (Iqbal et al., 2025).

Studies reveal that an abundance mindset encourages employees to reframe challenges as opportunities rather than obstacles, fostering collaboration across differences and empowering individuals to contribute authentically and innovatively to their teams (Gholidoust, 2025; Madanchian, 2025). This mindset nurtures creative problem-solving by reducing fears related to failure and resource scarcity, leading to more open, inclusive, and equitable workplace cultures. Importantly, abundance thinking emphasizes valuing diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing collective intelligence and driving more robust organizational outcomes.

The psychological benefits of abundance thinking are well documented, with research showing reductions in workplace stress and anxiety, improved employee morale and job satisfaction, and greater resilience in the face of adversity (Iqbal et al., 2025). Employees who adopt abundance mentalities reportedly experience less fear-driven behavior, exhibit greater motivation, and develop stronger interpersonal connections with colleagues. Such environments bolster mental health and encourage sustained engagement and productivity.

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping and modeling abundance mindsets by fostering open communication, recognizing collaborative behaviors, and cultivating a culture that prioritizes growth and opportunity over scarcity and competition (Ahsan, 2025). Leaders who embody abundance thinking inspire similar attitudes throughout their organizations, which contributes significantly to collective success and innovation.

In sum, the existing body of research underscores the transformative potential of abundance thinking in professional settings, not only for enhancing cognitive and emotional well-being but also for driving organizational effectiveness and resilience.

Theoretical framework

This study proposes an integrative model that links organizational culture, individual mindset, cognitive function, and well-being within professional settings to explain how shifts from scarcity to abundance thinking influence employee outcomes (see [Figure 1](#)). Organizational culture is conceptualized as the foundational context that shapes prevailing mindsets at the individual level, which in turn affects cognitive processes and psychological health (Schein, 2010). In this model, culture is not only a background condition but also a malleable lever that can be influenced through leadership practices, HR systems, and broader institutional and environmental forces. Founder values, leadership style, reward systems, job design, and external

performance, enabling employees to perform complex tasks efficiently and to engage innovatively (Eeese et al., 2025; Sweller, 1988). Well-being encompasses psychological, emotional, and physical health outcomes related to workplace experience, including stress, job satisfaction, and broader mental health indicators (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Bridger & Brasher, 2011).

A central feature of the model is its feedback structure. Enhanced cognitive functioning and well-being, fostered by abundance-oriented mindsets and cultures, are expected to translate into behaviors such as greater collaboration, proactive problem-solving, and constructive voice, which in turn reinforce and deepen abundance-oriented norms and practices at the cultural level (Crum et al., 2013; Schein, 2010). As employees experience lower stress and higher psychological safety, they are more likely to model and advocate for practices that sustain an abundance culture, such as knowledge sharing, mutual support, and inclusive decision-making, thereby creating a positive feedback loop between well-being, cognitive function, and organizational culture (Akande & Furnham, 2025).

Together, these components depict a dynamic system in which: (i) organizational culture shapes individual mindsets; (ii) individual mindsets regulate cognitive load and cognitive function; (iii) cognitive function influences well-being and performance; and (iv) improved well-being and performance feed back into and gradually reshape organizational culture toward more abundance-oriented patterns. This theoretical framework supports the investigation of how intentional cultural interventions—particularly those targeting leadership behavior, HR practices, and psychological safety—can shift organizations from scarcity to abundance logics, leading to meaningful improvements in employees' cognitive and well-being outcomes. By integrating organizational theory, cognitive psychology, and positive psychology, the model provides a comprehensive lens for understanding and guiding workplace transformation that is directly relevant to workplace behavioral health.

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the complex, subjective experiences of employees transitioning from a scarcity to an abundance mindset within workplace cultures. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for understanding the nuanced ways in which individuals interpret their organizational environment and how these interpretations shape cognitive function and well-being (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In-depth interviews provide rich, detailed personal narratives that reveal individual

perceptions and experiences. Focus groups complement interviews by facilitating interactive discussions that can surface shared themes, collective meanings, and organizational dynamics (Morgan, 1996). Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives, aligning with best practices for qualitative inquiry into workplace behavioral health.

Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select information-rich cases that were most relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The final sample comprised four organizations in Portugal, including three for-profit companies and one nonprofit entity operating in health care, information technology, professional services, and social care. Organizations were identified through existing research partnerships, professional networks, and publicly communicated culture-change or well-being initiatives. They were invited to participate via contact with senior HR or organizational development leaders. All participating organizations had explicitly committed to cultural transformation efforts oriented toward collaboration, psychological safety, or employee well-being, which likely biased the sample toward more change-oriented and potentially positive experiences; this limitation is acknowledged and discussed as an avenue for future research with organizations at earlier or more resistant stages of transformation.

Within these organizations, employees were recruited using a combination of open calls disseminated via internal communication channels (e.g., intranet announcements, email invitations) and nominations from HR partners designed to ensure diversity across departments and hierarchical levels. The final participant group included 32 employees drawn from the four organizations, with approximately 7–9 participants per organization. Participants represented a spread of roles, including six senior leaders and executives, 10 middle managers, and 16 nonmanagerial staff, as well as functions such as operations, human resources, finance, clinical or technical services, and administrative support. Demographically, participants ranged in age from their late 20s to late 50s, included men and women, and had organizational tenures from less than 2 years to more than 20 years, providing variation in perspectives on cultural change and mindset shifts.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus group sessions. The semi-structured format allowed for guided conversations while leaving space for participants to introduce unanticipated topics and

perspectives (Kallio et al., 2016). In total, 18 individual interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 45–60 min, with participants selected to ensure representation across hierarchical levels and functional areas. Interviews were conducted online via secure video-conferencing platforms to facilitate participation from different locations while maintaining confidentiality.

In addition, three focus groups were conducted, each comprising 6–8 participants and lasting approximately 75–90 min. Two focus groups brought together employees from a single organization, while one combined staff from two organizations to explore similarities and differences in cultural transformation efforts. Where feasible, focus groups were structured to include cross-departmental participation to capture diverse experiences of scarcity and abundance logics within the same organizational system. A subset of participants (four individuals) took part in both an individual interview and a focus group, allowing for more profound elaboration of key narratives as well as examination of how perspectives were expressed in individual versus group settings; this overlap was purposeful and is accounted for in the analysis as multiple data points from the same individuals rather than independent cases.

To reduce self-report and social desirability bias, several procedures were implemented. At the outset of each interview and focus group, participants were assured that their responses would be anonymized, reported only in aggregate, and not shared with managers or organizational leadership in a manner that would allow them to be identified. Facilitators emphasized that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers and explicitly invited both optimistic and critical reflections on organizational culture and change efforts. During data collection, the researchers used probing questions and reflexive notes to explore disconfirming or ambivalent accounts and to move beyond overly positive or socially desirable narratives. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with identifying details removed during transcription to protect confidentiality and to support rigorous analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The full dataset consisted of 21 transcripts (18 interview transcripts and three focus group transcripts); no transcripts were excluded from analysis. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase process: (i) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and analytic memo-writing; (ii) generating initial codes that captured segments related, for example, to perceived scarcity, cognitive strain, collaboration, psychological safety, and well-being; (iii) searching for candidate themes by clustering codes into higher-order patterns; (iv) reviewing themes against

both the coded extracts and the entire dataset; (v) defining and naming themes; and (vi) producing the final narrative account.

Coding was conducted by at least two researchers for each transcript, who first coded independently and then met to compare and reconcile interpretations; discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and a shared coding framework was iteratively refined as analysis proceeded. Member checking was conducted with a subset of six participants, who were invited to comment on the resonance and accuracy of the preliminary themes, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Particular attention was paid to disconfirming or minority cases—for instance, participants who reported persistent scarcity experiences in ostensibly abundance-oriented cultures, or who described the emotional effort required to sustain an abundance mindset in mixed or resistant teams—to ensure that the analysis captured both convergence and divergence in experiences.

Beyond corroborating established insights regarding scarcity's impact on cognitive bandwidth and stress (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2012), the analysis identified novel mechanisms, including social feedback loops in which team-level scarcity norms intensified individual cognitive load and the emotional labor involved in maintaining abundance-oriented thinking within partially transformed cultures. These emergent linkages informed the theoretical model and the organization of the Findings section, where themes were structured to reflect how cultural logics, individual mindsets, and cognitive and well-being outcomes co-evolve in practice.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Before commencing the research, ethical approval was obtained from the authors' Institutional Review Board. All participants received detailed written and verbal information about the study and provided informed consent before participation. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that all data would remain confidential and anonymized at the individual and organizational levels. Data collection, storage, and handling complied with national data protection regulations and institutional policies; only the research team had access to identifiable data, which were stored securely and de-identified before analysis.

Findings

Cognitive constraints and overload associated with scarcity mindset

This theme extends cognitive load theory by showing how scarcity thinking not only taxes individual working memory and attention but also reshapes

team-level collaboration patterns and emotional experience in daily work. Participants consistently reported significant cognitive strain and overload stemming from scarcity thinking in their workplace environments. The scarcity mindset pressured employees to focus narrowly on immediate concerns and limited resources, which impaired their ability to process information broadly, plan, and engage in strategic thinking. This experiential evidence aligns with cognitive load theory, emphasizing how perceived scarcity amplifies intrinsic and extraneous cognitive demands, thereby reducing available mental capacity for higher-order executive functions such as problem-solving and creative reasoning (Shah et al., 2012; Sweller, 1988).

One participant reflected: “I often felt like my mind was on a treadmill—racing but going nowhere, stuck trying to manage deadlines and shortages instead of looking ahead.”

Another employee highlighted the emotional toll intertwined with cognitive burden: “The constant worry about not having enough - time, staff, or budget - was exhausting. It was not just stress; it felt like my brain was overloaded, making it hard to think creatively or stay positive.”

Such accounts deepen scholarly understanding by linking cognitive overload directly with emotional depletion, illustrating the lived complexity of scarcity’s impact beyond abstract constructs and pointing to how sustained overload can erode psychological well-being.

Participants also indicated that these cognitive constraints extended beyond individual experience and influenced team dynamics.

As one employee explained: “When everyone is in scarcity mode, collaboration suffers. People hoard information or do not trust others to share, making problem-solving even harder.”

This observation adds a social and relational dimension to the cognitive effects of scarcity, suggesting an organizational feedback loop in which a collective scarcity mindset compounds individual cognitive load and undermines cooperative problem-solving. Together, these findings provide rich, contextualized insights into how a scarcity mindset manifests cognitively, emotionally, and socially within professional settings, expanding upon established theories by incorporating employees’ nuanced realities and organizational interactions.

Emotional and cognitive shifts toward abundance thinking

Participants described the shift from a scarcity to an abundance mindset as both a cognitive reframing and an emotional transformation. Many reflected on how adopting an abundance perspective expanded their mental space and fostered a more positive outlook.

One employee shared: “Embracing abundance was like opening a window in a stuffy room - suddenly, there was room to breathe and think beyond immediate constraints.”

This sentiment illustrates how abundance thinking can reduce perceived cognitive load by broadening attention away from constant threat monitoring, supporting research that links mindset to greater cognitive flexibility and adaptive appraisal of stressors (Crum et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2023).

However, the transition was not universally smooth or linear. Some participants expressed ambivalence or caution about sustaining an abundance mindset in contexts where scarcity cues persisted.

As one noted: “I want to believe in abundance, but old habits of scarcity are deeply ingrained. It is a daily effort, sometimes exhausting, to think differently.”

These accounts highlight the emotional complexity and effortful nature of mindset shifts, suggesting that enduring change requires ongoing support, reinforcement, and alignment between individual cognition and organizational practices rather than one-time interventions.

Participants also described how abundance thinking encouraged greater creativity, collaboration, and willingness to take interpersonal risks.

One employee observed: “When I stopped fearing that resources were limited, I was more willing to share ideas and take risks. It changed not only how I think but how I engage with my team.”

This finding underscores the relational and behavioral dimensions of an abundance mindset, extending prior work that focuses primarily on individual cognition by showing how changes in perceived resource sufficiency reshape team interactions, psychological safety, and collective learning processes. Overall, this theme reveals the profound cognitive and emotional realignments that accompany the emergence of abundance thinking in workplace settings, positioning these shifts as a bridge between individual experiences of reduced cognitive strain and the broader cultural dynamics examined in subsequent sections.

Organizational culture dynamics: Enablers and barriers to mindset change

The data revealed that organizational culture plays a pivotal and multifaceted role in facilitating or hindering the shift from scarcity to abundance mindsets. Many participants credited leadership commitment, transparent communication, and trust-building initiatives as key enablers of this transition.

One employee remarked: “Our leadership made it clear that collaboration and openness were priorities. That message, reinforced consistently, made it easier to let go of old scarcity-driven fears.”

This supports the view that culture shapes cognitive and emotional frameworks by signaling acceptable behaviors and attitudes, with leaders acting as powerful carriers of cultural meaning (Akanke & Furnham, 2025; Schein, 2010).

Conversely, several participants highlighted resistance at different organizational levels, often tied to entrenched norms, status dynamics, or fear of change.

As one participant noted: “There are pockets where scarcity still dominates—people clinging to ‘what has worked before,’ afraid that sharing too much means losing power.”

Such resistance created inconsistencies that complicated mindset shifts and, at times, led to frustration and disengagement, revealing how subcultures and legacy practices can continue to reproduce scarcity assumptions even as formal messages emphasize abundance. These tensions illustrate that cultural transformation is uneven and contested rather than linear, with scarcity and abundance logics coexisting and sometimes colliding within the same organization (Burnes, 2005).

Cultural shifts also influenced team dynamics and perceptions of psychological safety. Participants described how evolving norms that valued openness and learning enabled risk-taking and more honest dialogue.

One participant stated: “As the culture grew more abundant, we felt safer to voice ideas and learn from mistakes instead of hiding behind competition.”

However, others reported that uneven adoption of abundance values—especially in mixed-status groups where power imbalances persisted—limited these benefits and left some employees cautious about fully embracing new norms. Taken together, these contrasting perspectives underscore the complexity of cultural transformation, expanding organizational culture theory by emphasizing how culture simultaneously constructs, enables, and constrains mindset evolution within workplaces, and how micro-level experiences of safety or threat feed back into the broader cultural trajectory.

Impact of mindset shifts on cognitive function and well-being

Participants reported significant improvements in both cognitive functioning and psychological well-being following shifts toward an abundance mindset within their organizations. Many described enhanced mental clarity, focus, and problem-solving abilities as direct outcomes of reduced cognitive load and decreased threat perception.

One employee shared: “Once I started seeing resources and opportunities as plentiful rather than scarce, I could think more creatively and solve problems more effectively. It felt like my brain had been freed up.”

This narrative supports theoretical links between abundance thinking, reduced cognitive burden, and improved executive function, echoing research showing that mindset influences how individuals appraise and manage stressors (Crum et al., 2013; Sweller, 1988).

Well-being benefits were also pronounced. Employees emphasized reductions in stress, anxiety, and burnout symptoms, attributing these changes to feeling more supported and psychologically safe in cultures that emphasized growth, learning, and mutual care.

Another participant commented: “My anxiety around work dropped when I realized the environment was about growth and support, not cut-throat competition.”

These accounts align with positive organizational scholarship that links supportive cultures and abundance-oriented assumptions to healthier psychological outcomes and more sustainable engagement (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Bridger & Brasher, 2011).

Notably, several participants pointed to variability in these effects depending on individual differences and contextual pressures.

As one employee remarked: “The shift helps, but personal resilience and external pressures still matter—a mindset alone is not a cure-all.”

This nuance highlights the interplay between mindset and other psychological resources (e.g., resilience) and environmental demands (e.g., workload, financial strain), suggesting that abundance thinking can mitigate, but not completely override, structural stressors. Overall, this theme illustrates how mindset shifts contribute to tangible cognitive and well-being enhancements while extending existing theory by foregrounding lived experience, contextual complexity, and the limits of mindset-based interventions in workplace settings.

Case studies of organizational transitions

Several case studies emerged from participants’ accounts of organizations actively transitioning from scarcity-based to abundance-oriented cultures, illustrating practical pathways, challenges, and outcomes during cultural transformation efforts. One case involved a mid-sized technology company that implemented leadership training focused on psychological safety and abundance principles.

A senior manager described the process: “We started by explicitly talking about scarcity and how it limited us. Then, we committed to creating more transparent communication and celebrating team successes rather than fostering competition.”

Employees in this organization reported increased trust and innovation after the intervention, reflecting a cultural shift that supported abundance mindsets and reduced cognitive and emotional strain.

Another case focused on a health-care organization grappling with high stress and resource constraints. Participants explained how introducing abundance language and values alongside wellness programs helped reframe collective perspectives on workload, support, and shared responsibility.

A nurse shared: “At first, it felt like lip service. However, over time, when leaders showed they cared about our well-being and growth, attitudes began to change.”

Improvements were noted in staff cognitive engagement and emotional resilience, although challenges remained, particularly in departments with entrenched scarcity norms and chronic resource pressures. This case underscores that abundance-oriented initiatives can gain traction even in resource-tight settings, but that legacy practices and structural constraints may slow or unevenly distribute benefits.

A third case depicted a start-up company experiencing rapid growth, in which abundance thinking emerged more organically through collaborative problem-solving and a strong shared vision.

An employee reflected: “Growth pushed us to rely on each other rather than hoard resources. That trust in abundance helped us adapt and thrive.”

Here, external pressures for agility and innovation appeared to catalyze abundance norms, with interdependence and mutual trust acting as everyday reinforcers of the mindset. Taken together, these case studies complement the thematic findings by providing concrete, sector-diverse illustrations of how abundance mindset adoption unfolds over time, highlighting both effective strategies, such as leadership modeling, structured training, and wellness integration, and persistent challenges linked to sub-cultural resistance and structural scarcity.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide nuanced insights that both corroborate and extend existing literature on scarcity and abundance mindsets, cognitive load theory, organizational culture, and employee well-being. Participants’ descriptions of cognitive constraints associated with a scarcity mindset align closely with the work of Hobfoll et al. (2018) and Shah et al. (2012), which emphasizes how perceived resource limitations diminish cognitive bandwidth and impair decision-making. The qualitative data add depth to these insights by illustrating the emotional strain and social dynamics that accompany cognitive overload in real workplace settings, showing how scarcity not only taxes executive functioning but also erodes trust and collaborative problem solving. This underscores scarcity’s

multifaceted impact, which simultaneously affects mental processes, emotions, and interpersonal relationships.

The observed emotional and cognitive shifts toward abundance thinking resonate with the positive psychology literature, particularly the work of Crum et al. (2013), who highlight how mindset can transform stress responses and cognitive flexibility. Participants' accounts revealed an abundance mindset as both a cognitive reframing and an emotional transition, characterized by expanded perceived possibilities, ambivalence, and effort, thereby expanding theoretical understandings by emphasizing the complexity and nonlinearity of mindset change. These lived experiences suggest that abundance mindset development is a dynamic, ongoing process rather than an immediate switch, contingent on continuing reinforcement from the cultural context.

Organizational culture emerged in the findings as both an enabler and a barrier, a duality well documented by Schein (2010) and Akande and Furnham (2025). The data highlight culture's role not merely as a backdrop but as an active force shaping mindsets and cognitive wellness through leadership behavior, HR policies, communication patterns, and norms of psychological safety (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Arnold et al., 2023). Tensions between progressive cultural initiatives and resistant subcultures advance organizational culture theory by illustrating how scarcity and abundance logics can coexist within the same organization, making mindset shifts inherently contested and uneven and requiring sustained leadership effort and alignment across levels (Burnes, 2005; Schein, 2010).

The positive impact of an abundance mindset on cognitive function and well-being echoes the cognitive load theory framework (Eeese et al., 2025; Sweller, 1988), supporting the idea that reducing extraneous cognitive burdens through cultural and mindset changes enhances cognitive performance and mental health. At the same time, variability reported by participants regarding individual resilience, external stressors, and structural constraints introduces a vital nuance, reminding us that mindset interacts with a broader psychological and environmental ecosystem, including financial pressures and resource inequities documented in studies of scarcity and subjective well-being (Sherman et al., 2024). This interplay suggests that abundance thinking can mitigate, but not entirely offset, the cognitive and emotional costs of structural scarcity.

The case studies enrich the literature by providing concrete narratives of implementation and transformation, illustrating both effective strategies, such as leadership training focused on psychological safety, wellness program integration, deliberate framing of scarcity and abundance, and persistent challenges linked to sectoral context, legacy practices, and power dynamics. These experiential accounts exemplify complexity theorists'

perspectives on organizational change as a nonlinear, emergent phenomenon shaped by feedback loops between individual experiences and cultural patterns (Burnes, 2005). In sum, this study contributes: (a) a qualitative elucidation of feedback loops linking culture, mindset, cognitive function, and well-being; (b) an integration of cognitive load theory and positive organizational scholarship grounded in employees' lived experiences of culture change; and (c) case-based pathways that show how organizations operationalize abundance principles under different structural and sectoral conditions.

Implications for organizational theory and practice

The findings have significant implications for both organizational theory and managerial practice, particularly for cultivating workplace cultures that enhance cognitive function and well-being. Theoretically, the research reinforces the centrality of organizational culture as a dynamic and contested system in which scarcity and abundance paradigms compete for dominance (Schein, 2010). Culture emerges and is sustained through founder values, leadership styles, HR and reward systems, workload design, and responses to external pressures such as market volatility and digital transformation (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Arnold et al., 2023). The study advances this understanding by showing how these structural and historical factors translate into everyday cues that shape employees' mindsets, cognitive load, and health, and by illustrating how feedback from improved well-being and performance can gradually reinforce more abundance-oriented norms.

In practice, the results highlight the importance of intentional interventions that address both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of mindset transformation. Leadership commitment to fostering psychological safety and transparent communication emerges as a critical enabler of an abundance culture, echoing work on healthy and "fearless" organizations that prioritize trust and learning (Akande & Furnham, 2025). For practitioners, this entails moving beyond superficial culture-change campaigns to embed values and practices that reduce unnecessary cognitive load, such as clarifying priorities, simplifying processes, and ensuring resource accessibility, while promoting collaboration, trust, and innovation (Arnold et al., 2023; Sweller, 1988).

The findings further suggest that cognitive load management should be integrated into workplace design and human resource practices rather than treated as an individual responsibility. Simplifying workflows, limiting conflicting demands, and designing roles that balance challenge and capacity can alleviate mental burden and support higher-order cognitive functioning and creativity. Well-being initiatives are likely to be more effective when

they explicitly incorporate mindset as a core component, making the links between culture, cognition, and health visible, for example, by educating employees and leaders about scarcity and abundance cues and how these shape attention, stress responses, and interpersonal behavior (Crum et al., 2013).

Finally, variability in individual responses to cultural and mindset interventions indicates that one-size-fits-all approaches are insufficient. Personalized supports, such as coaching, resilience-building programs, and flexible work arrangements, can complement system-level efforts and help employees translate abundance principles into sustainable practices in their specific roles and life contexts. A holistic approach that combines structural change (leadership, HR systems, workload, and process design) with targeted psychological resources is therefore most likely to create the positive feedback loops envisioned in the theoretical model, where enhanced cognitive functioning and well-being reinforce and sustain abundance-oriented workplace cultures over time.

Conclusion

This study examined how shifting workplace culture from a scarcity to an abundance mindset affects employees' cognitive function and well-being. The findings showed that scarcity-oriented cultures impose substantial cognitive and emotional burdens, narrowing attentional focus, heightening cognitive load, and increasing stress, thereby undermining decision making, creativity, and collaboration (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2012). In contrast, transitioning toward an abundance mindset emerged as a complex cognitive and emotional realignment that broadened perceived possibilities, supported cognitive flexibility, and enhanced psychological resilience, particularly when reinforced by consistent cultural and leadership signals (Crum et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2023). Organizational culture functioned simultaneously as an enabler and an obstacle in this process: leadership commitment, psychologically safe climates, and supportive HR practices helped embed abundance logics, whereas entrenched norms and subcultures perpetuating scarcity created friction and uneven change (Akande & Furnham, 2025; Schein, 2010). Overall, adoption of abundance mindsets was associated with improved executive functioning, reduced stress and burnout, and more collaborative team dynamics. However, these benefits were moderated by individual differences and contextual constraints. The case studies of technology, health-care, and start-up organizations provided concrete illustrations of how these dynamics unfold over time, highlighting both effective strategies and persistent challenges in cultivating abundance-oriented cultures.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The qualitative design, conducted with a purposive sample of four Portuguese organizations already engaged in culture-change initiatives, offers rich, contextualized insights but limits generalizability to other sectors, countries, and organizations that have not yet committed to abundance-oriented transformation. Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential recall and social desirability biases, even though confidentiality assurances and probing techniques were used to elicit critical and disconfirming perspectives. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides only a snapshot of cultural change, whereas the proposed model conceptualizes culture, mindset, cognitive function, and well-being as dynamically linked through feedback loops over time (Burnes, 2005; Schein, 2010).

Future research can address these limitations in several ways. First, longitudinal mixed-methods designs could track employees' cognitive function and well-being before, during, and after specific abundance-oriented cultural interventions (e.g., leadership development, workload redesign, psychological safety initiatives), combining qualitative narratives with repeated quantitative measures of cognitive load, stress, and performance. Second, experimental or quasi-experimental field studies that manipulate scarcity versus abundance cues in simulated or real workplace contexts would allow more precise estimates of their causal effects on cognitive load, executive functioning, and collaborative behavior. Third, comparative studies across organizations at different stages of cultural transformation—and across sectors such as public vs. private, health care vs. technology—could illuminate contextual boundary conditions and sector-specific trajectories of scarcity and abundance dynamics. Finally, quantitative validation of the proposed theoretical model, for example, through structural equation modeling that links organizational culture, individual mindset, cognitive load, and well-being outcomes, would strengthen the evidence base and clarify the relative weight of different pathways identified in this qualitative work.

For practitioners, the results underscore that fostering abundance mindsets is not a surface-level communication exercise but a systemic cultural endeavor. Organizations should prioritize leadership development that models trust, openness, and collaborative problem solving, as these behaviors serve as visible anchors for abundance-oriented norms (Akanke & Furnham, 2025). Communication strategies that transparently address constraints while emphasizing shared resources and growth opportunities can help recalibrate employees' cognitive appraisals and reduce unnecessary threat perception. Reducing avoidable cognitive load—through clearer role expectations, streamlined workflows, and accessible resources—supports improved cognitive function and frees mental capacity for creativity and

learning (Arnold et al., 2023; Sweller, 1988). Tailored well-being programs that integrate mindset awareness, resilience-building, and psychological safety practices can complement structural changes, recognizing that mindset shifts are gradual, effortful, and contingent on consistent reinforcement in everyday work practices.

Taken together, these insights provide a foundation for reimagining workplace cultures that do more than mitigate the detrimental effects of scarcity. They point toward organizations that actively cultivate abundance thinking to enhance cognitive flourishing, strengthen psychological well-being, and create self-reinforcing feedback loops in which thriving employees contribute to more humane, innovative, and sustainable organizational cultures.

Authors' contributions

I. B. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. E. R. provided supervision, contributed to data interpretation, and substantively revised the manuscript. Both authors collaboratively reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and are accountable for its content.

Consent for publication

Not Applicable: This manuscript contains no person's data.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The Internal Review Board of the university reviewed and analyzed the study protocol. The board determined the study's compliance with ethical standards, given the nonsensitive nature of the information collected and the carefully constructed interview guide. All participants provided informed written consent prior to their involvement in the study. The research was conducted in full accordance with the ethical research practices of the research center and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and well-being throughout the study.

Funding

This work is funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Programme Contract UID/05105/2025. <https://doi.org/10.54499/UID/05105/2025>.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy concerns but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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