

interact



Re-envisioning the workplace for well-being

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With over 30 years of experience, Despina Katsikakis is an industry leader with an international reputation for thought leadership on the impact of the workplace on people and business performance. She has been Head of Occupier Business Performance for Cushman & Wakefield, Inc., since 2017.

The social value of the workplace

The workplace is undergoing a major change. Coworking spaces and corporate offices based on the coworking model are becoming more popular because people want to feel that they belong to a creative community.

As it turns out, the more constant and seamless our virtual connections become, the more important physical place becomes to bring us together in meaningful ways.

There's a great deal of data showing that people are much happier when they feel connected to others in the workplace. People who have friends at the office are at least four times happier at work than those who don't, while over 70% of millennials want their coworkers to be a second family.

This renewed focus on community in the workplace comes along with a new focus on mental and physical health. Corporations want to build wellness into their workspaces, but they don't always know how to go about it, and they don't always have the vision to achieve it.



70%

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Frank Lloyd Wright designed the open-plan office at the turn of the century to enable the uninterrupted flow of work and clear visual supervision. It worked exceptionally well, but 100 years on the nature of work has radically changed, but the physical environment has not kept up with these changes.

We know now that open-plan offices tend to be the antithesis of collaboration, and that they sometimes actually promote isolation. But if you layer the work environment with places that support connection, places that allow people to be open and spontaneous and accessible to one another, you can create the opportunities for innovation through collaboration.

Truly enabling people-centric workplaces requires management vision and practices. You need to have the right culture and behavior, and you need to have the right space, technology, and services. The physical environment combines with behavior and attitude to deliver a message and influence workplace behavior. Unfortunately, the many organizations still ignore this fact. They talk the talk, but have yet to start walking the walk.



Making the workplace work for people

Workplace wellness programs represent a \$6 billion-a-year industry. Yet these programs don't always address the work environment, despite a growing body of research that demonstrates the impact of workspaces on physical health, mental states, and emotions.

People are a company's most valuable resource, typically accounting for 90% of business operating costs, so even a 1% improvement in productivity can have a major impact on the bottom line and competitiveness of any business.

Since 2014, the World Green Building Council (WorldGBC) has put well-being at the heart of building design with their Better Places for People initiative. Their detailed report, Building the Business Case: Health, Wellbeing and Productivity in Green Offices, highlights the global momentum behind healthy and green office design and operation and showcases over 15 buildings from around the world that are leading the way. According to WorldGBC CEO Terri Wills, the report presents "overwhelming evidence between office design and improved health and wellbeing of workers and demonstrates tangible action businesses are taking to improve their workspaces."

You can dramatically impact the bottom line by taking simple steps such as improving air quality, increasing natural light, and introducing greenery—which typically have environmental benefits such as using less energy. Measures such as these improve employee productivity while reducing absenteeism, staff turnover, and medical costs.



Ergonomics and active design

Long hours sitting at a desk is a common, detrimental workplace behavior.

Studies show that lower back pain affects more than 100 million Americans, and its incidence is increasing in all age groups. It is the number two reason for disability, second only to the common cold. But back pain is only part of the problem. Employees also run the risk of repetitive stress injuries and stress-related mental illness, all costing billions of dollars to the economy.

Give your employees comfortable, ergonomically correct seating and worktables but recognize that people come in all shapes and sizes, making it challenging to find the right ergonomic seating arrangement for each individual.

Adjustable chairs have been an accepted part of office design for many years, but staying seated for prolonged periods of time can increase the risk for heart disease, diabetes and cancer, regardless of whether the person exercises regularly or not. Even exercising an hour or more a day doesn't eliminate the health risk of regular prolonged sitting, so encouraging movement is essential. Electrically-operated, height-adjustable tables and computer workstations are becoming standard equipment in modern offices. These "sit-to-stand" workstations allow employees to alternate easily between seated and standing positions throughout the day.

Create a variety of spaces for teams and departments so employees can work alone or collaborate, according to their changing needs and personal preferences. Neighborhoods can be allocated to teams so that they work both as knowledge-sharing and social spaces, with a combination of individual workstations, collaborative spaces, and quiet spaces to focus. Encourage your employees to be more active and move away from their desk throughout the day. Flexible working helps staff feel more in control of workload and encourages loyalty.

Introduce well-designed and convenient interconnecting stairs to minimize the use of lifts and encourage activity. Whenever possible, offer on-site exercise and relaxation amenities to help people recharge throughout the day.



Light and air

Natural light has a positive effect on employee engagement and productivity. If you rely on artificial light, be cognizant of the type and intensity of light delivered at different times of the day.

The WorldGBC has reported on the benefits of exposure to daylight. Quality of sleep and productivity increased by 15% for workers who sit close to a window. One study found that people in offices with windows get 46 minutes more sleep a night. Similarly, better air quality can increase productivity by 8–11%, and double cognitive ability. Try to maximize natural light streaming into the workspace and ensure that artificial light incorporates dynamic circadian lighting that changes throughout the day to support healthy sleep and effective working. Keep thermal comfort in mind as well—staff performance can fall 6% if offices are too hot, and 4% if offices are too cold.

Invisible toxins in offices can have a profound impact on how our bodies function. Reducing toxins within the built environment requires a multi-faceted approach. Companies should consider sustainable materials specification during building design. Sourcing furniture, fixtures, fittings, and paint with low levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) can also help reduce toxicity. Consider air filtration standards, proper ventilation, and operational policies such as green cleaning, each of which can make a difference.



Nature

Many studies demonstrate that greater connection with nature decreases stress and enhances mental well-being. Companies can achieve biophilic design—design that reflects the natural world—by integrating patterns, colors, and materials found in nature, or by directly incorporating natural features.

Incorporating plants in the workplace is an effective way to reduce toxins and increase productivity. An 18-month project at Exeter University, UK, demonstrated that adding houseplants to an otherwise sparse office environment can increase well-being by 47%, creativity by 45%, and productivity by 38%. Even pleasing vistas can help: processing time at one call center improved by up to 12% when staff had a view of nature.



Policies and metrics

Wellness goes beyond the built environment and depends on an integrated understanding of all that impacts health in the workplace.

Job demand, management style, and level of autonomy can all influence well-being, as can availability of healthy food, accessible drinking water, and other workplace amenities. Companies wanting to promote wellness, need to commit to aligning organizational policies across operational silos, prioritize desired outcomes, and commit to a comprehensive change management process.

How, then to measure "wellness"? What can you track, and how can performance be bench-marked?



Leadership depends on collaboration

As we move towards designing for overall occupant experience in the workplace, we will see more and more new, interdisciplinary teams mobilizing to successfully address both physical and non-physical aspects of work.

At a strategic level, organizations should start embedding wellness principles and approaches into building development briefs, fit-out guides, and operational policies, as well as the formulation of long-sighted workplace strategies that fundamentally unite HR, CRE, business, and people.

Corporate real estate executives, for the most part, are rewarded for delivering savings. Well-being is a bit tricky. Whose responsibility is it? How do you measure success? Even if it's just a sense, wellness and how people feel when they walk into and leave the office is extremely important to the success of companies now. Work is no longer somewhere you go; it is something you do. People can work almost anywhere now. Bright and talented employees are more and more frequently choosing workplaces that make them feel happier, healthier, and more energized.

Buildings have the power to attract and retain staff. So the successful workspaces of the future will be the ones that make people feel good, and offer a memorable, positive experience.

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7 health impact factors

Air

Water

Nourishment

Light

Fitness

Comfort

Mind



One approach is to leverage new building rating and bench-marking tools that provide cross-disciplinary metrics. Dovetailing neatly with existing green building rating tools, The WELL Building Standard translates seven years' research across both the medical and built-environment professions into a range of evidence-based design criteria, operational performance requirements, and organizational procedures to support human health and wellness. It measures seven factors that impact occupant health: air, water, nourishment, light, fitness, comfort, and mind.

An early pilot project at the CBRE Headquarters in Los Angeles, USA, found that 83% of staff were more productive in their new WELL certified space, with 92% also reporting a positive effect on their health and well-being. A study from Harvard University and SUNY Upstate Medical University, The Impact of Working in a Green Certified Building on Cognitive Function and Health, makes the case for green and WELL certification. It suggests that occupants of high-performing, certified green buildings had 30% fewer sick building symptoms, a 6.4% higher sleep quality score, and a 26.4% higher cognitive function score, compared to people in high-performing buildings without green certification.

Investigate new data-enabled systems and applications that use an Internet of Things approach to connect and measure many aspects of the work environment. Connected lighting systems and sensor networks distributed throughout a space can give you insight into occupancy patterns, space utilization, light levels, air quality, and much, much more. Wearables and devices embedded in workplace furniture can give employees real-time information on their stress levels and vital signs, while reminding them to move or change the position of their desks throughout the day.

Use the data derived from these systems to drive a change-management approach: changing behaviors has far more impact than only changing space. Data gives organizations the power to initiate change, and to communicate and market business improvements.



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