

Workplace Design Tips for Well-Being

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The Workplace Design Conversation is Evolving

Traditionally, office design focused on just one aspect of the employee—productivity—but of late this conversation is expanding to include a more holistic, person-centered point of view. Today we believe the workspace itself can be used to promote well-being, an enduring state that encompasses wellness of mind and body and can also lead to productive, engaged and healthy employees.

There is an emerging opportunity to effectively use workspace design to promote a lasting sense of well-being in employees.

Let's look at how this conversation is evolving. What follows is a summary of our Workplace Design for Well-Being white paper that offers some brief insights from our ongoing, global research project on place and well-being and how those insights can impact design.

Organizations are broadening their definition of a person at work.

Having work productivity as an ultimate goal aligned well with the Baby Boomer mentality of bringing the “work only” version of themselves into the office. Work products were largely created by individuals, and outcomes were somewhat more tangible and thus easier to measure. The whole person was not considered; rather, just their skills and work tasks.

The growing Generation Y workforce famously blends their work and personal life, bringing a more holistic version of themselves into the office. The need for belonging and connection is very important to these younger, highly collaborative workers. Thus of late, organizations are embracing “employee engagement” as a new mantra. A skeptic would argue that engagement is really just a proxy



term for performance. Engagement may be the opening round in a growing realization that productivity is too narrow of a way to think about knowledge workers and work, and we need a broader conceptualization of people at work.

Offering “fun” work spaces may not lead to deeper employee engagement.

In the workplace, attempts to encourage engagement focus on investment in mobile technologies, work/life balance, and related policy efforts. Some clumsy attempts have also been used in workplace design to encourage engagement. Seldom used slides, swings, and Ping-Pong tables occupy space in the office landscape (although beer kegs remain popular). These elements are supposed to promote “fun” experiences and social connection that might support engagement.

Companies and even whole countries aspire to a broader, more enduring outcome for employees.

Thus around the edges, the conversation is changing. This emerging conversation is around the idea of “well-being” that subsumes all other outcomes. Well-being and a meaningful life is not a short-term emotion like “happiness.” It’s an enduring state that can lead to productive, engaged, and healthy employees.

Workspace Matters to Well-Being

In order to gain insights on how interior design of space can be leveraged, Haworth has an ongoing, long-term global research program involving hundreds of people. This research includes locations as diverse as Los Angeles, Mexico City, Shanghai, Columbia, and New York City. We aim to continue to make connections between workspace design and well-being, performance, engagement. Based on preliminary results, we recommend these design tips:

1. **Create “legible” office space.** Legible workspace *increases performance and reduces stress* – especially for people’s ability to *focus at work*. Designing the layout of the floorplan so it is easy to understand helps people to see and find each other easily (O’Neill, 2015). The design of workspaces should clearly convey their intended use. For instance, is this a social space or a workspace?
2. **Invest in great meeting spaces.** High quality meeting spaces *increase performance, engagement, and well-being*. Ensure that the workplace offers:
 - Informal spaces for causal work or social interaction
 - Furnishings within meeting spaces that meet users’ work needs.
 - Meeting spaces sized to accommodate typical meeting requirements.
3. **Offer adjustable furnishings** (height adjustable work surfaces, seating, monitor arm, etc.) in primary workspace and meeting spaces, and an **effective acoustic environment**. We found that adjustable furnishings *reduce the risk of ill health* affecting peoples’ ability to work.

Source

O’Neill, M., Gilbert, V., Nagy, G., & Kiss, S. Workplace Design for Well-Being, Haworth, Inc. white paper, 2015.

Reference

O’Neill, M. Active Ergonomics, Haworth, Inc. white paper, 2015.

We see significant opportunities to effectively use workspace design to promote this enduring state of well-being.



Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit www.haworth.com.

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