The Three Dimensions of Improving Well-being through Workplace Design

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Workplace well-being is becoming a critical focus for organizations across every industry. The more we understand how our environment and habits are affecting our well-being (generally speaking our mental and physical health) and the more we realize that wealth and technology don't necessarily make things better, the more we need to find creative solutions. Corporate well-being programs are one approach, and they are now de rigueur, but they almost always depend on voluntary participation, which can be modest. An alternative strategy involves taking a more holistic approach: using the design of the workplace to make work itself healthier.

Well-being at work, or at least some facets of it, has been a concern since the industrial revolution, coming into especially sharp focus with the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 1970. But the focus for decades, including in office work, has been on avoiding injury – i.e. the direct impact of doing work. Designers responded by creating better office furniture but not necessarily changing office work. In that respect, we’ve been relatively successful, with incidents of carpal tunnel syndrome declining consistently over the past decade.¹

Yet, while offices have become more ergonomic, our collective health has continued to erode. One common predicator of mortality, body mass index, shot up in the 1980s and remains stubbornly high. Over two-thirds of US adults are currently overweight. On top of that, type-two diabetes continues to rise rapidly, and currently 58 million Americans live with some kind of chronic health condition.² And it’s affecting how we work and how organizations perform. One extensive research study found that US employers lost $1,685 per employee due to health-related productivity challenges, or $226 billion annually.³ On the plus side, research has shown that exercise and other healthy habits can make better workers. Fitter adults, for example, have more neural regeneration, better memory function, and faster focused responses than their less-fit counterparts.

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With the costs of ill-health and the benefits of fitness well documented, organizations are starting to address it. By 2009 92% of employers with 200 or more employees had a wellness program, a majority encouraging physical activities through a variety of incentives, penalties and even social competitions. Most who have measured results found their programs to be beneficial for participants. The problem is participation. One study conducted by RAND estimated that only 20% of eligible employees take part.⁴

A different approach to improving well-being in organizations could have broader benefits. As we argue here, organizations can use the design of the workplace to shape work in healthier ways, taking advantage of the fact that the workplace already shapes nearly 60% of our waking lives.
The three dimensions of well-being

If you want to make work healthier, there are three things you should focus on: physical activity, mental restoration and social interaction. All three are naturally part of work, not new things people have to find more time for, but they can nonetheless be inhibited by the environment and culture. Workplaces designed without these three things in mind can create unhealthy conditions, and in fact, many of the traditional workplaces we’ve studied do as a result of misguided planning principles. Smarter workplaces, though, can improve well-being by enhancing these aspects of work.

Physical Activity

One of the most commonly discussed factors influencing health, and hence well-being, is how much people move. Increasingly we know that regular light-to-moderate activity is important. One study found that the lack of it, in the form of prolonged sitting, correlated with death from heart disease. Another found that simply forcing people to walk less over the course of the day resulted in substantial increases in blood sugar, a predictor of diabetes and chronic heart problems. A third found that total sitting time, regardless of how much vigorous activity was done at other times, correlated with increased blood pressure and triglycerides, and a reduction in good cholesterol.

Given our decades-long quest to make sitting more comfortable, most workplaces don’t promote activity. The traditional workplaces we’ve studied at CannonDesign are sometimes 90% cubicles, with 10% left for offices, conference rooms and social spaces. That kind of monotony doesn’t give the average worker much choice. The traditional workplaces we’ve studied also tend to distribute resources around floors for maximum convenience, ensuring that no one has to go far to get a printout or a cup of coffee.

Workplaces can increase movement during work by first challenging the convenience principle. The goal shouldn’t, of course, be to make things inconvenient, but to centralize within reason. In CannonDesign’s Chicago office, for example, we’ve created one centrally located social hub and kitchen for over 200 people. While it’s a hundred steps or so from where most people work, it’s an attractive destination. Because we occupy almost 60,000 square feet on one level, you can walk to everything. By our calculations, if the average person takes seven roundtrips to meetings, seven more for short breaks, and seven more for visiting colleagues, they’ll take roughly 3,700 steps, or walk 1.8 miles a day at work, which gets them to over half of the CDCs recommended amount.

For multi-level offices, visible open stairs also encourage activity. People use them 9 times the rate they use enclosed fire stairs. Visibility between work settings will also encourage people to get up and move to talk to people, as in most organizations we’ve found that people want less email and more face-to-face interaction but are often stymied by not knowing if people are present and available to talk.

Lastly, organizations can change their furniture. To counter prolonged sitting, large organizations, such as Zurich North America, are giving every employee a desk they can raise to standing height whenever they want to stand. We’ve also found that about a third of employees are eager to use treadmill workstations, and many who have access to them are avid users, multiplying the steps that they would otherwise be unable to do in a normal workday.
Mental restoration

A second major influencer of well-being is mental restoration. The opposite – stress – has well-known consequences, especially the traumatic kind. Lower-grade chronic stress, though, has dire consequences as well. It leads to elevated stress hormones, which when continuously present leads to weakened immune systems, high blood pressure, and memory impairment. Chronic stress is also associated with coping behaviors, which tend to be unproductive (surfing the web is common) if not deadly (drinking and smoking).

Workplaces, as it turns out, generate a lot of chronic stress. Much of it comes from deadlines, performance goals, and lack of control, but our work environments also contribute to it. Office noise, for example, has been shown to raise stress hormone levels. Workers we’ve spoken to in our research are also stressed by interruptions and continuous communication – being in an always-on environment. In surveys conducted by CannonDesign with 6,000 office workers in 15 different organizations, mental exhaustion was the third biggest problem out of 20, behind only noise and lack of space for ad hoc meetings.

Lowering stress doesn’t require not working. It can be done simply by going to a place that limits the kind of top-down stimulation that commands attention. Giving people access to “escape” spaces for periodic use is one way to help. At Zurich Insurance’s North American headquarters, for example, we’ve found that simply adding ad hoc “enclaves” immediately adjacent to open team areas reduced time lost to distractions and increased overall enjoyment at work. Enclaves also give other people a place to take noisy activities, like conference calls, and get them out of open areas where they could stress others. Escape areas, of course, don’t have to be private rooms. We’ve also found that quiet zones, with soothing colors, textures and lighting, can help.

Another way to reduce stress at work is to make nature more accessible. Nature is particularly effective because it provides bottom-up stimulation while relieving attentional demands. Its mere presence has been shown to help restore attention and improve information processing speeds. We worked with one organization, a global food and pharmaceutical conglomerate in Seoul, to build a “winter garden” in the center of their R&D headquarters for that purpose. At Clorox, we worked on making outdoor areas attractive places for escape as well.
Social interaction

The third major factor influencing well-being at work is the strength of relationships, particularly those that go deeper than work. Numerous studies have shown that social ties influence physical health, largely because of their mitigating effect on stress hormones. People with strong relationships, for example, heal faster and resist viruses better. Their memory declines less with age. At work, strong social relationships can also influence productivity. Studies have shown that spontaneously formed teams of friends significantly outperform teams of acquaintances in problem solving. People have also been found to work more intensively with less effort when working socially.

Despite the benefits of social ties, offices may be getting less social. People with close friendships at work declined from nearly 50% in 1985 to 30% in 2004. Surveys of high school seniors done over 30 years show also show a progressive decline in the percentage who feel it will be very important for them to develop close friendships at work. The cause may be the fact that young workers simply expect less from work than young workers of past decades. It may also be the result of technology that allows us to more easily sustain friendships outside of work.

While workplace design may not be the primary cause of growing friendlessness at work, better design could help reverse it. To foster social ties workplaces should make it easier for people to interact in general, and they should provide places where people are comfortable talking about things other than work. One tactic is to create social spaces at intersections where people are likely to bump into acquaintances they may not regularly work with. To enhance the impact of central social spaces, resources should be concentrated there. Follett’s new headquarters outside Chicago is a good example of how the central areas of floors, which connect people both horizontally and vertically, can be activated as social spaces.

Creating clearly defined neighborhoods in the workplace will also foster social ties. Neighborhoods that bring together roughly 25 to 50 people (the prototypical “band” size in anthropological research) in one area will, in particular, foster repeated, manageable interactions. Visibility, of course, is also critical. If people can’t see each other, they’ll be much more likely to fall back on email or messaging, which is less likely to build friendships than face-to-face interaction.

Conclusions

If you want to improve your employee’s well-being, you don’t have to create a big program and beg or threaten your employees to join it. You can simply make work healthier by more intelligently designing your next workplace or updating your current one. Employees only need to be more active, have better social connections and incorporate mental restoration into their work to be happier and healthier. While these elements might sound frivolous when taken out of context, they’re each a natural part of work, and they all have measurable impacts not just on health but on cognitive performance and productivity, too.

While there are many ways to amplify activity, restoration and social connections at work, including those we highlighted in this article, there are a few simple points worth remembering. One is variety. The more choices people have and the more diverse their environment, the more they will move around and modulate their surroundings to suit their mental and physical needs. A second basic point is visibility. Workplaces should never be completely open, but the more visual connections between spaces and zones, the more people will take advantage of choices, get out of their chairs, get off email, and make more meaningful connections. A final point, and one of the most important, concerns communication and training. While some behaviors might automatically change when the environment affords change, many may not, especially when old habits are entrenched. In research on the use of sit-stand desks, for example, thoughtful guidance at the start tripled beneficial outcomes.

In arguing for healthier workplaces, it’s worth noting that these views are not new. Robert Propst, who helped develop the first modular furniture systems for offices in the 1960s, observed the negative impact office work had on health and argued that designers should make work more dynamic. After 50 years of being off track, we’re finally coming back to that realization. If anything, well-being in the future will likely become even more central to office work and office design. Public service organizations, including the Well Building Institute and the Center for Active Design are now providing detailed design guidelines and standards. We’re also seeing a heightened focus on well-being in our next generation of offices workers – Generation Z. In the universities that many of them now attend, recreation centers, as one indicator, are morphing into vital social hubs. Lastly, we’re seeing an increased interest in not just creating healthier workplaces and schools, but also healthier homes, communities and cities. We know that smart design can transform work in positive ways. The future promises that design for well-being will be integrated across all aspects of life.
Each floor at Follett’s headquarters outside of Chicago is designed as a social hub with an identity that reflects the groups around it.

References


About CannonDesign

CannonDesign is an integrated global design firm that unites a dynamic team of strategists, futurists, researchers, architects, engineers, and industry specialists driven by a singular goal—to help solve our clients’ and society’s greatest challenges.

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