Why design for wellness?

Because it is the key to organizational success.

by Dr. Cristina G. Banks

Organizational success, of course, has been achieved without designing for wellness, but the human cost of that strategy has not been assessed comprehensively or included on any organization's balance sheet. Frankly, if serious enough, an employee illness or injury defaults to workers' compensation, social security, or welfare. If an employee dies, the direct financial cost is eliminated altogether. In either case, the human cost is no longer the organization's problem. When organization-sponsored healthcare is no longer provided to employees or is reduced, the cost of illness or injury moves to the public at large, creating a net positive effect on an organization's bottom line.

These are strong incentives for not caring about employee health and well-being. More troubling, the human cost of poor working conditions and the lack of access to health insurance are invisible. As a country, we do not have a sense of the size of that cost and its implications – until now.

Stanford Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer and his colleagues Stefanos Zenios and Joel Goh have done the calculations.[1] In his newly released book, *Dying for a Paycheck,* Pfeffer reports their findings on the health effects of workplace stressors. He reports that working conditions such as long working hours, low job control, high job demands, low social support, lack of fairness in the workplace, and poor access to health insurance result in 120,000 excess deaths per year and account for 5 to 8 percent of annual healthcare costs – or $190 billion.

These researchers believe that their calculations underestimate the true costs because they only account for a subset of factors that cause stress and toxic situations employees encounter in the workplace. They do not account for costs associated with increased health needs or the cost to families of the loss of employment.

The implication of these calculations is that common working conditions make employees sick and, for some, lead to unnecessary death. Although it is difficult to tie a direct line between employers' decisions and employee illness and death, clearly, the association has been established.

How can employers better understand the human cost of poor working conditions they might be tolerating, or even stoking, to get the most out of their employees and maximize profitability? If the numbers reported by Pfeffer and colleagues are not persuasive – that the conditions employers create in the pursuit of profit actually harm people and some very seriously – then we need to change the narrative. Instead of focusing on how investment in employee health and well-being lowers costs, we can refocus the discussion on how the investment builds value for employers.

Connecting health and productivity

Although many experts have made the argument that healthy employees are productive employees, there is often a failure to make obvious why this connection exists. I will make the connection here. The value proposition results from one simple fact: employees care whether their employer takes steps to preserve and promote their health and well-being. Both employees and employers have for decades recognized the impact physical and psychosocial factors in the work environment have had on employee health and well-being.[2] Today there is considerable attention paid to how these factors cause job stress, which is responsible in large part for negative organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, presenteeism, lower productivity, and turnover.[3,4] When employees have work environments where their health and well-being are supported, their productivity increases because they are engaged, motivated and able to do their work.[5] In such workplaces, employees are not hampered by chronic illness, musculoskeletal pain, poor mood, feelings of social isolation and unfairness, and physical fatigue, among other maladies.

A principal connection between health and productivity lies in the "performance equation," which says that employee performance is a function of ability times motivation, or, in equation form,

performance = f (ability X motivation). In other words, for an employee to exhibit high performance (productivity) on the job, he or she must have both high ability to do the job as well as high motivation to exert the effort to perform at a high level. Anything that detracts from ability or motivation will result in lower performance.

Aspects of the work environment that compromise employee health and well-being also compromise employee ability and motivation. This is because when employees work under conditions that affect their health and well-being, they cannot apply their abilities fully and their desire to exert effort is diminished as a function of their negative emotional response to the work environment. Translating this into the workplace design, physical or psychosocial factors that affect employee health and well-being and thereby interfere with an employee's ability or motivation to perform at a high level will result in underperformance or productivity loss.

Identifying negative, positive factors

It is easy to imagine how the physical environment might affect negatively both the ability and motivation components of the performance equation. Ability can be negatively affected, for example, by aspects of the physical environment that make completion of tasks difficult, interrupt concentration, create barriers to desired collaboration, are physically uncomfortable to the point of distraction, raise concerns about visual or personal privacy, create fatigue, or put safety or security at risk. Motivation can be affected negatively, for example, by aspects of the environment that create job dissatisfaction, disengagement, feelings of unfairness, a sense of things being out of one's personal control, burnout, and frustration. Aspects of the psychological environment can also contribute to deficits in ability and motivation, but we will focus only on the physical environment here.

We can also imagine how the physical environment might positively affect both ability and motivation. Ability can be supported in the physical environment, for example, by building in aspects that promote employees' focus, accomplishment, mastery, ease of task completion, elimination of distractions, refreshment, social support, enhance their immunity to illness, and create a harassment-free and safe workplace. Similarly, motivation can be supported in the physical environment, for example, by stimulating employees energetically, raising their mood states, increasing the satisfaction with important elements within the workplace, build in personal controls over the physical environment, creating spaces for refreshment, and making tools, equipment, and resources easy to access and use.

We at the Interdisciplinary Center for Healthy Workplaces have studied connections between health, well-being, and productivity, and we have concluded that at the core of these connections is the role of basic human needs in determining whether employees have a work environment that results in need satisfaction. The needs we have identified will be familiar to you: positive emotions such as pride, hope, inspiration, joy and awe; autonomy; belongingness; competence; psychological safety; meaning and/or sense of purpose; accomplishment; and personal growth. When these basic needs are satisfied, employees experience positive physical and psychological states, which underlie health and well-being. When this is experienced, employees are able and motivated to do their best work.
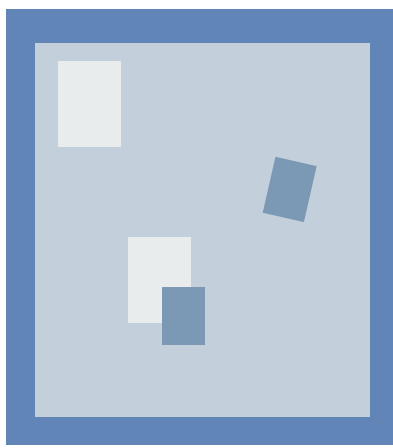
Translating this to the workplace

How do you design the physical environment in ways that will result in need satisfaction and thus, will maximize employees' ability and motivation? Based on our study of the research, we have identified seven "enablers" of need satisfaction, which can be translated into specific qualities designed into the work environment. They are:

- Physical and psychological comfort
- Social connection
- Equity/fairness
- Flexibility/control
- Predictability
- Visual and acoustic privacy
- Physical and psychological safety and security

The following are suggestions for how corporate real estate (CRE) executives, interior designers and facilities managers can use these "enablers" to create a workplace that promotes employee health, well-being and productivity.

- **Location:** Identify a location for building office space where employees can experience predictability in commuting time to and from the location. Locate the workplace in a community where employees feel physically and psychologically safe and they can control when they can come and go from the workplace.
- **Amenities:** Locate the workplace where important amenities are close by or are built into the building complex to create flexibility/control in acquiring what they want (e.g., food, workouts, entertainment). Ensure amenities will provide opportunities for social engagement and connection.
- **Aesthetics:** Build into the structure elements that employees find pleasing and give them a sense of connection with the organization. When creating the aesthetics, build in opportunities for visual and physical access to nature (biophilia) to help employees experience physical and psychological comfort.
- **Workstations:** Choose furniture that is proven to minimize musculoskeletal disorders by supporting healthy postures and postural variation. Introduce biophilic elements to increase positive emotions, and, to boost the immune system, provide visual access to windows allowing distant views, which are important for refreshing the brain. Provide lighting compatible with circadian rhythms.
- **Common areas:** Create spaces for meaningful social connections. Separate common spaces from workspaces to ensure visual and acoustic privacy for high concentration and confidential work. Set aside spaces for a variety of work activities to provide flexibility/control over the location of work and to match work activities with space design.
- **Aesthetics:** Use colors, fabrics, patterns, and materials that provide physical and psychological comfort because of their calming and restorative effect. Use colors, fabrics, etc., to match the mood desired in a specific space.
- **Indoor environmental quality:** Build in systems and processes that control air, temperature, and acoustics, and that create physical and psychological comfort, and predictability in the environment where employees work. Give employees a sense of control over IEQ.
- **Technology:** Incorporate technology that will create predictability with respect to use of electronics, connection to the Internet, and communications within and outside the organization. Introduce technology that allows flexibility in how employees work and where they work within the building.

The preceding is offered to begin the thinking about how you can design for wellness. However, I started this article with the question, why design for wellness? I hope that the answer is clear now. We design for wellness because it is best for employees AND employers. Promoting employee health and well-being through workplace design enables employees to maintain their physical and psychological vitality and enables them to do their best work – necessary ingredients for organizational success.

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