

6 key factors of workplace wellness

Wellness at work is an increasingly dominant theme in any discussion about the workplace but for many it's a broad buzzphrase without much science behind it.



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But Linda Trim, director at workplace design specialists Giant Leap, said that thanks to a new research project called Wellness Together carried out by Sapio Research and that included 1000 respondents, it is clear that productivity, creativity and profitability can be affected by employee conditions.

“The survey provides evidence of strong correlations between people feeling good about their workplace and a positive outcome for business. To achieve true ‘wellness’, attention must be given to every component that can impact mental and physical health.

“This means building structures, company cultures and, of course, also furniture and fittings because all these factors fit together and are important to people and the businesses they work for.”

Trim noted that the survey evaluated six key attributes of wellness in the workplace:

1. **Movement**

Musculoskeletal problems, namely those related to the back, neck and upper limbs, account for the second biggest reason for absenteeism from the workplace - after colds. "High performing companies are more likely to have facilities that allow people to adjust their work station to best suit them. This can mean anything from the height of the desk to having the option to sit or stand while working. It is important to move around and change environments every so often. This helps prevent dips in concentration, and could help prevent back and neck problems."

2. **Lighting**

Harsh or overly bright lighting is considered a far greater distraction for employees than low level or soft lighting. "Yet lighting systems that have the ability to change their colour tone as the day progresses are the least common features in an office," Trim noted.

"Having glare control and variable lighting is found to be a strong characteristic of more profitable businesses. Human-centric lighting is a major benefit to the most successful organisations."

Lighting that responsive to circadian rhythms is the next major trend expected in lighting technology.

3. **Personal storage**

The survey revealed that personal storage at work is a contentious issue. "Increasingly people are bringing more things, and often more expensive things, to the workplace," said Trim. "Gym gear, tech, and sometimes cycling gear all needs to be stored somewhere throughout the day. Banks of personal lockers are becoming a standard facility in big cities overseas and we expect that trend to catch on South Africa too."

Trim added that the survey also showed that despite the trend towards hot desking, the majority of people in the study (53%) still wanted their own desk. "But these days fewer people have their own desks. But giving all employees - whether permanent or mobile - individual storage, as well as providing office storage, will help them maintain a sense of control, belonging and a sense of well being."

4. **Noise and acoustics**

Shrieking laughter, loud conversations and traffic are distracting. And being listened to on the phone is annoying.

"Providing quiet working spaces is one of the most important characteristics of companies that consider themselves to be innovative, creative or simply focused," said Trim. "Quiet work spaces are one of the biggest differentiators between high and low performing companies according to the survey."

But Trim also noted that it is also important for businesses to offer areas where staff can talk openly and discuss ideas. "Having the choice is extremely important."

5. **Air quality**

Not only is fresh air the single most successful way in mitigating dips in concentration, but the survey showed it to be one of the most differentiating factors of the most productive and innovative companies. "Good quality ventilation and air movement is therefore a vital characteristic of a healthy office," said Trim.

6. **Staff empowerment**

"Companies can make their staff feel empowered in a host of ways and this can have significant outcomes for business," Trim noted.

“The act of consulting with staff, and letting them have a say on their environment, is a major differentiator between high and low performing companies. This suggests that consulting with employees on issues of importance will lead to greater profitability.”

Trim cautioned however that employees won't necessarily choose the factors that are prevalent in profitable companies without guidance and awareness of the implications of different choices. The role of an expert guiding staff choice is therefore essential.

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