

# WORKPLACE WELLBEING

*10 ways office design can help*

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING IS A BENEFIT, NOT A BURDEN.  
Discover design methods that make a difference.



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# Wellbeing and the workplace.

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Some business owners argue that these two things don't – and shouldn't – have anything to do with one another. Others understand that health and wellbeing have everything to do with the workplace.

This is especially true in a time when attracting talented workers is more competitive than ever. Employees interview potential bosses as much as the other way around. Companies that prioritize their employees will attract and retain the most qualified people.

There are substantial consequences to ignoring employee wellbeing: more frequent sick days, higher staff turnover, reduced productivity and an overall lower morale around the office.

But is wellbeing something that can be planned for? Can it actually be designed into an office space? Many believe it can; and there's plenty of evidence to support this line of thinking.

There are several factors involved in promoting wellness at work - some of which seem obvious and others more progressive. Follow along below to discover both the simple and complex solutions for weaving mental and physical health into your office design.



# Freedom of choice

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For most businesses, gone are the days when employees walk into the office, greet their co-workers and then head to an isolated workspace not to be heard from again until the end of the day.

Thanks to the influx of the X, Y and Z Generations entering the workforce, priorities have shifted. On the whole, these groups don't appreciate the 'closed-door' mentality of conventional office design. Rather, they favour open-concept spaces that reflect a desire for creativity and collaboration.

That being said, even the most open individuals understand the need for privacy and separation at times.

The point is, offering several choices in which employees can carry out their work makes sense. Depending on the type of business, flexible workspace options can include:

- Community/team zones with large desks intended for groups to collaborate and brainstorm
- Small nooks meant for one or two people to focus on more individualized tasks
- Stand up desks to accommodate transient employees or brief, impromptu meetings
- Boardrooms designed for official staff or formal client meetings



**FLEXIBLE** offices  
acknowledge the  
need for **DIVERSITY**.  
No two people operate  
the same way,  
and employees feel  
**RESPECTED** when given  
the choice to work  
however feels most  
**NATURAL**.

# Noise management

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Preventing noise-related distractions at work is becoming exceedingly more difficult. As more businesses transition to open-concept design, the need for innovative solutions increase.

The US government conducted a survey of over 3,700 office workers on the impact of noise-related distractions<sup>1</sup>. The following summarizes the results:

- 60% of respondents stated they could achieve more if it (the office) were quieter
- 56% indicated that the ability to insulate themselves from distractions was very important
- 50% said noise prevents them from being as productive as possible

But before deciding to go with enclosed offices for each employee, consider this: the same study discovered that workers rated open-concept environments as better for communication and collaboration than spaces with separated workspaces.



This research demonstrates the importance of two factors:

- Business owners must take into account what kind of space is ideal for the type of work being carried out. Putting design preferences aside, choose the layout that leaves employees most satisfied and able to complete their job effectively.
- Once a decision regarding layout has been made, employers should incorporate sound reducing elements to the office design.
- Aesthetically pleasing, acoustic panels do the job best – absorbing approximately 90 percent of environmental noise 2.
- Seek a layout that places noisier spaces - such as the employee lounge or boardroom - away from workspaces intended for quiet, focused work.
- Invest in quality insulation during the construction process to prevent unnecessary disruptions between workspaces as well as from outside the office.

# Temperature

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If Canadian weather is anything, it's unpredictable. This makes it all the more important for business owners to maintain a stable indoor climate for employees.

Although there will never be a situation in which everyone feels happy with the level of heat (or lack thereof), it is possible to satisfy the masses.

First, keep the thermostat set between 21-23 degrees. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety suggests that over 80 percent of workers feel comfortable if the temperature remains within this range.

Second, allow workers to use area fans or heaters. When people are given a level of control over their own comfort, their perceived value and satisfaction go up. However, in order to prevent a power outage, consult an electrician to ensure the breaker can handle multiple area heaters being plugged in during winter.





# Artwork

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“Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.” - Pablo Picasso

Going to work has often been labeled as a grind. Even for those who love what they do, the daily routine gets stale. Companies play a large role in preventing their employees from getting stuck in a rut – or at least jostling them out of it occasionally.

An effective way to make work an enjoyable destination is through art.

No matter a person’s individual style or artistic taste, the presence of art makes a positive impact. When people are at work, it’s easy to dream of being elsewhere. By incorporating art in the office design – and not just posters with over-used clichés – employers create a more relaxed, natural atmosphere. Instead of counting down the minutes until the end of the day, employees enjoy their environment and the time spent in it.

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- PABLO PICASSO



# Lighting and views

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During Canadian winters, people experience entire days – sometimes weeks – without seeing the light of day. When the sun rises after work begins and sets before it ends, the effect can be traumatic. Mood, productivity and overall well-being suffer.

For this reason, the value of natural light in the workplace is immeasurable. Even on long summer days, it's critical to catch glimpses of the outdoors during the day.

When searching for a new office space, or while refurbishing an existing one, prioritize and maximize natural light. Design the office in a way that allows every office space to benefit from the view outside.

And speaking of view, recent studies<sup>4</sup> have demonstrated that what people see through the window is just as important as the light shining in it. The research indicates that a window with a view “affects the productivity and psychological wellbeing of office occupants.”

However, since it isn't possible to rely solely on windows to illuminate an office space and boost the mood of employees, use alternate solutions to ensure ideal lighting is found in every workspace.

The consequences of an inappropriately lit space include drowsiness, distraction, and even headaches and muscle strain. Instead, think about allowing workers to personalize their lighting solutions.

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# Nutrition

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People skip breakfast and lunch all the time. Life gets busy, and something has to give. Trying to operate at full capacity on an empty stomach is a fruitless endeavour. The brain simply doesn't function properly when it hasn't been fed.

A Harvard Medical School employee and medical doctor summed up the situation well. She stated that the "brain requires a constant supply of fuel. That fuel comes from the foods you eat... Put simply, what you eat directly affects the structure and function of your brain and, ultimately, your mood." 5

She discusses how critical it is to empower the brain with the vitamins, minerals and antioxidants necessary for ideal mental function. 5

Where does the office fit in to the nutrition equation? Business owners need to understand that people are often too busy to make the wisest dietary decisions. Instead, they can offer their employees alternatives.

If it's possible, provide employees with a canteen. Instead of opting for fast food – or no food at all – employees can make fresh, nourishing choices to fuel their minds and keep them energized and focused throughout the workday.

Many organizations have taken this a step further. They supply fruit, healthy snacks, and prepared lunches to eliminate any excuses for poor nutrition.

Furthermore, sometimes people just need to get away from their work to recharge. Whether catching up on the news or enjoying a quick chat, a staff kitchen or canteen offers a welcome – and much needed – reprieve from the workload.

# Fitness

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The physical benefits of exercise are well known: sleep quality improves, risk of disease drops, blood sugars stabilize, energy is boosted, likelihood of depression and anxiety shrinks, self confidence rises, blood flow to the brain increases and overall mood gets better.

With a list of perks this long, it's clear to see the value of promoting a culture of fitness at work.

However, despite the obvious upside to fitness, nearly half of Canadian adults are deemed inactive, according to StatCan 6. This means they aren't achieving the 30 minutes of exercise per day the World Health Organization suggests as a minimum 7.



To improve these statistics, make fitness an easier choice for employees. Think about implementing some of the following solutions:

- Businesses with enough space can build a gym onsite. Providing employees with somewhere to work out at work eliminates most barriers to exercise.
- If employees have the option to work out during the day, shower facilities are also necessary. Heading back to work sweaty isn't pleasant.
- If onsite facilities aren't an option, provide a subsidized membership at a nearby gym.
- Hire a yoga or Pilates instructor to teach sessions in the office. A private room with moveable furniture is all that's needed to accommodate a class.
- Make it easy for staff to cycle or run to work. Again, shower facilities are a huge bonus. Additionally, providing convenient storage and a space for bike maintenance (including tools, pumps, tire tubes, etc.) for those cycling to work makes the process much simpler.

There are financial implications associated with promoting physical fitness in the office, but the benefits outweigh the cost. Businesses that provide employees with fitness opportunities will reap the rewards: fewer sick days, increased productivity, a greater sense of community, and higher retention of quality staff.



# Environmental impact

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Wellbeing doesn't just involve the health and wellness of people. The state of our planet must also be prioritized.

As the 'green' movement has garnered more attention, a rising concern has been whether profit will suffer at the hand of sustainability. In other words, must business owners choose either environmental and social responsibility or economic growth?

This question is an important one in how it relates to wellbeing in the workplace. Profit directly impacts employees and their security. Additionally, a sustainable office is a healthy office (I.E. use of non-toxic materials, provision of facilities for those cycling or running to work).

Thankfully, the answer contains good news. Data from a recent study conducted by MIT Sloan Management Review 8 suggests that "the sustainability movement is nearing a tipping point, the point at which a substantial portion of companies are not only seeing the need for sustainable business practices but are also deriving financial benefits from these activities."

Soon enough, sustainability will cease to even be a conversation. It will simply be standard business practice to operate in a socially and environmentally responsible way.

# Colour

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Colour affects more than just the aesthetic of an office. It's also an effective tool to promote a company's brand. Furthermore, colour can be used to stimulate a specific response or a mood.

When selecting office colour, factor in the emotions – both positive and negative – that these common colours trigger:

- Red – Power, urgency, excitement, boldness / danger, defiance
- Yellow – Optimism, creativity, warmth / emotional, fragility
- Green – Success, endurance, peace / boredom
- Blue – Trust, strength, dependability / coldness, lack of emotion
- White/grey – Neutrality, balance / lacklustre, sterility
- Purple – Imaginative, wise / indulgent
- Brown – Warmth, reliability / unsophisticated

Think about the wellbeing of those in the office before painting; first establish business goals. Should staff consistently remain calm, cool and collected or stimulated and engaged? Should the colours in the office evoke a sense of power or a feeling of urgency?

It all depends on the type of business. What services are being offered - and to what clientele? No doubt, an advertising agency expects a different atmosphere than a doctor's office.





# Texture

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Although a design element such as texture may appear inconsequential, its impact shouldn't be underestimated. Offices offering up a variety of textures stimulate creativity as well as a sense of comfort for employees and guests alike.

Rather than presenting a flat, uninspiring environment, utilize texture as a means to differentiate between a space and its purpose. For example, use grainier textures for areas intended for stimulating conversation and creativity. Conversely, areas meant for concentration should include smoother, less abrasive materials.

Texture goes beyond the obvious fabric and materials used on furniture. Humans have an instinctive bond to nature – it's a phenomenon called biophilia. To appease this innate craving people have, use natural textures, such as plants, water features, wood or cork flooring, fireplaces, maybe even a fireplace, to create a desirable environment.



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