

Workplace Design Tips for Well-Being

Dr. Michael O'Neill

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.

