BETTER PLACES FOR PEOPLE | PUT WELLBEING AT THE HEART OF YOUR BUILDING

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In any organisation, the staff is a crucial asset. No matter how automated processes have become, businesses still need that human factor to drive machinery, tend to customer queries or to simply make things work. Therefore, it stands to reason that an organisation’s staff should be housed in healthy, efficient offices to maximise their efficiency and productivity.

Indeed, the focus in the business arena for the past few years has revolved around the much-lauded term: productivity. Many government incentive and assistance schemes are tailored to help local businesses become more productive, and therefore able to contribute more to Singapore’s economy. However, most of the schemes are purpose driven, in that they are drawn up and implemented explicitly to address specific issues. Sending your workers for skill upgrade courses is great and all, but there is a more achievable way to quickly improve office productivity.

According to a growing body of research, staff members in any organisation typically account for 90 percent of business operating costs. Therefore, even a small improvement in staff productivity can translate to rosier news for the company’s bottom line and competitiveness. This is especially crucial in today’s highly cluttered and extremely competitive global marketplace, where consumers are spoilt for choice and companies have to put in more effort to raise their profiles.

Apart from their own homes, employees usually spend most of the day in their offices, hard at work performing the myriad of tasks that is essential to any company. Oftentimes, they pay little attention to their immediate surroundings, ignoring the bad lighting or the poor indoor air quality present in the very office they are spending a third of their day in. In recent years, as the global sustainability movement shifted into high gear, people are
becoming more aware of their surrounding environment, particularly in the buildings they spend so much time in. This growing trend is not confined to only employees: building owners, designers, developers and investors throughout the world that office design affects the health and wellbeing of occupants in many ways and that it is also a smart business move to construct healthy green buildings.

In the latest World Green Building Council Building the Business Case: Health, Wellbeing and Productivity in Green Offices Report published in October 2016, a survey of 200 Canadian building owners unveiled the following interesting factoids:

1. Healthy buildings are worth at least seven percent more than their conventional counterparts.

2. 46 percent of building owners said that healthy green buildings were easier to lease.

3. 28 percent said that these green buildings commanded premium rents.

Therefore, not only is a green building a worthwhile financial investment, the intangible benefits provided to the occupants’ health and wellbeing will more than make up for the initial capital outlay. In fact, the WorldGBC report also shows that employers who care about the environmental impact of their buildings as well as the health and wellbeing of their staff, and take action to improve the quality of the workplace, are rewarded by improved productivity and loyalty, which can be worth many times more than their investment.

Hence, creating Better Places for People is indeed the way to go.
In the simplest terms, a better place for people simply means that a building’s occupant feels comfortable just by being in the room or building. A number of factors govern the quality of the interior environment, and each of these factors play key roles in determining whether or not you will continually sneeze in this auditorium or feel that the temperature is just right at the office.

Together, these factors form the tenets of the Better Places for People initiative launched by the World Green Building Council, aimed at raising awareness of what constitutes a healthy place to be in and how green building can help. On the local front, the Singapore Green Building Council has localised the programme and for a start, will be bringing it to office tenants and occupants.
This is particularly poignant in this day and age, where the general consumer has become more aware of environmental issues and are increasingly concerned about their own personal health and wellbeing. The modern consumer is also more technologically-inclined, turning to “smart” devices and other technology to receive updates about environmental trends or to help them lead healthier lifestyles.

For example, in order to combat the annual haze that plagues Singapore, consumers have become more discerning in their purchase of products that can help alleviate the stigma. As opposed to simply buying regular facemasks to filter out the harmful air particles, many consumers opt to go for purpose-made filtered masks that are able to block out fine particulate matter (PM2.5) that pose significant concern to health. Even though these masks are pricier than regular ones, consumers see it as a necessary expenditure to preserve their health, their awareness on this issue bolstered by public education campaigns as well as ready accessibility to concrete information.

The National Steps Challenge organised by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) is another example of the increasing onus placed by consumers on their own health and wellbeing. Ostensibly a rewards programme tagged to physical performance reflected by a steps tracker, the programme has seen enough traction and take-up to warrant a second season, suggesting that the regular consumer will take the extra effort to keep fit if technology is able to help them do so. One of the main draws of the Challenge is the seamless transfer of tracked steps
from the steps tracker to the smartphone app, allowing consumers to claim their rewards or see how far they have walked with just one tap of a button.

Despite this increased emphasis on personal health and wellbeing, the general consumer often overlooks a key component that has a direct impact: our buildings. As we go about our daily lives, we are always in some form of building to live, work and play in. We sleep inside a building, we work inside a building and we also derive recreation inside a building, most of the time at least. Therefore, it stands to reason that the buildings we are in have to be healthy and productive, so that the occupants within remain healthy and productive as well.

There is still a substantial gap in knowledge and awareness on how buildings can help improve personal health and wellbeing. More often than not, consumers are only aware of the more tangible things like greenery and lighting, while having only a fleeting understanding of how indoor air quality or the interior layout of an office workspace can play vital roles in improving occupant health and wellbeing. A healthy office environment is also crucial in helping to attract and retain the best talent.

This is the basis of the Better Places for People programme.

**TENETS OF BETTER PLACES**

WorldGBC, through rigorous research, has identified seven features that will create greener and healthier offices.
Healthy offices have low concentrations of CO$_2$, VOCs and other pollutants, as well as high ventilation rates. Why? Increase in cognitive scores for workers in a green, well-ventilated office.

Healthy offices have a diverse array of workspaces, with ample meeting rooms, quiet zones, and stand-sit desks, promoting active movement within offices. Why? Flexible workspaces help staff feel more in control of their workload and engenders loyalty.

Healthy offices have a wide variety of plant species inside and out as well as views of nature from workspaces. Why? Improvement in processing time at a call centre when staff have a view of nature.

Healthy offices have a comfortable temperature range which staff can control. Why? Fall in staff performance when offices are too hot and 4% if too cold.
Healthy offices have access to public transport, safe bike routes, parking, and showers, and a range of health food choices.

WHY?

Savings through cutting absenteeism as a result of Dutch cycle-to-work scheme.

Healthy offices have generous access to daylight and self-controlled electrical lighting.

WHY?

46 minutes

more sleep for workers in offices near windows.

Healthy offices use materials that reduce noise and provide quiet spaces to work.

WHY?

66%

fall in staff performance as a result of distracting noise.

Healthy offices have employees that are regularly consulted and that feedback is used to drive continuous improvement.

WHY?

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Healthy offices have access to public transport, safe bike routes, parking, and showers, and a range of health food choices.

WHY?

€27m

savings through cutting absenteeism as a result of Dutch cycle-to-work scheme.
WHAT IS INDOOR AIR QUALITY?

Indoor air quality refers to the value of air purity within and around buildings, relating especially to the health and comfort of building occupants. Substances such as carbon dioxide, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), mould and bacteria in the air we breathe in can have adverse effects on our health and wellbeing, particularly after periods of prolonged exposure.

Healthy offices have low concentrations of these harmful substances as well as high ventilation rates. Workers in such offices report a 101 percent increase in cognitive scores, improving their productivity while also lessening their absenteeism rate.

To improve the indoor air quality of your office, specify for office interior fit-out products that have low concentrations of harmful substances. Ensure that these products have a valid green certification issued by an authorised body, such as the Singapore Green Building Product labelling scheme administered by the Singapore Green Building Council.

In addition, you can also install carbon dioxide sensors in your office to give you a better idea of how clean the air in your office is before taking the appropriate corrective measure. Growing of certain indoor plant species can also help to absorb VOCs and cleanse the air. Lastly, ensure that your air-conditioning units are regularly maintained to prevent a build-up of harmful substances like mould and bacteria.
WHAT IS THERMAL COMFORT?

Thermal comfort is achieved when the combination of temperature and humidity in your immediate surroundings are just right. In Singapore, this is assessed by subjective evaluation based on Singapore Standards 554. All buildings undergoing assessment for the Building and Construction Authority’s Green Mark Scheme will have to pass this thermal test as part of the evaluation process.

Healthy offices enable their staff to control the temperature of their immediate surroundings to achieve the ideal range they feel most comfortable in, recommended to be in the range of 24-26 degrees Celsius. The WorldGBC report shows that staff report a 6 percent fall in staff performance if offices are too hot or too cold but increase their productivity by 3 percent if they are able to control their local climate. Ideal temperatures can also be achieved by a combination of air-condition and fans. This way, more energy savings can also be gained.

WHAT IS DAYLIGHTING AND LIGHTING?

Daylighting is the practice of positioning windows, openings or reflective surfaces such that natural daylight provides effective lighting for the interior of a building. When actively incorporated into building design, daylighting is able to maximise visual comfort for its occupants or reduce energy use. In workplace design, natural daylight is the most wanted element as it improves mood, reduces stress and has a positive impact on circadian system functions. Studies indicate that adequate exposure to daylight can result in 46 minutes more of quality sleep at night.

Healthy offices have abundant natural daylight with building features to maximise exposure. Self-controlled artificial lighting is also a key feature of healthy offices, and these have to be glare-free, energy efficient and flicker-free with appropriate lighting controls installed for individual workers to freely adjust their levels of illumination for different tasks and use scenarios. Not only will staff feel more productive, less energy is also wasted on lighting unused areas of the office.
NOISE AND ACOUSTICS

WHAT IS NOISE AND ACOUSTICS?

Noise and acoustics refer to the aural environment of the office, whether there are sufficient quiet spaces for staff to perform tasks away from distracting noise. Studies report a 66 percent drop in staff performance as a result of distracting noise. Therefore, it is pertinent to use sound absorptive materials (floor/wall coverings, office furniture, etc.) in the office while also zoning out the office based on the various activities. Also, consider designating quiet spaces or dedicated booths for phone calls, while keeping noisy office equipment away from open office areas.

INTERIOR LAYOUT AND ACTIVE DESIGN

WHAT IS INTERIOR LAYOUT AND ACTIVE DESIGN?

Interior layout largely refers to the visual appeal of a workspace, a major factor in workplace satisfaction especially within the younger demographic. More than two-thirds of Generation Y workers report an increase in productivity when their offices are fit-out in a “funky” manner.

Apart from the visual appearance of the workplace, healthy offices have many different sections and workspaces for employees. From ample meeting rooms to quiet rooms and stand-sit desks, such office spaces promote active movement within the office. This flexibility helps staff feel more in control of their workload, and this in turn engenders employee loyalty.

Healthy offices should be designed to accommodate the various needs of staff, while having a layout that facilitates easy interaction, discussion and collaboration with sufficient spaces for privacy and focus. Different space designs can also be incorporated to match the requirements of different tasks and also to mitigate noise levels.

Office equipment can also help with interior layout. Select office furniture that provide flexibility in the adjustability of equipment as well as different working options, for example, standing desks. It is also good to consider the ergonomics of the furniture, especially those where staff will spend protracted periods of time in.
WHAT IS LOCATION AND ACCESS TO AMENITIES?

Given a choice, employees would choose a workplace with shorter commutes to reduce the time taken to get to and off work. Oftentimes, employees have to work around long commuting times, especially if using the public transport network. Therefore, the office’s location and access to amenities is important to attract and retain staff.

Healthy offices have good access to the public transport network, safe bike routes, ample parking, and shower facilities, as well as a range of healthy food choices within a stone’s throw from the building. Ancillary services like childcare centres are also crucial considerations for the modern employee.

Apart from the more tangible features, intangibles such as health policies and benefits (e.g. fruits day and healthy snack corner), workplace family support, incentives that encourage greater levels of physical activity through reimbursement of gym membership all play a part in improving the wellbeing and productivity of staff members. Employers can also consider allowing flexible work arrangements for staff members, especially those with family commitments.

WHAT IS BIOPHILIA AND VIEW?

As introduced by Edward O. Wilson in 1984, biophilia is defined as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life”. In building terms, it simply means to bring nature into man-made spaces. Studies have shown that concentration levels in workers increase if there is greenery in the office. In addition to enhancing the view of office employees, certain species of indoor plants can also absorb harmful VOCs and purify the air.

Views of nature have been shown to improve employee wellbeing and productivity. At a call centre, staff reported a 7-12 percent improvement in processing times when they had a view of nature. Greenery and views of nature can come in the form of green roofs, vertical gardens and indoor plants incorporated into the building design or office environment.

It is important to select plants that are hardy and require lesser maintenance in the office (see page 56 for a selection). In addition, use only organic fertilisers and pesticides, if needed.
GREEN MARK SCHEME

The Green Mark Scheme is a building certification programme administered by the Building and Construction Authority (BCA), assessing buildings for their performance and impact on its immediate environment. The Scheme is further sub-divided into several different categories, each looking at a specific type of building and their usage, e.g. New Buildings, Existing Buildings, Office Interiors. Although the Green Mark Scheme encompasses a host of other factors including energy efficiency and resource management, usage of certified green building materials will help the building or office to achieve a higher Green Mark rating, which translates to a more productive workplace environment.

The Singapore Green Building Council (SGBC) runs a dedicated certification programme for green building products. The Singapore Green Building Product (SGBP) labelling scheme evaluates and assesses building materials for their environmental performance based on a stringent set of criteria rooted in sustainability. The SGBP’s tiered rating levels is a clear indication of a product’s environmental performance, allowing end-users to make informed building decisions. Products certified by the SGBP labelling scheme are also catalogued on an online directory, making it easy for green building products to be searched and utilised.

As an outreach programme pioneered by the World Green Building Council, Better Places for People will continue to raise awareness of healthy, productive offices achievable by building green. In Singapore, SGBC has adapted the Better Places for People programme for the local context, with a number of tenant engagement sessions organised with programme partners already in the pipeline.

For more information, please visit http://www.sgbc.sg/resources/better-places-for-people

Images courtesy of World Green Building Council.