Human beings spend most of their time inside buildings: we leave our homes for our workplaces, adjourn to leisurely or educational facilities after work before calling it a night in our residences each day. It stands to reason that the places and spaces we live in have to be places and spaces we can live with as the indoor environment directly affects our health and productivity. According to research undertaken by the World Green Building Council, staff in any organisation typically account for 50-90 percent of a business’ operating costs. Any improvement in employee productivity whether big or small, can translate to rosier news for the organisation’s bottom line and market competitiveness. Indeed, this is especially critical in the modern cluttered marketplace, where consumers are spoilt for choice for any given product or service, necessitating organisations to put in more effort to raise their profiles.

While employees can be sent for training programmes to sharpen their communication skills or hone their marketing prowess in order to achieve better work performance, the relatively simple solution of greening the office can also work wonders for employee health and productivity. At the most basic level, green and healthy offices can reduce absenteeism rates due to sick employees simply because of the positive indoor environment. Offices with good environments also bolster productivity and fosters cohesion, leading to generally happier employees who can deliver better, more impactful work. A healthy (and attractive) office also plays an important role in attracting and retaining talent needed to grow and take the organisation to greater heights.

The World Green Building Council, through its global Better People for Places project, has identified seven features that go towards greener and healthier workplaces. By bearing in mind these seven factors, your workplace can be a conducive, positive haven for your employees.

**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.

**Thermal comfort**
Healthy offices enable their staff to control the temperature of their immediate surroundings to achieve the ideal range they feel most comfortable in. This is recommended to be in the range of 24-26 degrees Celsius. A WorldGBC
report showed that staff indicated a 6 percent fall in staff performance if offices are too hot or too cold but an increase in 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.

**Good lighting**

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 your staff feel more productive, less energy is also wasted on lighting unused areas of the office.

**Noise & 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 have reported 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 & active design**

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.

**Biophilia**

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 as not all indoor plants are grown equal. In addition, use only organic fertilisers and pesticides, if needed.

**Location & access to amenities**

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.

The end goal of these seven features is to create healthier workplaces for employees, exemplified by the Building and Construction Authority’s (BCA) Green Mark Scheme for Healthier Workplaces. Working in conjunction with the Health Promotion Board (HPB), the new Green Mark Scheme was launched in September 2018 with the objective to create environmentally-friendly and healthy office spaces.

The Singapore Green Building Council will continue to raise awareness of healthy, productive offices achievable by building green. Adapting the Better Places for People programme for the local context, SGBC works with building owners and developers to run talks and sharing sessions for tenants. These lunchtime talks will cover the low-hanging fruits for greening offices, giving companies an idea on how to begin the process of creating a greener and healthier workplace.

*This article is adapted from the “Better Places for People” article first published in Issue 4.0 of the SG Green magazine.*