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The Healthy Workplace

By Judy Voss and Sally Augustin

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"All stimuli, including the arts, have an impact on human physiology and on health outcomes ranging from illness to wellness, from injury to peak performance." ¹

Work is good for us. It's healthy to interact with others and cooperate toward shared goals. It stimulates our minds to learn new things and meet new challenges. Work gets us out into the world to show what we can do, and rewards us for our successes.

Work doesn't always feel healthy however. Many workers are stressed to the limit by long work hours, frustrating commutes, office politics and 24/7 communications accessibility.

- Stress, depression and burnout have increased to where 10% of workers are affected.² On an average day, an estimated 1 million workers are absent due to stress-related problems.³
- Stress is estimated to cost employers over \$200 billion a year worldwide⁴ ; a cost that ultimately gets built into the prices of products and services.
- Stress also takes a personal toll - The World Health Organization reports that around three-quarters of those seeking psychiatric services show either a lack of job satisfaction or an inability to relax.⁵

Teams and other workgroups can also experience collective stress. As time-pressed workers focus on urgent tasks, less information is shared with, and less consideration is shown to colleagues. Group interactions can become tense and full of misunderstandings.

So what can be done to make the workplace less draining and more genuinely productive? Can the workplace enhance productivity, energy and creativity or play a role in a get-well plan? Let's start by taking a look at how environments influence stress levels.

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What Stress is and what it does

Stress has been described as the reaction to unpleasant aspects of the environment, such as tight deadlines, noise, crowding, and an invasion of personal space.⁶ Situations and conditions that can be experienced as stressful continually surround us.

Although stress responses can help us in emergencies, every stressor has a potentially negative effect on our well being. The cumulative effect of many stresses, even minor ones, can be extremely serious. In response to either a single stressor or a collection of stressors, individuals may experience increased heart rate and adrenaline secretion. People may also become anxious or depressed following a stressful incident or situation.

When we are experiencing stress we devote cognitive resources to emotionally charged thoughts and worries. This causes us to feel tense and get less done, which adds to the worry that things are getting out of control. Worry leaves us with less brainpower to accurately absorb new information, think creatively or to complete other types of knowledge work. Stress thus reduces our work quantity and quality.

Research has shown that stress generated by noise reduces the amount of attention available for other activities. After a while however, many people learn to tune out what's going on around them as a kind of defense mechanism. In urban environments, people learn to filter out traffic noise and other sensations to keep stimulation within a range they can handle. In this way they are able to sustain participation in a complex environment, but stop perceiving the richness of that environment.

In office settings, irritation with noise has also been linked to job dissatisfaction. When employees are moved to offices that are noisier than their previous work areas, they are less satisfied with their jobs.

Office workgroup interactions are also impacted by stress. Studies have shown that as stress causes workers to focus their attention on their own concerns, they become less able to perceive the needs of others. Stressed office workers simply do not pick up subtle cues that coworkers are in need of assistance or a good listener.

To cope with stress, individuals may take problem-focused action, such as leaving an area they perceive to be too hot or too noisy. They may respond to their stress by taking an aspirin, or by simply telling themselves that the situation is not as bad as first thought.

Workers should not be left to solve or otherwise adjust to workplace problems because they are unlikely to arrive at sustainable solutions. One person's solution may solve that person's problem, but the group may experience increased stress if it's not a win-win solution. Bottled up emotions and/or denial just delay trouble.

Worst case, valued workers stop expecting anything to change and look for new jobs. An ASID study found that employees who said they were likely to change jobs within the next year mention dissatisfaction with the workplace as an issue 50 percent of the time.⁷

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The Design Dimension

Much is being learned about the psychological impacts of interior spaces from the field of health care design. For example, patients have been found to require less pain medication when noise levels were reduced. Noise has been defined for hospital settings as "environmentally-generated sound with no specific human purpose."⁸

Not all distractions are bad however. The sight and sound of water and trees, or even a mural of a natural scene have been shown to change electrical activity in the brain for the better, reducing both muscle tension and the release of stress hormones. Chaotic art however can be a negative distraction that doesn't promote wellness. Light also has significant effects on wellness.

Light color, temperature and exposure can influence the synthesis of some vitamins, as well as biochemical and hormonal body rhythms. Lighting and interior colors can be selected to promote calm and positive feelings.

Control over surroundings and privacy, access to the support of others, and exposure to "positive distractions" such as natural scenes or elements are key to a wellness-promoting environment.⁹ Complete lack of distractions is not ideal however, especially in hospitals, because visual and acoustic isolation tends to make people dwell excessively on their fears and problems.

As more scientific research on the impact of environmental factors becomes available, it could be well worth contacting an interior design professional to hear about what's being learned. Although most wellness studies are being done in health care facilities, there may be many opportunities for carryover of these emerging design principles into office environments.

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The Control Factor:

Stress often results from feeling a less than satisfactory level of personal control. One moment the office is cold, the next it's tropical. Noise levels go up when you most need to concentrate.

With some forethought, unpredictability and uncontrollability can be reduced. Part of the solution may require work scheduling or management style changes that are outside the range of a designer's or facilities manager's influence. Within the scope of physical workspace change, the following areas can often influence positive change.

Ergonomics - Any physical discomfort can become stressful. Make sure everyone knows how to adjust their chairs, computer support, lighting and storage accessories to suit them physically and to support the ways they want to work. Have a trained ergonomist walk around the facility to look for hazardous typing postures or less than ideal furniture layouts. As workers see others solving ergonomics problems by actively managing their spaces, they will gain a better understanding of how they too can take action to avoid pain and fatigue.

Crowding - Growing organizations and companies in tight real estate markets will frequently pack more people than intended into a space. With salary costs averaging \$130 a sq. ft., delaying a needed move to a larger space is rarely a long-term bargain. If a move isn't possible in the short term, staggered shifts or multiple work sites may be needed in the interim to reduce crowding issues.¹⁰

Noise - Increased densities and more collaborative work styles can raise the ambient sound level considerably. Try to separate noisier meeting spaces from individual offices, and provide acoustic barriers between work groups. Full-height walls may be necessary to provide acoustic support for video conferencing and speakerphones. Noisy equipment should be moved away from work areas and phones should be set to ring at a low volume. Carpet, quality ceiling tile, acoustic panels and white noise can also help calm the ambient environment. Using headphones instead of speakers for individual music also helps.

Facility Comfort - Air temperature and quality should be regularly monitored and worker complaints about hot and cold areas deserve quick attention. Working in poor indoor environmental conditions causes physical as well as psychological stress. Regular cleaning is also helpful for the removal of dust and other allergens that can lead to extra sick time. Another benefit of good cleaning is that well-maintained offices visually communicate that workers are valued, and feeling appreciated is a known stress reducer.

Escape Routes - Temporary quiet spaces available on an as-needed basis for workers are great for those who occasionally need solo time to focus on a task. If a worker can take a project to a different workspace, alertness can be improved by the exercise of going there, as well as by the change of scenery. Access to daylight and natural views can calm someone who's been glued to a PC too long. Break areas, such as food courts or "Zen Dens" also let people unplug for a while. In the overall space plan, try to balance quiet spaces with collaborative areas where interactive activities are encouraged and supported. Giving workers a chance to occasionally move between different environments in a facility helps restore a sense of control and balance.

Flexibility - Work schedule flexibility is very popular with workers. However, one person's flexibility to work at home or leave early can raise other peoples' stress when they are not able to find the person they need to see. The key to using flexibility to reduce overall stress is to reach consensus on core hours or ways for workers to locate and support each other.

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Remember that a work life is a long haul

Physician Richard Lippin sees the ways knowledge workers are being pushed to the limit as a trend that's not going to end anytime soon. "Hard capital is in excess and intellectual capital is in short supply. Thus the human brain is the last frontier in human capital management."¹¹

Along with the trend toward maximization of human capital can come long hours at computers and sitting in meetings, and the stress of constant striving to get more done.

There will always be pressure and deadlines, and another batch of e-mail to open. However, we must not become so focussed on processing that we completely forget to build and maintain the kinds of healthy environments that can support workers for the long haul.

Lippin compares workers to artists and athletes. They are always straining to do more, faster. He urges caution however. "As physicians, we must emphasize the centrality of human needs in work. In the arts or in athletic areas, where the risk of excessive emphasis on performance is great, we must promote the priority of long-term health over short-lived and often dangerous glory. Similarly, we must promote health when it is in competition with work performance."¹²

¹ Lippin, Richard MD. December 1999. Applying Lessons from the Work of Art. Business & Health. 19.

² The International Labor Organization. October 10, 2000. www.news.bbc.co.uk

³ McGee, Marianne Kolbasuk, Khirallah, Diane Rezendes and Lodge, Michelle. September 25, 2000. Backlash. www.informationweek.com.

⁴ The International Labor Organization, September 1, 1999. www.psycport.com

⁵ www.psycport.com, 9/1/99

⁶ Bell, Fisher, Baum and Greene, 1996. Environmental Psychology

⁷ ASID. 1999. Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Employees-By Design.

⁸ Frankowski Jones, Beth. July/August 1996. Environments That Support Healing. Interiors & Sources. 68-71.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Revisiting Space Standards on www.haworth.com for more on this.

¹¹ Lippin, Richard MD. December 1999. Applying Lessons from the Work of Art. Business & Health. 22

¹² Ibid.

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