

Sustainability Spotlight

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PIVOT POINT: SUSTAINABILITY GOES SOCIAL

At its heart, sustainability is about people. It's about creating and supporting the economic, environmental and social conditions that allow people and communities to reach their full potential. It's about long-term wellbeing in its purest sense. The inherent connection—and some would say overlap—of sustainability and wellbeing is evident, as is the red thread that runs through both concepts: humans.

The human thread dates back to the landmark 1987 Brundtland Report, which defined sustainability as that which meets the needs of future and current generations within the limits of the planet. This definition presents two lenses—satisfying human needs and respecting environmental limits. So far, the planetary limitations lens has attracted more attention, and significant progress has been made. Now the emphasis is shifting to a different conversation, one that’s about meeting human needs and creating a culture of wellbeing. Social sustainability is emerging as the new area of action.

Companies worldwide are embracing this more holistic approach to sustainability, making it an inseparable core objective and aspiration of their enterprise. These progressive thinkers understand that human wellbeing without environmental wellbeing is a crisis, environmental wellbeing without human wellbeing is a non-starter, and economic wellbeing, once considered the only measure of achievement, is now considered the means to reach a more sustainable future.

These forward-thinking organizations realize that when economic, environmental and social sustainability intersect, it’s easier to develop new business models, create and execute new internal and external strategies, introduce innovative products and dream up better ideas that contribute to solving the pressing needs of today and the future.

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During this transition, with this expanded aperture, businesses must take a different tack with social sustainability than with previous environmental strategies. It’s time to pivot from minimizing damage to maximizing potential, from doing less harm to seeking more positive impacts. This isn’t about preservation—it’s about expansion of human promise. It’s time to move from a position of risk management to a position of human development.

Businesses have been reluctant to tackle the issue of wellbeing. Skeptics say it’s hard to measure and define, and feels too soft for a ROI-based business climate. In an age of privacy concerns, employees feel it may infringe on their personal privacy, and critics point to lingering questions about the business case. Others have made substantial investments in physical wellbeing, such as gym memberships for employees, and consider the problem solved. But the problems persist: Diabetes and obesity are at epidemic proportions, health care costs continue to rise unabated, and we now spend more time working than anything else, including sleeping. With human capital at a premium, isn’t it time for businesses to adopt a new mindset?

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In today’s business climate, and what some are calling a conspicuous absence of wellbeing in the workplace, the economics of wellbeing are finding high-profile champions. Recently, a global coalition of business leaders including Virgin’s Sir Richard Branson, Unilever’s Paul Polman, India’s Ratan Tata and Nobel Prize-winning banker Muhammad Yunus prevailed on the world’s companies to “become a primary driver of holistic wellbeing, adding social value through evolving business models, employee welfare, health, citizen engagement and human rights.”

Wellbeing is a cultural issue—it cuts across all departments, HR strategies, environments and processes. It’s a symbiotic ecosystem within organizations. For progressive companies, wellbeing is now a strategic imperative and competitive differentiator—just as environmental sustainability has become. Our research has shown that a culture of wellbeing:

- Fosters innovation
- Increases productivity
- Encourages creativity

- Sparks collaboration
- Creates and spreads optimism
- Enhances mindfulness
- Cultivates personal authenticity
- Supports physical vigor
- Builds a culture of shared meaning and beliefs
- Cements the connection between work and creating lasting change in the greater world



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I know that our job will never be “finished.” As citizens of a world that keeps getting smaller, we face tremendous environmental, economic and social challenges, and the scope of our efforts must always be expanding. The future will be about designing for a holistic system in which business embraces its role as a positive change agent, and realizes the full benefit of sustainable business design. The challenge will be in the scope of the opportunity; it’s all-encompassing. The good news? It’s scalable.

I’d love to learn your perspective and ideas. Email me at: anahikia@steelcase.com

These are all highly desirable results, but how does one measure wellbeing? Across the globe, corporations, academics and governments are wrestling with the metrics. Just as there was a debate years ago about how to measure the environmental impact of products and actions, the wellbeing measurement debate is being defined now. Some of the most interesting work is being done in the United Kingdom, where the government is creating national wellbeing accounts and conducting biennial studies to gauge national wellbeing. The New Economy Foundation sponsors the Happy Planet Index, a snapshot at the happiest and least happy places on earth (see pg. 57 for more information about the Happy Planet Index). Gallup continues its global efforts to track trends in wellbeing, and several countries, including France, are considering replacing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures with more holistic wellbeing measures to evaluate their national success.

In the future, as big data matures, it may be possible to more closely link specific wellbeing actions to direct economic impact, but as the father of Total Quality Management, W. Edwards Deming, once said, “Only three percent of what’s important can be measured.”

In the meantime, the confluence of economic, environmental and social sustainability is beginning to make a mark on progressive businesses and the marketplace. The connection between sustainability and wellbeing is more and more evident, and is redefining success in the decades to come. “The sustainable business of the future, the future bottom line, the future of leadership and future incentives will all be defined by their ability to ecologically and efficiently satisfy our wellbeing needs,” stated one visionary author. This is nothing short of an opportunity to reinvent the ways we do business, the ways we act and perform as people, and the ways we interact with the environment. And it all starts with us—as humans—seeking to unlock our promise to solve the entrenched problems we collectively share and create a more sustainable future.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE OF WELLBEING

Our learning continues as we branch out with wellbeing workshops in multiple North American locations. Together with members of the architectural and design community, business decision-makers, academics and thought leaders, we'll explore the future of wellbeing at work. In each half-day session, we'll collaborate, create and dream up powerful visions for a future that better supports employee physical, social and cognitive wellbeing. Teams will cross-pollinate ideas, examine trends and ultimately create a scenario that represents their vision for the future. These ideas and insights will be synthesized and shared throughout the company so we can structure our future vision with clarity and aligned purpose.

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