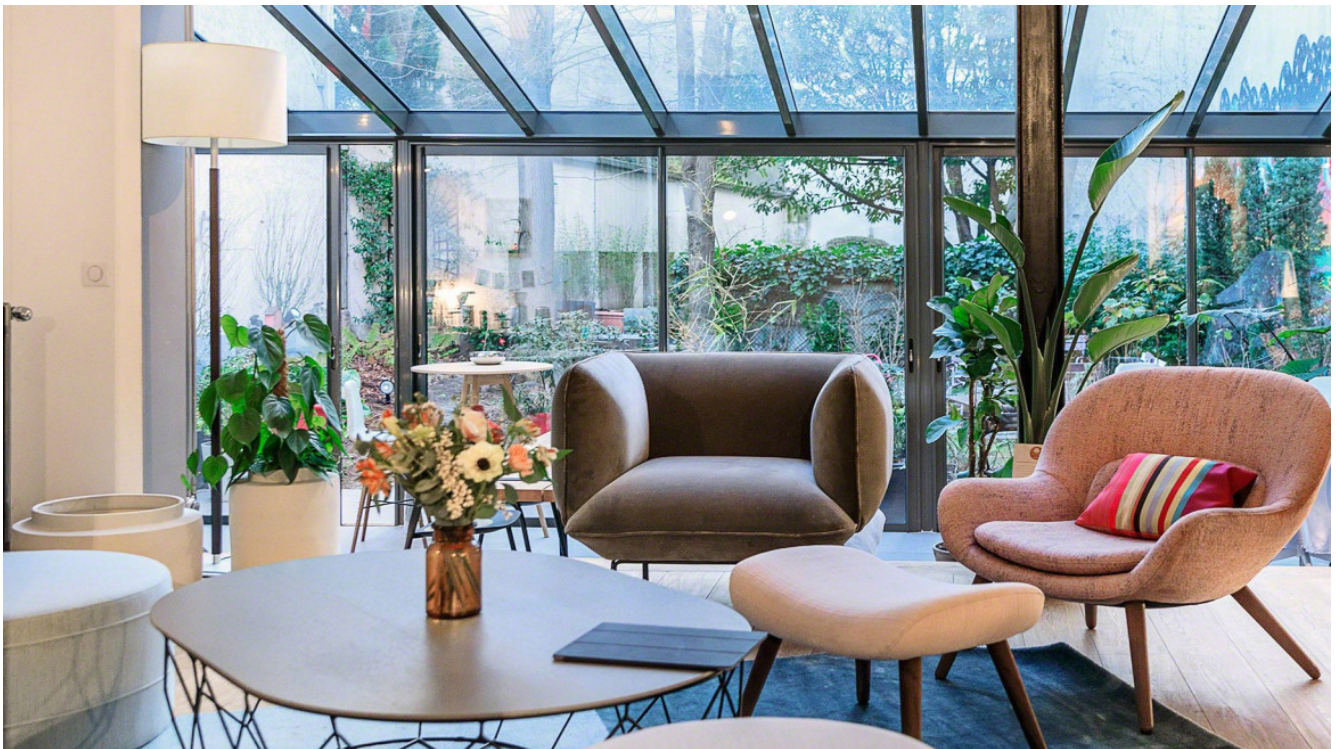


Sustainability

Office Agriculture: A New Employee Wellbeing Concept

A start-up is encouraging companies to create an easy way for people at work to grow their own food.



As people work longer hours and in more intense ways, many organizations are seeking to support employee wellbeing in the office. It's no secret that food can reenergize people and increase social connections. But, in the Strasbourg area of France, a start-up company called myfood is encouraging companies to go a step further.

Myfood is creating an easy way for people at work to grow their own food. They call this concept "office agriculture." It not only aims to improve the quality of what people eat, but also adds a place for people to connect with nature and with one another. 360 spoke with Matthieu Urban, partner and co-founder of myfood, about this new idea.

360: Why are you drawn to the mission of reconnecting people with food?

Matthieu Urban: Across the world, citizens are worried about the consequences of industrial agriculture: soil depletion, loss of biodiversity, transportation, excessive pollution, pollinator decline, food waste, GMOs, tasteless food, low nutritional value, food security and more. By the year 2050, the percentage of people living in urban areas is expected to increase to nearly 70 percent. The time has come to find solutions to avoid a future food blackout. We need to find new methods to keep food production closer to home. Permaculture, sustainable and self-sufficient agriculture ecosystems, and soilless farming have emerged as possible solutions.

The team at myfood believes every individual in both urban and suburban areas should be able to produce his or her own food locally. Unoccupied urban zones or buildings, rooftops and offices are now turning into growing spaces thanks to new urban agricultural growing techniques. We may never meet the demand, but the gap is being reduced and we are bringing people closer to nature.

360: How does this connect to the workplace?

MU: According to Terrapin Bright Green , 10 percent of absenteeism can be attributed to the fact that employees are disconnected from nature. There is a what we call a big “green disconnect.” People in cities and offices have fewer interactions with nature and almost none with food production. With an urban garden in the workplace, we’ve found people come to work less stressed and with more joy. We believe this can result in improved productivity in the workplace.

Horticultural therapy is a process in which plants and gardening activities are used to improve the body, mind and spirit of those people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Horticultural therapy is currently being used in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, disability services, skilled nursing facilities and a range of community settings including people’s homes and community gardens. One main factor is that amongst the five senses, touch is the one that has the strongest ability to reconnect people to the present moment. When gardening, you become fully connected to the present moment, thus cutting off negative thoughts.

360: Where is this idea of “office agriculture” being introduced?

MU: Disruptive initiatives toward urban agriculture in the office are not emerging from small green startups, but from global organizations like Google, Microsoft, Ebay and Paypal. These tech companies are illuminating the path to some of the best methods that bridge urban agriculture with corporate social responsibility. Let me share a few examples:

During the annual Association for Vertical Farming (AVF) summit in Amsterdam, myfood researchers met with the director of urban farming at the Compass Group. The Compass Group contracts with Microsoft to manage its farming projects. They shared insight into the quiet, green revolution growing in the middle of Microsoft’s Café 34. Under plasma lights, lettuce thrives in hydroponic towers. Meanwhile, microgreens are cultivated in a cooler behind the organic salad bar. In Microsoft’s urban farming experiment, microgreens are used as a topping on pizzas and other dishes served at the café. They’re also often the finishing touches to entrees served in the adjacent restaurant.

Microsoft is not alone. Google’s campus includes many gardens, and their Farm to Table program looks for ways to educate people about the food industry. One highlight is a shipping container at the Googleplex called the Leafy Green Machine . And, at eBay’s corporate headquarters in San Jose, California, employees can take a break from their computer screens and get their hands dirty by working at the campus vegetable garden. The program started in 2013 as an initiative of the local eBay Green Team, a group of eBay employees committed to making their worldwide operations, campuses, and communities more sustainable. The Green Team partnered with StartOrganic, a Bay-area vegetable garden services company, to install the garden’s raised beds and organize educational programming for employees.

360: This movement goes beyond organizations too. Tell us about how some governments are getting involved?

MU: Beginning in 2016, the city of Paris kicked off a major initiative called “ParisCulteurs” with the objective to connect urban agriculture projects with available rooftops. Twenty-five companies and agencies such as RIVP, the public housing agency of the Paris region, soon volunteered to participate in the project. They offered their unused rooftop space to welcome sustainable initiatives, biodiversity and involve their employees in gardening. We should soon see productive greenhouses topping the architecture of the French capital. Myfood has recently installed greenhouses for restaurants, hotels, schools and retirement homes in addition to companies.

360: How do you work with companies to get people closer to producing their own food while at work?

MU: We want to make food easy to grow. We also know people want fresh, organic, nutritious food that tastes good. We’re able to do that by helping companies install freestanding vertical gardens and smart greenhouses. We believe in clean, local and environmentally friendly agriculture, food accessibility for all, reconnecting with nature and improving wellbeing. Myfood makes it simple for organizations to achieve food autonomy in a small footprint.

For more information about myfood visit their [website](#).

-
1. “The Economics of Biophilia, Why Designing with Nature in Mind Makes Financial Sense.” Browning, W. D., et al, Terrapin Bright Green (2012).
 2. “Avoid Employee Burnout — Working to Disconnect.” Shirley Engelmeier, InclusionINC White Paper, 2016.
 3. “Horticultural Therapy.” Sydney Park Brown, et al, University of Florida, IFAS Extension, 2011.
 4. “How does your garden grow? Microsoft finds success, sustainability in urban farming experiment.” Aimee Riordan, Microsoft Features.
 5. “These Google Food employees are using high-tech, dirt-free shipping containers to grow organic herbs.” Julie Bort, Business Insider Singapore, 2016. And, “How Google Is Growing Its Own Food.” Leo Lutero, PSFK, 2016.
 6. “eBay/PayPal Garden.” Campus Farmers. And, “The Rise of Company Gardens.” Kim Severson, The New York Times, 2010.

© 1996 - 2019 Steelcase Inc. is the global leader in office furniture, interior architecture and space solutions for offices, hospitals and classrooms. Our furniture is inspired by innovative research in workspace design.