Wellbeing

Building Wellbeing into the Workplace

A chair that provides ergonomic benefits to people of various sizes and working in different postures adds to physical wellbeing.

Read 21 minutes

Organizational wellbeing made tangible: space, furniture and tools designed to nurture individual wellbeing.

Companies are pursuing organizational wellbeing with an enthusiasm never seen before. It seems the right thing to do for employees, plus there's the potential for lower absenteeism and fewer medical claims.

Substantial cost savings are at stake, too. For example, thanks in part to the company's wellbeing Efforts, Steelcase health insurance premiums in 2013 will increase about 3%, less than half the 7.5% increase estimated for the year by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Yet at Steelcase, wellbeing is about much more than cost reduction. "Most companies are interested in wellbeing, but mostly as the potential for lower insurance premiums. Beyond that, they think it's fluff. As a finance guy, I can tell you that our wellbeing strategy has paid off in terms of organizational performance," says Dave Sylvester, CFO.

The company takes a two- part approach to wellbeing. First, wellbeing is being woven into the culture of the organization, through multiple activities led by both management and employees.

Second, Steelcase is creating products and environments that actually help improve the wellbeing of workers. In other words, wellbeing is being made tangible through workspace.

"This isn't simply about work environments with better ergonomics or more comfort. We believe that the workplace can be a place where people actually leave healthier than when they arrive in the morning."

NANCY HICKEY | Senior Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer

DEFINING WELLBEING

What exactly is wellbeing? “For a lot of companies, it means ergonomics,” says Catherine Gall, Paris-based Research Director for Steelcase WorkSpace Futures, who leads an ongoing investigation of workplace cultures across a dozen different countries.

“Wellbeing actually involves many aspects of organizational culture, from making sure people understand what their job is and having a sense of purpose, to providing the right space, tools and resources to be successful. Research shows that successful organizations support their employees with a holistic approach to mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.”

That support has become trickier as knowledge work has evolved. Thanks to new technology and a global marketplace, work is more project-based, much faster-paced and often a 24/7 endeavor.

A workplace that offers a palette of place, posture and presence helps boost wellbeing.

High stress levels are endemic to knowledge work today. “We communicate and collaborate constantly. It’s hard to unplug. But there are times when you need a place free of distractions to focus on a task, have a quiet conversation or some personal down time. People need the ability to amp up or down and that often means a change of scenery,” says Gall.

“Whether it’s individual work, working in pairs, or working with a group, we know that people perform best when they can determine where and how they work. The best place at ten o’clock might not be the right one for a different project at ten-thirty. Plus, your workstyle is often different from your colleague’s.”

A culture of wellbeing also can help increase worker creativity. People who are well supported and more in control of where and how they work, feel safer and more engaged. This encourages engagement and entrepreneurial effort.

THE BEST PLACE FOR WORK OFFERS A PALETTE OF PLACE, POSTURE AND PRESENCE

The solution Steelcase developed is the best place strategy, which includes palette of place, a menu of different workspace choices for different work modes, and palette of posture, support for the various postures, from a stand-up meeting to seated task work, collaboration, etc. Changing postures is physically energizing, mentally stimulating and helps people stay refreshed and engaged. The third element is palette of presence, support for the different ways people communicate and share information, such as audio and video conferencing. Support for different forms of presence augments collegial interaction, whether people work side by side or a continent apart.

“Whatever work you’re doing, there’s a preferred workspace that gives people choice and control over how and where they work and provides the support they need in terms of space, furniture, technology and tools,” says Gall.

“When you have the best place to do your job, it helps you to be more efficient, less stressed, and more satisfied with your job. That’s a real boost to wellbeing.”

The company is implementing its best place strategy in a series of innovative new work environments. First was the WorkCafé, a unique blend of workplace, coffee shop, dining area and social hub designed for knowledge work’s ever-changing demands from individual work to meeting with colleagues, learning, socializing and meals. The essential activities of a knowledge worker’s day supported by a palette of place options.

Cherie Johnson, Design Manager at Steelcase and part of the team that developed the WorkCafé, says it was envisioned as a resource for mind, body and spirit. “Food nourishes the body, but so does socializing with others. You can refresh the spirit by finding a place of respite or a place for quiet contemplation, amping up or down. People use different kinds of spaces to nourish the mind —intellectually stimulating spaces, places to connect with others, enclosed meeting spaces, videoconferencing settings, and other spaces that adjust to their needs.”

WorkCafé also supports face time, in the best sense. “More people are hoteling, working out of unassigned workspaces and less connected to what’s going on in their department or company. Even when we have an assigned desk, we’re more mobile than ever before. As a result, we all need to have face time with others, not to prove we’re working but to reinforce our connections to our colleagues and the company.”

Posture choices include seated and stand-up work areas, seating for casual collaboration, meeting rooms, cafe tables and lounge areas. Palette of presence options support collaboration with distant colleagues via audio, video conference call, high definition television and various means of sharing ideas and information. In the WorkCafé, for example, open and closed meeting rooms provide technology for information sharing in person or through web, video and voice.

The space and furniture options in the WorkCafé reflect the episodic nature of teamwork, says Julie Barnhart Hoffman, Steelcase design researcher. “Just getting up, moving to a new space, being more active is healthier than sitting in one place all day. The interaction with others also helps build trust and the team culture.”

The best place strategy is being applied across the company: throughout Steelcase’s global headquarters, now in the midst of a three-year reconfiguration, in the new Innovation Center opened in 2013, and as part of a planned renovation of Steelcase University, the company’s learning center.

SPACE THAT CONTRIBUTES TO WELLBEING

At the company’s global headquarters, two floors on the east half of the building have been completely redesigned to offer a range of workspaces that nurture wellbeing.

Here the palette of workspaces includes height adjustable desks, fixed height benches, tables, enclosed rooms for individuals and groups, project team areas, lounge spaces and a small on-floor café. Panels are few and rarely over seated height, allowing natural light to fill the space and making it easy for workers to connect and collaborate. The design supports the emotional aspect of collaboration, a process that reinforces a sense of community and belonging to a larger group.

Users can adapt these workspaces to many different uses. A telepresence room can be used for a project team space; a benching work setting supports both individual task work or an impromptu collaboration. This not only makes real estate more usable, it ensures workers have the best place to work at any time.

Posture choices abound, from sitting and standing to perching and reclining. Even taking a stroll is an option at a **Walkstation**, a combination of height adjustable worksurface and low speed treadmill. Employees walk at a comfortable two miles an hour, burn calories, feel healthier and more energized while they get work done that's normally done seated.

Simplifying technology and making it easy for people to get together and share information make work more efficient. People are less stressed, more comfortable and in control.

Videoconferencing, phone conferences, and wi-fi are supported throughout the space, of course, but the palette of presence also includes support for presenting information and ideas, the core of knowledge work. Several media:scape collaborative settings make sharing information easy. Plug in a digital device, press the puck and share content with colleagues in-house or connected via HD videoconferencing. "Simplifying technology and making it easy for people to get together and share information make work more efficient. People are less stressed, more comfortable and in control," says Hoffman.

The Best Place
Steelcase's Best Place strategy gives workers choice and control over the places they work, the postures they use, and the various forms of presence – in person or virtual- they engage in to get work done.

Teamwork Rules
As knowledge work becomes increasing group work, teams need places for collaboration with colleagues on site and in remote locations. A media:scape collaborative setting makes it easy for groups to share ideas and information in person and via real-time web, video and voice.

Everyone needs privacy, so enclosed huddle spaces and a quiet zone called the library provide get-away spaces. When people need more social interaction, a café on each floor encourages connecting with colleagues. It's also a place to get work done at tables, booths and some small collaboration spaces that provide a coffee shop feel without leaving the floor.

When one of the floors first opened, CFO Sylvester told the staff they could work anywhere, including off site. “At first they weren’t sure they believed me. So they tested it, and it got quiet here for a couple of weeks. But they all came back . The reason is the best place strategy: their colleagues are here, the best technology is here and they’re most productive here.

“The overall effect is that when people have a work environment based on best place, they’re better able to negotiate a work-life balance. So besides the obvious physical benefits of more daylight, a choice in workspaces, good comfort and support, etc., there’s improved emotional wellbeing just from having better control of the fusion of work and life.”

ADAPTING TO USERS

Choice and control are found throughout the work environment’s furniture and tools. A chair that provides ergonomic benefits to people of various sizes and working in different postures adds to physical wellbeing. But knowledge work, since it’s mobile and collaborative, requires other adaptive tools to support worker health and comfort. Steelcase design researchers call this workplace authenticity: space that allows people to behave naturally and thus encourages them to be themselves with others.

Workspaces at the global headquarters building include adjustable height worksurfaces that accommodate each user’s height and posture. Adjustable monitor arms position flat screens at the preferred height and angle, helping people avoid fatigue and aching muscles and making it easier to share information. A variety of spaces support collaboration while standing, seated, perched on stools or reclining in lounge chairs.

Open design, various workspaces, and flexibility built into the furniture and tools give employees choice, control and support. It’s a combination that surprises visitors, says Sylvester. “When other companies tour our space, they always ask, ‘Can you prove this is a better model. Are people in fact more productive?’ My response is simple. ‘We’re using a fraction of the space we used before for the same number of people, employees have much greater control of where and how they work, and our post-occupancy surveys are much better than ever. So you tell me: Do you think they’re more productive?’ And everyone nods their heads.”

AN INCREASE IN HEALTH BENEFITS

Hickey, the senior VP, says the company has enough measurable and anecdotal evidence to show that the Steelcase culture is changing and that employee wellbeing is improving. “Our health insurance premiums are down, but there are other measures, too. For example, about 16% of our employees smoke, which is below the national average of about 20%. Our wellbeing experiments (see sidebar on previous page) get great participation and people are talking about them and sharing what they’ve learned.”

“Our approach to wellbeing is starting to deliver some results. We don’t have all the answers, but we think our approach can work for others, too,” says Hickey.

“Wellbeing isn’t a new idea for us, but how we approach it is. We’re building with wellbeing, making it part of the culture of our company and the workplaces we design. It’s an approach that’s making a difference for both our employees and the company today, and will continue to do so for years to come.”

CHALLENGING CONVENTION, CHANGING CULTURE

Culture change at Steelcase received a boost from a research and development program created by an internal cross- functional group, the Wellbeing@Work Experience Team, and IDEO, a longtime collaborator with Steelcase. Based on interviews with employees, observations and analysis of wellness activities, the group developed a series of experiments to further embed wellbeing into daily work life. Each experiment was designed to build awareness of different aspects of wellbeing, from nutrition and exercise to community building and employee engagement. A few of these experiments:

Breakfast at work — Self-prep omelet stations were set up in a building lobby and employees cooked ingredients with an assist from cafeteria chefs. Make Your Own Omelet Day created widespread in-house buzz and a call for more such events.

Walking game—250 employees accepted a pedometer to count their steps: 2 million strides over 36 hours. The idea was to get people moving, help them meet colleagues and build a feeling of community. This friendly competition became a way for employees to meet people they might never see otherwise. As one employee said, “Now everyone says hello to me, even if I don’t know them.”

Healthier home meals—Healthy ingredients for a home cooked meal were set up at prep stations near the cafeteria. Employees chopped and sautéed their way to a nutritious, take-home dinner instead of a less healthy drive-through meal. “Dinner went from bag to table in 15 minutes,” one employee said.

Another well received culture-changing tactic is Curious Minds, a series of lectures that offer inspiration on wide ranging topics such as personal wellness, elder care and life coaching. Business-related talks are less frequent but contribute to the overall goal for the talks to convey information and generate conversation.

To feed the buzz, an internal web site shared employee ideas and comments. New lunch options at Steelcase University drove more conversation. Chalkboards mounted in stairwells posed questions to engage employees: What’s on your bucket list? What are the top 100 ways to make a difference? (tied to the company’s 100th anniversary). Employees soon posed their own questions.

“No single solution will work for everyone. Some employees are setting up and running their own classes in our fitness room —yoga, pilates, kettle bell exercise classes, biking and running clubs. No mandate can make these things happen and it’s more effective when people do it for themselves,” says Karleen Stephens, Health and Safety manager.

“We’re working to get people learning and talking about wellbeing, sharing their experiences and knowledge, building community around the subject. We provide good content for the conversation, engage with employees and involve them in the process. Together we build the organizational change we want.”

WELLBEING AND STEELCASE — A LONG AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

Steelcase’s decision to create products and environments that help improve the wellbeing of people at work was not a recent one. The company has a history of considering wellbeing as part of the office environment. From the company’s first products—metal furniture to help reduce fire hazards in the office—to the introduction of ergonomic seating in the 1970s and workplaces today where people leave healthier than when they arrived, Steelcase has worked to improve the health and wellbeing of knowledge workers.

Another tradition: the company’s concern for the wellbeing of its employees. In the late 70s, long before others, the company began offering mental health services for employees and families through a confidential counseling and referral service. At about the same time they initiated a service to help employees find quality day care. Concern for the health of the global environment has been a company priority for many decades. The wellbeing tradition is broad and deep, says Karleen Stephens, manager of health & safety and disability management. “It a long road, a legacy and an accumulated knowledge base that’s allowed us to develop products and workplaces specifically designed to nurture employee wellbeing.”

May 2013

Featured Products
