

Bold Strokes are Only the Starting Point

A workplace that nurtures our physical and emotional wellbeing is increasingly important in a world where technology keeps us constantly connected, always on the clock.

In workplaces designed for wellbeing, every detail counts. Architecture that connects us with nature and natural light, open offices that facilitate communication with colleagues and other overarching strategies provide the framework for our work environment, but it's in the details where a workplace becomes our work home.

Smaller-scale choices, such as how intuitive our workplace is to use, how well furniture adapts to a diverse workforce, the materials, colors and even the shape of chair cushions have dramatic effects on our wellbeing.

A workplace that nurtures our physical and emotional wellbeing is increasingly important in a world where technology keeps us constantly connected, always on the clock. Our time has become less our own and harder to control. Less time to unplug and decompress means fewer ways to find separation in our professional and personal lives. Stressed out has become the new default work mode.

Investing so much of our lives in work, we look to the work environment to help us find a sense of balance and even solace, and here the details play a vital role.

How form, color, materials and intuitive user interfaces influence wellbeing are a hot topic now, she says, "and set to get much hotter. It will become one of those 'must' considerations for interior designers, space planners and architects." These design elements are directly related to three of the six dimensions for wellbeing identified by Steelcase: authenticity, mindfulness, and vitality.

The spaces we work in and the products we touch and interact with can lift our mood, make us less stressed, more stimulated. They can inspire, intrigue and fascinate.

SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTICITY

Workplaces have such a strong affect on wellbeing because we interact with workspaces and tools so closely. Whether it's a well-thumbed smartphone, favorite chair or quiet place to retreat, we form relationships with these products and places, and transpose these emotions onto the brand and the company responsible for them.

“These design elements help a space or a product resonate with a person. We get the sense that the company understands us, how we live, what we like and need and desire. Companies want to build that desire into the products at all levels, from the surface to the deep functionality,” says Redshaw. For example, textures and materials can be antidotes to the hard, cold surfaces of the technology we deal with all day long. Real wood components and natural fabrics convey authenticity. They represent “familiar patterns and materials from nature that are reassuring to us. They give us a feeling of being connected and grounded and remind us that everything isn’t digital and virtual,” says Redshaw.

Authenticity also means being able to express ourselves honestly, to nurture relationships with others in positive interactions. A nearby private enclave allows us to have confidential discussions that build relationships, just as the comfort and contours of a side dining chair evoke a more residential feel and encourage colleagues to sit down and communicate face to face.

“Wellbeing is part of our job as designers, to use materials, color and textures to promote a happier, healthier environment. It’s important that spaces, from our very first impression, are inviting, even transforming,” says Kimberle Frost, a designer and vice president at Designtex, a Steelcase company providing textiles and wall coverings.

PLACES THAT ENGAGE

We’re drawn to places based on emotional responses. A coffee shop with the great aromas, cozy tables and a nice vibe is an inviting place for chatting over espresso. But as a workspace, it disappoints. There’s too much noise, too little privacy and chairs are too hard for working comfortably. Collaboration spaces in many companies are intended to duplicate this coffee shop mystique, but similarly fail in the details.

“People spend a lot of time in these spaces working alone or collaborating, yet the furniture often has poor back support, a lack of privacy and little support for personal belongings. It’s hard to be fully engaged in work in these places,” says Constance Kocher, Steelcase marketing manager for the B-Free Lounge, a line of furniture for informal spaces and welcome areas.

The B-Free development team explored how people use soft seating areas and other spaces that support knowledge work. “The feeling of being relaxed, more casual, a place where you can be yourself, are all emotions connected to creativity and a sense of engagement in your work,” says Kocher. We often want a measure of visual privacy but not to be separated from the rest of the office. Researchers call this being alone together: We share the space with others who know we’re working, yet we feel protected and have a sense of our own personal space.

“People look for connection, collaboration and concentration in these spaces. They want to work alone but still have a chance to connect with other people,” says Bryony Gaschy, Steelcase product designer.

In designing new B-Free components, Gaschy included a privacy screen in a semi-transparent fabric that allows just the right level of privacy. Seating and worksurfaces come in stand-up or seated styles. Even the shape of the lounge seat is telling: Sloping armrests and seat backs and a rounded corner seat are physically more comfortable, while the curved forms are more welcoming to the eye.

In Lagunitas™ lounge seating from the Coalesse brand, users can position the back cushions to support either an upright posture or a more relaxed, reclined posture. Working alone or with others, sitting at a table or reclined for a conversation, users are comfortably supported.

Our tools are always with us, of course, so the sight of a bag drop next to a chair and a bag stand alongside the worksurface, with power outlets for charging digital tools tell users these are places where we can settle, connect as little or as much as we want, and better engage with our work and coworkers.

Materials signal comfort, too. The B-Free screen fabric is warm and soft. Legs are available in wood (a sign of authenticity) and lend a more residential feel.

Soft, sensual materials provide a more engaging ambience to the workplace.

VITALITY

A variety of workspaces encourages people to move throughout the business day, and physical movement is essential to vitality. In fact, workers need a palette of workspaces that allows work while standing, sitting or reclining.

For working in a variety of spaces, a simple, elegant solution is Free Stand, a lightweight table with a worksurface for a mobile device. It folds for storage, but it's also light enough that users can move it around to wherever it's needed.

“Many casual spaces lack functional support for working. With Free Stand you have a sturdy table that swivels 360 degrees and adjusts in height from 20 to 27 inches. It lets you work practically anywhere,” says Karin Gintz, vice president of marketing for Coalesse.

A healthy mix of shared and owned spaces, or “I” and “We” spaces, enhance workers’ ability to change postures and engage with colleagues while seated, standing or in a reclined posture.

Another simple worktool, an adjustable monitor arm, does more than save worksurface real estate. The ability to set a monitor at the precise height and viewing distance reduces eye strain and facilitates more comfortable postures.

Height-adjustable standing desks and worksurfaces with integrated walking treadmills support varying postures and provide a refreshing change of pace.

Vitality is also heightened by sensory stimulation from natural light and views of the outside, but here, too, smaller choices make a big impact. The colors used in a space help define our reactions and evoke emotional, psychological and physical responses. In general, warm colors evoke energy. Cool colors are calming. Neutral shades are often used in workplaces, with pops of color that add an element of surprise.

Green is often chosen for healthcare environments because of its psychological effects. “Green symbolizes health and growth, so it’s often used in hospitals,” says Frost of Designtex. But reactions to colors often vary by geography, culture, history and, of course personal preferences. “One person’s response to red is anger, another’s response is love. Every country has certain color preferences. It’s more important to have options so people can use the materials and colors that will evoke positive emotional responses.”

HEARING THE “WOW”!

How much do these thoughtful details contribute to wellbeing? Frost says Designtex regularly meets with customers to get a collective sense of how people respond to fabrics and products with a particular textile. “In the end, you want products that people look at and touch and use, and say, ‘Wow!’”

Such reactions may be indicative of the performance of a work environment. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, a professor at the University of North Carolina, has explored the effect of positive emotions on physical and mental health. She finds that positive emotions do more than signal wellbeing. They also improve coping and produce wellbeing, not just in the present, pleasant moment but over the long term as well.

“The benefits of positive emotions do not end with changes within individuals,” she writes. “Because one individual’s experience of positive emotion can reverberate through other organizational members and across interpersonal transactions with customers, positive emotions may fuel optimal organizational functioning, helping organizations to thrive and prosper.”

Small choices can have major benefits. From providing smart functionality in worktools and supporting different postures and varying levels of privacy, to selecting fabrics, colors and textures that engender positive emotional responses, these are important choices that further the wellbeing of each person in the work environment.

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