Worker wellbeing is a hot topic and extends beyond measures of personal satisfaction or fulfillment. It’s critical to an organization’s ability to innovate and thrive. In this story, we share new Steelcase research and insights about the factors that create wellbeing, and how workplaces can be intentionally designed to nurture it to drive improved business performance.
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When IBM asked CEOs around the world to identify the most important leadership traits needed today, their answer was resounding: collaborative, communicative, creative and flexible. CEOs are seeking “employees with the ability to constantly reinvent themselves. These employees are comfortable with change; they learn as they go, often from others’ experiences,” notes the study. Driving the need for these skills is the complexity of problems that organizations face today, and the demand for innovation that is no longer the turf of elite, top brands. Innovation is critical to drive bottom line results.

But here’s the new dilemma that CEOs face: collaboration, communication, creativity and flexibility are a set of behaviors that require leadership skills, metrics and mindsets that are different from what many business leaders have learned in the past. For decades, business schools churned out young leaders who were well trained in areas such as logistics, supply chain management, analysis and the like. Only recently are organizations recognizing that those business fundamentals aren’t enough on their own. They also need to create an environment and culture in which the necessary new behaviors can thrive.

3 Introduction
6 Building a Culture of Wellbeing by James P. Hackett, CEO, Steelcase Inc.
7 Holistic View: Body, Mind, Environment
11 Does Your Work Environment Undermine Wellbeing?
13 Six Dimensions of Wellbeing in the Workplace
27 Thought Starters: Application Concepts
43 Gensler: Designing for Wellbeing
45 How to Make Work Healthier: Move It
Fostering creativity and innovation requires a new strategy that might take some business leaders by surprise—a rigorous focus on organizational and employee wellbeing. "The most successful organizations are now turning their attention to employee wellbeing in a way to gain emotional, financial and competitive advantages," notes Tom Rath, Gallup’s leader of workplace research and co-author of the bestselling book "Wellbeing."

Rath and other leading thinkers on the topic point out that employee wellbeing is a distinctly different notion than "wellness," which focuses narrowly on physical health and is currently the primary area where businesses turn their attention. In the United States, wellness programs have been driven by the need to control health care costs commonly borne by the employer. In other countries around the world, businesses and governments are also seeking to control the rising economic costs of physical and mental illness in the workforce.

An Assault on Wellbeing

Organizations have strong reasons to be preoccupied with physical wellness, given its clear connection to costs. Worldwide, rates of heart and lung disease, diabetes and obesity are rising sharply. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) found Mexico has a 32.8 percent adult obesity rate, surpassing the U.S. at 31.8 percent. There are now about 1.5 billion overweight people in the world, and at least 25 percent of them are in China, according to the Duke University Global Health Institute. In Mexico, Type 2 diabetes is the leading cause of adult deaths, says a 2011 study by the World Economic Forum and Harvard School of Public Health.

At the same time that declining physical health poses a growing risk for employers, the ubiquity of technologies is driving people to multitask like never before, leading to cognitive overload. According to author, researcher and Harvard educator Shawn Achor, our senses receive 11 million bits of information every second, but the conscious brain can effectively process only 40 bits of information. Switching from one task to another makes it difficult to tune out distractions and can cause mental blocks that reduce a person’s productive time by as much as 40 percent, according to research reported by the American Psychological Association.

In addition to cognitive costs, stress is a strong contributor to the explosion of "developed nation" diseases throughout the world. Rapid changes in the work people do, the tools and the technology they use have made work more complex, demanding and stressful. "How fast" and "how much" have taken on new dimensions, and work easily blends into life away from the workplace. These factors are all powerful catalysts for employee burnout and other signs of ill-being, making wellbeing a form of risk management.

"The most successful organizations are now turning their attention to employee wellbeing as a way to gain emotional, financial and competitive advantage."

Tom Rath

In the United Kingdom, research by the Centre for Mental Health puts the costs of mental health-related presenteeism (at work physically but unproductive mentally) at £15 billion per year—almost twice the cost of absence. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work cites stress as a factor in at least half of all lost working days. Stress in the workplace is now emerging in the developing world, too, according to a 2011 report in La Monde newspaper: "Countries from Asia and the southern hemisphere are now carefully—and officially—looking at the psycho-social problems and economic consequences linked to work-induced stress."

To understand the positive drivers of wellbeing, Steelcase WorkSpace Futures researchers in Europe, North America and Asia recently delved deeply into the topic, exploring the role of the physical workplace in shaping employee behavior to foster wellbeing. After synthesizing years of Steelcase primary research and investigating globally diverse notions of wellbeing, the team came to a distinct conclusion: Wellbeing is systemic and holistic, integrating many dimensions, including the physical, cognitive and psychological needs of people. The team went on to conclude that the places where people come together to work can be designed to have a positive impact on a variety of dimensions of worker wellbeing.

"Bad health outcomes can lead to poor business outcomes in regard to absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents and increased costs, so there’s been significant focus on prevention," says Beatriz Arantes, a Steelcase researcher who co-led a recent exploration of worker wellbeing. At the same time, Arantes says, there’s a growing awareness that being focused on wellbeing as a defensive measure has limited impact as a business strategy.

"Physical wellness is a critically important area of concern," notes Nicholas de Boinoist, who collaborated with Arantes and others in Steelcase’s exploration. "But focusing on just physical wellness can actually be detrimental to people’s overall wellbeing. At an organizational level, a myopic attention to physical wellness only misses the bigger business opportunity: Employee wellbeing is a critical pathway to achieving the creativity and innovation that organizations require to be successful today."

And progressive employers are getting the message. "Today we’re seeing a surge of interest in wellbeing with some organizations in a more proactive sense," notes Arantes. "Companies are interested in driving greater innovation. They’re betting they can reap positive results with a more creative, engaged and innovative workforce. In a knowledge-based, global economy, investing in wellbeing is completely in the interest of doing business."

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## Wellbeing: A Bottom Line Issue

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<th></th>
<th>Lost Time</th>
<th>Cognitive Overload</th>
<th>Global Obesity</th>
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<tr>
<td>£15.1 Billion</td>
<td>£9.4 Billion</td>
<td>Our senses receive 11M bits of information every second, but the conscious brain can effectively process only 40 bits of information.</td>
<td>16–25%</td>
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<td>£15.1 Billion</td>
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<td>Source: World Health Organization</td>
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<td>£15.1 Billion</td>
<td>£9.4 Billion</td>
<td>Source: The Happiness Advantage, Shawn Achor</td>
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<td>£15.1 Billion</td>
<td>£9.4 Billion</td>
<td>Bottom line: Mental blocks to creativity result in less innovation, hindering organizational competitiveness and growth.</td>
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I was fortunate that, fairly early in my career, I be-
came candid with myself about the connection
between physical health and my ability to do
my job well. Based on some good advice from my
brother, who is a doctor, I realized that I needed to
manage my health as intentionally as I managed my
work. I also gained insight that health isn’t just phys-
ical. Our bodies are a complex system of processes
that have a circular way of affecting each other.

Building a Culture of Wellbeing

I realized back then that wellbeing is about achiev-
ning harmony between your physical, emotional and
cognitive self, and so I set some goals and became
very intentional about achieving that balance.

When I became CEO of Steelcase, I had a strong
linking that what was true for me personally was also
true in a larger context: that the wellbeing of in-
dividuals and the wellbeing of the organization they
work for are inseparable. The better off employees
are in terms of their personal wellbeing, the better
off the company can be—in terms of fiscal fitness,
agility and capabilities for innovation and growth.

By personal wellbeing, I mean the “whole” person
at work—mind, body and soul—and I realized that
the physical workplace could be a powerful agent
in providing an environment in which people can
thrive, which will in turn allow us to build the kind
of resilient and agile organization we wanted to be.

Since then, work has become even more complex
and intense for nearly everyone. Stress-induced
issues—the extreme opposite of wellbeing—is a risk
factor that leaders can and must proactive-
ly manage, within themselves and within their
organizations. People who are overly stressed, over-
worked and anxiety-plagued can’t frame challenges
in an optimistic way and move things forward. In
contrast, people who feel supported are unbound-
ed in what they can accomplish and in the deep
personal satisfaction that they gain from their work.

Our research over the past decade has shown us
that a workplace provides all the bandwidth—all
the technology connections, tools and resources
that people need for their tasks and projects—it
can reduce friction and amplify human capabilities.
It can eliminate the restraints, irritants and work-
around that slow people down and cause stress
unnecessarily. As we continue to research and learn,
these things become identifiable and solvable. This
is what drove our decision to launch a new research
project focused specifically on worker and work-
place wellbeing. We wanted to look closely at what
the building blocks are and how the workplace can
be a source of wellbeing day-to-day. And we con-
trive to learn about the power of place in providing
an environment that serves to provide the harmo-
ny that I described earlier.

I have been fortunate in my career to have some
great leaders as my mentors. One of the many in-
sights I gained from Bob Pew, who was our CEO
for decades before me, was that humans need
enrichment, at work as well as away from work.
If you’re going to make an investment in a facility,
make sure it’s designed with an understanding of
what really matters to people—their psychological
as well as physical needs. That’s stayed with me, and
it’s fundamental to how we are at Steelcase and what
we do.

A bond is formed when a person joins a company.
A workplace designed with employees’ wellbeing in
mind can be a source of pride as well as a source
of inspiration to achieve the purpose that drives the
organizations reason for being. It can be a place
that makes people feel good about being part of
the enterprise; a place that they want to show family
and friends, a place that is a visual representation
of what their company stands for. It is a place that
people at work is critical for success. It’s that sim-
ple. And that powerful.

We began in what I believed was the right way.
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the enterprise; a place that they want to show family
and friends, a place that is a visual representation
of what their company stands for.

It has been my experience as CEO of Steelcase for
the past 19 years, that work is inherently a social
endeavor, and that when you understand the pur-
pose and emotional health of great companies is
centered around people, you can take performance
to a much higher level. Creating places that provide for the wellbeing of
people at work is critical for success. It’s that sim-
ple. And that powerful.

When businesses turn their attention to the assault
on their employees’ wellbeing, it’s not surprising
they often begin with physical health and ergonom-
ic. In addition to the focus on employee health
factors such as obesity, smoking cessation and
exercise, many organizations are also focused on
workplace ergonomics to prevent injury.

The ascent of ergonomics in the 1980s resulted in
deep understandings of biomechanics and the im-
portance of providing posture support for workers.
Whereas in the 1980s the focus was on maintain-
ing a static, neutral posture for office workers using
desktop computers, Steelcase breakthrough re-
search established the importance of dynamic
support that mimicked the movement of the spine
and set a new industry standard for ergonomic
seating.

Steelcase researchers want on to study the im-
portance of movement, and began encouraging
workers to intersperse standing and walking with
sitting throughout the day. Recent studies per-
formed by Marc T. Hamilton (2007), Pedersen
(2009) and Stephens (2010) have shed new light on
the relationship between long periods of sed-
entary behavior and pervasive health problems
such as weight gain, metabolic syndrome and di-
abetes. Prolonged static sitting is now known to
be physically demanding in its own way—disrupt-
ing metabolic functions and weakening the body’s
defenses. Even working out in a gym after sitting
all day won’t reverse its negative affects.

Meanwhile, technology devices are tempting peo-
ple to sit even longer in chairs that were designed
before tablets and other handheld devices came into
the office mainstream. This is leading to new work pos-
tures, some of which are leading to more pain.

“As a result of our work, we define
wellbeing as sustaining a healthy
physical and mental state over time,
in a supportive material and social
environment.”
“Ergonomic issues should always be top of mind for employers,” says Kevin Butler, a senior ergonomist at Steelcase. “Upper-extremity issues, especially pain in the neck and shoulders, are becoming more common all the time as a result of people constantly peering down at their handheld devices.”

Butler points out the need for workplaces to be designed for a palette of postures—a variety of work settings where people can choose to sit, stand, walk, perch or even squat. But Butler warns that not all postures are created equal.

“Some postures are inherently bad for the body and should not be encouraged,” he notes. “I’ve seen workplaces that are designed to be fun, creative and have a great vibe, but sometimes they have terrible ergonomics. That’s not a solution that’s either bad ergonomics should always be top of mind for firms, agree: Wellbeing is multifaceted. Unfortunately, your culture, your HR strategies and the environment you need to consider. It’s not just a fitness center (For more on physical wellbeing in the workplace, see pg. 45.)

Researchers and designers at Gensler, a leading global architecture, design, planning and consulting firm, also find that “We’re not just concerned with physical health. Wellbeing is also not the same thing as happiness, which is a transitory emotion that comes and goes. As a result of our work, we define wellbeing as sustaining a healthy physical and mental state over time, in a supportive material and social environment.”

Feeling Good at Work

Gallop’s global wellbeing study explored a powerful body/mind connection: engagement. Being disengaged, they found, is a leading indicator for a subsequent diagnosis of depression, as well as an increase in total cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Perhaps even more alarming for businesses is that Gallop found more that two-thirds of workers around the world are simply waiting for the workday to come to an end; they become increasingly happier the closer they get to leaving work. So not only are disengaged workers not as productive, they’re likely to cost an organization more because of the physical and mental health issues associated with stress. Everyday stressors can create negative emotions that put humans in a constant state of being on guard, conditioned for a “fight or flight” response. Ultimately, cortisol and other hormones that are released during stress tire and deteriorate the body and mind.

“Western culture typically views the mind, the body and the environment separately, but science is showing that they are intricately linked, as Eastern cultures have long known,” says Arantes. “This means that wellbeing is more than ‘wellness,’ which is just concerned with physical health. Wellbeing is also not the same thing as happiness, which is a transitory emotion that comes and goes. As a result of our work, we define wellbeing as sustaining a healthy physical and mental state over time, in a supportive material and social environment.”

The Mind/Body Connection

As organizations face increasingly complex problems, they are recognizing that wellbeing is multifaceted and seeing a link between body and mind. Today scientists are studying the interdependence of our physical and mental states, and how our senses impact cognition.

Researchers are finding that our sense of touch—whether a surface is hard or soft, rough or smooth, for example—can impact how we perceive an unrelated interpersonal interaction. Another factor that significantly impacts cognitive wellbeing is our sense of hearing. It can have undesirable physiological, psychological and behavioral effects, according to Julian Treasure, chairman of a United Kingdom-based consultancy, The Sound Agency. Background noise in the workplace has been found to increase employees’ stress hormone levels and undermine short-term memory, reading comprehension and willingness to engage with others, he says.

In workplaces, irritating noise can come from all kinds of sources: air conditioning, obnoxious ring tones, traffic, nearby construction, “pink noise” sound-masking and—especially—from other people’s voices.

“Cognitively, there is plenty of research now that shows that in loud offices in particular the most destructive sound of all is other people’s conversations,” says Treasure.

Noisy environments tend to only get worse over time, because people start speaking louder as it gets noisier around them (the Lombard effect). As a result of too much noise in the workplace, health and productivity can suffer—the latter by as much as 66 percent, according to one study that Treasure cites.

At the same time, he says, open-plan environments can be very good for many types of work. “It’s one way of working, but it’s not the only way. We need to give people spaces that match what they need to do.” And, conversely, the sounds of silence in the workplace can be too much of a good thing.

Pin-drop quiet places are intimidating, he says, because you can clearly hear every sound in them. The solution, says Treasure, is a variety of workplace environments, each designed with consciousness of sound for the task and the people using the space. Work environments need to be designed not just for appearances, but for experience in all the senses.

In a time where the term “cognitive overload” has gone mainstream, researchers at The University of California and other institutions are studying how cognitive processes are linked to the body’s interaction with its surroundings. Their work shows how people do better when they can offload cognitive work onto the environment because of limits on attention or memory. At its most basic level, physical environments equipped with whiteboards make it easier for people to offload information by giving them a place to make their work visible. Going further, researchers at Steelcase are exploring how technology-enabled architectural elements and furniture allow the physical environment to take on routine tasks, such as anticipating when to turn on equipment. Being able to offload some functions onto the environment can free up brain capacity to tackle complex problems.

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The Biological Drive of Emotions

Given the vast amount of attention that has been given to physical dimensions of wellbeing, Steelcase researchers decided instead to focus their attention on the aspect of wellbeing at work that many organizations feel uncomfortable talking about—emotion. How people feel has a significant impact on both their health and their work.

“In the simplest sense, work is action—doing something. Emotions prime our bodies and minds for action,” says Arantes. “The link between the mind and the body is emotion. Humans are biological organisms that evolved in nature. Our survival has depended on our ability to interpret situations around us as safe or dangerous, and then react appropriately.”

An important emphasis, she says, is “how biologically driven this is, because our survival as a species has depended on taking appropriate actions that are triggered by our emotions. We’re constantly working organisms that need to be constantly repaired. And when we’re in a negative state of mind, we can’t repair ourselves. While negative emotions are a normal part of life, it’s important that we are appropriate in duration and overbalanced in positive emotions. When people are in environments that support positive emotions, they’re free to be productive, collaborative and creative.”

Shifting to Creative Work

As people’s work changes, their needs change. And as needs change, work environments also need to change to remain supportive. The evolution of offices as places primarily for process work to places for creative work has profound implications for wellbeing. Creative work is all about making connections, being open to new ideas, taking risks and experimenting. Those behaviors are impossible in a stressed state of mind. For creative work to thrive, the workplace needs to be a supportive and positive environment. For creative work, the workplace matters more than ever, and it needs to do more than ever.

“Companies like Zappos and Google have been capitalizing by taking a more emotional approach to wellbeing and promoting their organizations as fun, creative workplaces,” says Arantes. “They are reaping the benefits in their results and also realizing positive employee morale is an added recruitment incentive.”

Most companies, however, still rely mostly on hunches or trial-and-error approaches to workplace wellbeing. A gap in wellbeing research has been in the impact of the work environment beyond ergonomics, air quality and other obvious factors. Lack of access to quiet, private spots for concentrated conversations that people want to be in because it helps them do their best work.

Steelcase’s ongoing research sheds light on what is a viable option for some workers, business leaders understand that it’s important for employees to feel connected to each other and with the purpose of their organization. Coming together in the workplace is what allows them to do that. The key is to create workplaces that are designed to be destinations that people want to be in because it helps them do their best work.

Steelcase’s ongoing research sheds light on what workers need to be creative and productive, and identifies some of the most frequent workplace culprits.

Leading organizations can make a significant impact—on hinder—not their employees’ wellbeing by focusing attention on the physical environment.

With a little effort, people can actually leave work feeling as well, or even better, than when they came in.

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### Does Your Work Environment Undermine Wellbeing?

At a recent roundtable conversation on the topic of about the future of work, PopTech curator Andrew Zoll asked a packed room of people where they do their best work. The answer: not at work. People described great cafés, home offices and libraries that helped them to feel energized, focused and engaged. Only one person in the group praised their company’s recently redesigned office as a place where she felt a sense of purpose and vitality.

This conversation echoes many other discussions that are taking place online and in a variety of forums where people are passionately debating what the best work environment is for actually getting work done. Authors Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson recent book “Remote” suggests people don’t need offices at all. Business leaders disagree. While working remotely is a viable option for some workers, business leaders understand that it’s important for employees to feel connected to each other and with the purpose of their organization.

Getting the basics right

Privacy

95%

95% say they need quiet, private space for confidential conversations

Focus

95%

95% of workers say having access to quiet, private places for concentrated work is important

Getting the basics right

Respite

91%

91% of people say they need casual spaces to re-energize

Privacy

40%

40% say they don’t have them

Focus

41%

41% workers say they don’t have access to quiet spaces

Getting the basics right

Respite

51%

51% of workers report that they don’t have pleasing views

Focus

37%

37% workers lose up to 30 minutes a day dealing with physical discomfort

Respite

91%

91% of people say they need casual spaces to re-energize

Privacy

9%

9% say they need quiet, private space for confidential conversations

Focus

9%

9% say they need having access to quiet, private places for concentrated work is important

Getting the basics right

Respite

91%

91% of people say they need casual spaces to re-energize

### Note

This framework provides a methodology for creating and assessing a workplace designed for an interconnected world. It recognizes that people need to do both individual "I" work and group "We" work. It also breaks the paradigm that all individual spaces should be assigned or "owned" or that all group spaces should be shared, and instead offers the choice to work in a range of spaces that best supports the work that is being done. The range of spaces in an interconnected workplace need to support focused work, collaboration, socializing and learning, and consider the physical, cognitive and psychological needs of people.

The Steelcase team's research synthesis identified six dimensions of wellbeing that can be impacted by the design of the physical environment. The foundational concept that links all six dimensions is what Steelcase refers to as an "interconnected workplace," and which offers employees control and choice over where and how they work.

"To foster wellbeing, employees need to have a variety of work settings that they can choose from," notes de Benoist. "Traditionally workplaces have been designed for efficiency, and sometimes take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. But that doesn't offer employees the ability to choose the right kind of setting for the work they need to do. When they have choices, employees have a sense of control that helps them feel more empowered, engaged and less stressed."

Three key ways to offering this level of choice and control are:

- **Palette of Place**
  An ecosystem of interrelated zones and settings that provide users with a range of spaces that support their modes of work.

- **Palette of Posture**
  A range of solutions that encourage people to sit, stand and move and support the multiple technologies they use.

- **Palette of Presence**
  A range of mixed-presence experiences (physical and virtual) in spaces designed to augment human interaction.

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Optimism is more than just expecting positive outcomes in various domains of life. It is about being on a quest for discovery, eager to try new approaches versus being overly risk averse. It means interpreting and remembering events in a positive light, as well as creating enjoyment in the present and seeing possibilities for the future.

Researchers at the University of California recently found that part of our optimism, self-esteem and sense of mastery (the ability to affect a positive change in life) is genetic. But, they also noted that genes are not destiny and that activities, relationships and environment can have almost as much impact in the equation. Emotions can play a significant role in our tendencies toward optimism. Fear breeds pessimism.

Optimism is critical to the type of work that organizations need today: creativity and innovation. It influences a wide range of behaviors such as seeing the big picture, exploring ideas, being open to others, taking more risks and facing difficult tasks. It also makes people open to change. Understood in this way, optimism has important implications for an organization’s agility and resiliency. Because of this, optimistic employees tend be more productive employees in today’s economy.

“Optimism may be the most important job skill in the 21st century,” notes de Benoist. “Organizations are faced with so much volatility and stress that the people who can rise above fears and anxiety are the ones who can help build a culture that is better able to thrive in our world.”

1 Optimism

FOSTERING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Cultivating optimism in the workplace

Empowering workplaces support continuous experimentation and show the legacy of the brand and organization in positive ways to reinforce progress and possibility. “Workers need to feel a sense of individual influence and control over their environment, versus feeling qualified by standardization and rigidity,” advises de Benoist.

Design Considerations:

1. Allow choice and control over where and how people work.
2. Create spaces that allow personalization and individual customization, instead of tightly enforced workplace standards.
3. Offer settings and affordances that help employees feel supported in their work.
4. Design for transparency, so people can see and be seen, and build trust.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing in the workplace see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).
Mindfulness means balancing the intense pace of life with being fully present in the moment. Today technology presents many opportunities for multitasking, which allows people to be physically present in a meeting, for example, but mentally lost in email.

The focus on mindfulness in business has grown exponentially as organizations recognize that rapid changes in technology, the marketplace and the global playing field have caused volatility, uncertainty, chaos and ambiguity. These realities create stressful conditions for people in organizations and call for a new style of leadership.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, noted psychologist and author of the seminal book “Flow,” relates the notion of flow with his study of happiness and creativity. It’s the antithesis to multitasking and a direct result of mindfulness—i.e., being fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement and enjoyment in what you’re doing.

“Mindfulness is a fusion of the mind and body when you lose the notion of time,” says de Benoist. “And it’s not just something you can achieve alone. People can work together in mindfulness, too, performing like a jazz group, all mindful in the moment of now.”

Cultivating mindfulness in the workplace

“Workers need physical spaces that help them manage the cognitive overload of their daily lives and be fully present in the moment,” notes de Benoist.

Design Considerations:
1. Create spaces that help people connect with others one-on-one and eye-to-eye, and not just through their technology devices.
2. Design areas that allow workers to control their sensory stimulation and choose if they want to amp it up or down.
3. Offer places that are calming, through the materials, textures, colors, lighting and views.
4. Create areas where people can connect with others without distractions or interference.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing in the workplace see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).
Cultivating authenticity in the workplace

“Workers need spaces where they can feel a part of the organization’s culture, while feeling encouraged to express their own ideas and values,” notes Arantes. “Leaders set standards and a tone of authenticity, while customizable work environments and social settings can reinforce the message.”

Design Considerations:
1. Create spaces that help people feel comfortable to express themselves and share their ideas.
2. Incorporate informal, non-constricting environments with a home-like feel.
3. Design areas that help people connect their personal values to the brand values.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing in the workplace see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).

Authenticity

REALLY YOURSELF

In workplaces of the past as popularized by Dilbertville and “Mad Men,” allowing yourself to be vulnerable or show emotion at work was considered unacceptable. With “fight or flight” emotions in high gear, many workers are still accustomed to defending themselves by keeping up a pretense of perfection and expected behaviors, which leads to frustration, resentment and unhealthy behaviors. Wellbeing, in contrast, is cultivated by personal expressiveness—the freedom to be who you are, at work as well as away from work.

Gallup poll data from more than a decade of surveying people has revealed that the most important factor in wellbeing on the job is to have a best friend at work. Relationships anchor people’s commitment to the larger organization. Having close friends and positive interactions can’t happen without trust, which requires authenticity. “Even in Eastern cultures with their legacy of collectiveness versus individualism, the authenticity of self and being able to express that at work is become more important to wellbeing,” says Arantes.

Cultivating authenticity in the workplace

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As work becomes increasingly mobile and global, creating a sense of belonging is a bigger challenge than ever, but certainly not less important,” says Arantes. “Leading organizations make sure their workplaces provide reasons for people to choose to work there by making it easy to collaborate with co-workers and connect to technologies. They put effort into creating an equal sense of community and belonging for mobile and distributed employees, as well as those physically present.”

Design Considerations:
1. Create entrances that are welcoming with visible hosting for people who don’t work there routinely.
2. Provide ample and well-equipped spaces for mobile and resident workers to work individually or in teams.
3. Offer videoconferencing configurations that allow remote participants to see content in the room and on the walls, and to hear everyone equally.
4. Design informal areas for socialization, in person as well as virtually.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing in the workplace see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).

A meaningful life means feeling connected to other people. Social connections at work are sustaining, and feeling useful to others is a powerful way to generate positive emotions.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow positioned belonging at the third level of his famous hierarchy of universal human needs, preempted only by basic physiological needs (food, water, sleep, etc.) and safety/security needs. Numerous studies and experiments have led to the belief that humans are genetically wired to need one another, and Gallup data provides empirical evidence that having close friends and positive interactions at work significantly increases engagement with the organization.

Relationships anchor people’s commitment to an organization, its brand and its purpose. Without meaningful connections to people, organizations can seem anonymous. Because of this, mobility, alternative work strategies and telepresence across geographies must be intentionally crafted so that employees don’t lose their sense of belonging.

“Mobility can be positive because you’re giving people flexibility, and videoconferencing is fast becoming a fact of everyday work, especially for global teams. But it’s important to ensure that people have meaningful connections to others and understand that, wherever they are, they are valued in the organization. Employees need to know they are integral participants in something larger than themselves and others in the organization care about them,” says Arantes.

Cultivating belonging in the workplace
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Mobile workers can easily connect with their peers and feel a sense of belonging. The bench supports a range of user needs, from focused work to collaboration to touch-down tasks.
People need to use their strengths, understand their impact, and see how they contribute to organizational goals. Edward Diener, nicknamed “Dr. Happiness” and a senior scientist for the Gallup Organization, distinguished that the so-called “calling orientation,” in which people are passionate about what they do, is intrinsically the most rewarding.

A sense of purpose helps build a resilient enterprise based on trust and collaboration. It infuses “yes power” throughout an organization, says de Benoist.

“Beliefs are the rituals of the everyday that a community shares,” he notes. “In the best cases, a person’s sense of meaning in life and the purpose of the company are compatible and augment each other. When people around us believe the same things as we do, and work toward similar things in the same space, it creates a sense of harmony in context.”

“Brand isn’t just for the client,” says Arantes. “The brand is also for the people inside the company to have a meaningful understanding of what the brand stands for and be mindful of it in their everyday work.

“Without shared understanding of what you want to accomplish, it’s hard to get people aligned on what their goals are and how to get there. People need meaning in order to know that their work is not going to waste. It’s possible for even a large body of people to move quickly if they’re aligned on the same goal and meaning.”

Cultivating meaning in the workplace

“How we spend our time, doing the right things in the right way, can powerfully impact wellbeing,” says de Benoist. “Spaces that are intentionally designed to help people accomplish meaningful goals can make a tremendous difference in individual performance and overall organizational results.”

**Design Considerations:**

1. Include spaces beyond the lobby that reinforce the brand, purpose, history, and culture of the company.
2. Leverage vertical real estate to make thinking and progress visible.
3. Use technology to display real-time information.
4. Create an ecosystem of spaces that give people choices and empower them to work productively alone or together.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive, and emotional wellbeing in the workplace, see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).
Scientists continue to make breakthrough discoveries about how the mind and body function as an interrelated system. Brain chemistry expert Dr. Candace Pert, a neuroscientist at the U.S. National Institute of Health, wrote in her 1997 book, “Molecules of Emotion,” that receptors and peptides run every system in the human body, creating what she termed a “bodymind’s intelligence.”

Continuing to explore the science of vitality, recent medical studies published in respected journals such as the European Association for the Study of Diabetes and mass media such as The New York Times, have raised awareness of the negative effects of prolonged sitting. Dr. James A. Levine of the Mayo Clinic, a leading researcher in the field of inactivity studies, has noted an explosion of research in this area “because the health care cost implications are so enormous.”

The risks are mental as well as physical, since muscle inactivity produces a series of harmful metabolic effects including a slowdown of the flow of nutrients to the brain, affecting alertness.

Clearly, engaging the body in movement is essential for supporting physical and mental vigor at work. Movement is the body language of ideas,” says de Benoist. “Taking different postures stimulates the mind, and healthy environments encourage people to move, eat well and exercise as healthy practices.”

In addition, sensory experiences in work environments are important, too. Using our senses and nervous system, we interact constantly within the context of spatial environments, processing touch, light and sound and other stimuli that influence mental and physical states. Because stimuli have direct and often immediately perceptible positive or negative consequences, as humans we naturally want choice and control of our environments, seeking out the places that “feel good” to us.

“When you get to the workplace, you need the tools and environments that are going to support you, whether it’s to work alone or have a collaborative session or eat a meal in a pleasant place or go outdoors,” says Arantes. “Providing a palette of places that supports frequent movement is fundamental for sustaining vitality.”

Cultivating vitality in the workplace

How we experience a place affects our actions. Investments in the workplace can completely change employees’ attitudes and behaviors, creating a new spatial vibe that boosts people’s motivation and performance within a relatively short time.

Design Considerations:

1. Design areas that give people choices for controlling the level of sensory stimulation around them.

2. Provide easily adjustable furniture to fit a range of sizes, needs and preferences and to promote movement throughout the day.

3. Include cafés with healthy food choices and displays.

4. Bring nature in with daylight, views, ventilation, patios, etc.

5. Support active, healthy lifestyles with centrally located stairways, outdoor walking paths, bicycle racks, etc.

For application ideas designed to support physical, cognitive and emotional well-being in the workplace see the Wellbeing Thoughtstarters (pg 27–42).
Amplifying People’s Performance

IBM’s CEO Study notes that the move toward a more collaborative, communicative, creative, flexible, and ultimately more innovative organization is not something they are delegating to HR. They see the challenge as so critical to their business performance that they plan to engage the entire C-suite and personally lead this shift.

To impact this goal, leaders at all levels of the organization will gain greater traction if they incorporate a focus on wellbeing into their strategy. Employers make a significant investment in people and expect a positive ROI over time. For those who understand that their employees’ wellbeing is imperative for bottom line success, the potential return is high. Conversely, it’s shortsighted and risky to shortchange people’s potential with inadequate, unsupportive or uninspiring work environments that undermine their wellbeing.

“Businesses understand that they need people more than ever to get innovative work out the door. It’s really about getting people to blossom,” says Arantes. “In the past leaders may not have recognized the impact employee wellbeing could make. That’s changing, there’s a different mindset.”

Wellbeing is a competitive advantage in today’s business world. To achieve it, workers need mental and physical health, nurtured by a supportive environment that gives them the emotional capacity to interpret and experience events in a way that leads to productive, positive actions.

Informed by insights from our research, we’ve developed some settings that can be a catalyst for intentionally designing work environments that support the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of people at work.

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PLANNING FOR THE DIMENSIONS OF WELLBEING

Attaining wellbeing at work is about creating and sustaining a healthy physical and mental state over time in a supportive physical and social environment. No single space can do this alone.

OPTIMISM
Provide spaces that can be easily modified by individuals and teams to encourage experimentation, spark imagination and creativity, and expand possibilities.

MINDFULNESS
Create environments that support focus and minimize distractions for all tasks by providing a diverse range of settings that facilitate individual concentration, 1:1 connections, collaboration and team focus.

AUTHENTICITY
Allow individuals and teams to express their personalities through space by empowering them to select environments that best suit their preferred work styles. Encourage employees to display personal items in workstations and on their computers, tablets and smartphones.

BELONGING
Provide spaces that encourage personal and professional connections. Ensure that spaces designed for users to connect with one another are intuitive and easily accessible for both co-located and distributed teams. Embed elements such as a media wall in the space to reinforce the importance of connections and the organization’s commitment to employees.

MEANING
Accommodate both co-located and geographically disparate teams by creating a palette of places and presences—i.e., settings for both physical and virtual collaboration. Provide social spaces to reinforce the importance of fun and social interactions and the company’s commitment to encourage these behaviors.

VITALITY
Design spaces that encourage movement. Create a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces that offer posture choices (sitting, standing, perching, lounging) and encourage walking to create physical and emotional energy, stimulate the mind, improve alertness and improve focus.

WELLBEING DIMENSIONS APPLIED
PROJECT STUDIOS

An immersive, shared space that supports project teams and small groups in analog and digital collaboration, content sharing and idea generation. Well-appointed to meet user needs around tools, hospitality, amplification and posture options.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

VIA™ Architectural Walls
IJ™ Seating
media:scape® Collaboration Solutions

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

VIA™ Architectural Walls
media:scape® Collaboration Solutions
Exponents™ Storage

Walls are leveraged as planes for analog and digital collaboration. Chairs swivel so workers can switch eye contact quickly between each other and multiple information displays.

Well-situated high-definition telepresence allows team members to collaborate with distant colleagues.

With moveable seating, workers can easily reconfigure the space.

Using walls as vertical planes for displaying information increases mental capacity for dealing with complex issues.

Well-being: A Bottom Line Issue

*Not all products available in all countries.*
CAFÉ

An informal and social setting to support connections, build trust and provide nourishment. Provides opportunities to connect socially and hosts mobile workers graciously to facilitate a sense of belonging, promote healthy professional relationships and bridge presence disparities.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

Enea Lottu™ Tables and Seating

Last Minute™ Seating

*Not all products available in all countries.
NOMADIC CAMP

An area for mobile users with a variety of settings that welcome and accommodate focus and collaboration. A palette of place and presence options provides solutions for mobile and geographically disparate users to feel a sense of belonging, community and connection to the brand and culture. Shared spaces welcome users and allow for personalization and self-selection, giving a sense of pride and temporary ownership.

PRIVATE OFFICE

An owned space that provides the ability to express one’s self and display personal items and professional artifacts. Users are empowered to utilize the space in the best way to support their individual needs through amplification, making work visible on the walls or providing solitude for focus.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

Ology Desks
Gesture™ Seating
Soto™ Worktools
Bi-Free Lounge Seating and Tables
Flexbox Storage

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

VIA™ Architectural Walls
Denizen™ Tables and Storage
Bob™ Seating
Bindu™ Seating

WELLBEING:

Acoustically sealed, the space supports quick switches from individual focused work to 1:1 connections and interactions.

*Not all products available in all countries
PATIO

A setting that offers inspiring views, access to nature and a palette of place, postures and presence options. Promote movement through the environment by encouraging users to select the right place for a given task. A variety of settings support user needs throughout the day, from focus to respite to collaboration.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
Emu Shade Seating
Emu Heaven™ Seating and Tables
Emu Ivy™ Seating

WELLBEING:
THOUGHT STARTERS
Adjacency to a common space provides nearby access, encouraging workers to move outdoors often.
Wi-Fi and access to power make this a productive outdoor work setting for individuals and teams.
Sun and shade options accommodate various preferences and tolerances.

*Not all products available in all countries.
RETREAT

An informal place that enables people to be alone with others nearby or have informal interactions within the hum of surrounding activity. Provides great views to the outdoors and displays of organizational artifacts.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
Milbank™ Lounge Seating and Tables
Wing™ Lounge Seating
Await™ Lounge Seating
Currency® Workwall™ Storage

INNOVATION SUITE

A space to fine-tune imagination, spark creativity and foster critical thinking. Inspire, engage and support evolving innovation processes and serve as a symbolic and tangible expression of a company’s commitment to a culture of innovation.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
V.I.A.™ Architectural Walls
Buoy™ Seating
Await™ Seating
EE6® Storage
Topo® Mobile Seating

*not all products available in all countries

In unrestricted environments, ideas can progress to reality.

Those who aren’t comfortable in a high-sensory environment can come here to dial down the stimulation around them.
ENCLAVES

Small, private spaces that provide respite, focus and rejuvenation. Easily accessible with good visual signaling.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
- V.I.A.™ Architectural Walls
- Hosu Seating
- media:scape® Kiosk Collaboration Solutions
- EE6® Storage

Enclaves with telepresence support 1:1 problem solving in close proximity to the team space.

Lounging in a quiet space encourages contemplation or clearing your head for what’s next.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
- V.I.A.™ Architectural Walls
- Regard™ Bench
- Airtouch® Tables
- Walkstation™
- EE6® Storage

A treadmill workstation is an option for healthy movement that also promotes mental alertness.

A height-adjustable workstation lets people stand up to reenergize.

*Not all products available in all countries.
Most people spend most of their waking hours at work, so what better place to focus on improving health and wellbeing?

Designers Nila R. Leiserowitz and Sarah Bader believe that the office may offer the single greatest opportunity to positively impact people’s health. Both are principals and firm-wide health and wellness practice area leaders with Gensler, the renowned global architecture, design, planning and consulting firm.

In response to expanding health consciousness and a growing interest in wellness, Gensler created a practice area of design professionals who are exclusively focused on health and wellbeing environments—from urban planning to buildings to interior design. Among corporate clients, they see growing interest in fostering wellbeing in the workplace.

“For many years, there was a lot of focus around sustainability and the work environment, to the point that it became a big issue in talent recruitment. Now we’re starting to see that people who are considering an organization want to understand that there’s a commitment to their wellbeing. To hire good knowledge workers, there is always competition for the brightest and best, whether the economy is good or bad. So you want to send a strong message about your culture and how people are going to be able to succeed within your company,” says Leiserowitz.

Wellbeing has a direct relationship to productivity, says Bader, IIDA, also based in Gensler’s Chicago office. “People used to think of wellbeing as just about wellness and physical health. But now we realize that there’s this mental piece, too. Wellbeing supports good thinking. And that’s what employers hire people to do—they’re not hiring you just to be present, they want you thinking clearly and fully engaged.”

People are more engaged in their health than ever before, and a consumerization of the healthcare industry is well underway, which has direct impact on wellbeing at work, says Leiserowitz. “You are now an engaged consumer of your own health and you have choice in how you’re going to spend the capital that is your health. It’s exciting to see companies more aware and have this desire for people to stay healthy.”

“It’s definitely going to be a more important aspect in this century,” adds Bader.

It’s key to create experiences in environments that help people feel good about being where they are, and research confirms that there is plenty of room for improvement in today’s workplaces. The Gensler 2013 U.S. Workplace Survey results show that only one in every four U.S. workers has an optimal work environment, and worker effectiveness has fallen since 2006. “Enabling choice with the right alignment of tools, policies and spaces is an opportunity for companies to create a climate in which autonomous, engaged employees can make meaningful decisions to maximize their individual performance,” the report states.

“We chose our professions as architects and designers so we can create experiences,” says Leiserowitz. “Space is so powerful. It’s one of the most powerful experiences that people take for granted. That’s why I think it’s fantastic that, more and more, we’re focusing on wellbeing as a problem of space. Good spaces create good experiences. Spaces are fundamental for wellbeing.”

RESIDENT NEIGHBORHOOD

Owned individual space with supportive tools and personal control. Users can personalize their workstations and adjust for comfort. The overall zone supports a range of user needs, from focused work to collaboration to touch-down tasks, allowing the worker to choose where they feel most productive.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

- Ology Tables
- Flexbox Storage
- Gesture™ Seating
- Soto™ Worktools

*not all products available in all countries
How sedentary is your work?

If you’re like many office workers, you probably wish you could be more active, maybe spend less time sitting.

But, work keeps most of us at our desks. We may have a cell phone, maybe a tablet or laptop, so you’d think we could be fairly mobile. But most workers aren’t.

The Steelcase Global Report, a major new study of office workers in 17 countries, shows that office workers use fixed technology (desktop computers, landline phones, etc.) twice as much as mobile devices (smartphones, laptops and tablets). In fact, we found 86 percent of offices have landline phones, and just 39 percent are equipped with cell phones. A full 80 percent of offices have desktop computers vs. 39 percent with laptops.

As a result, many workers are desk-bound. On average we spend 5.7 hours a day sitting, according to a 2013 study. But very few people sit for long stretches at a time. Most get up frequently to attend meetings, collaborate with colleagues, grab a coffee, etc. Studies show we get up from our chairs every 8 to 10 minutes.

Another recently published study, this one of workers in Britain over 16 years, found no link between sitting and mortality. The researchers recommend being cautious in emphasizing sitting as a risk factor for mortality separate from the effect of physical activity.

This is good news: Sedentary work is less worrisome than we may have previously imagined. But, this does not mean we should not look for ways to introduce more activity into our lives at work—in fact many workers are demanding it.

How To Create A More Active Workplace

Since the work itself is a sedentary pursuit, and will probably always require a lot of sitting, can we rethink how the workplace can help us be more active?

The answer is yes. According to ongoing Steelcase research, there are three strategies to make it happen.

1) Provide an ecosystem of spaces.

To create a workplace that promotes activity and movement, it’s critical that you provide employees with a variety of spaces each designed to support different types of work. People at work need to focus, collaborate, rejuvenate, socialize and learn throughout their day. No single space can support these diverse needs.

The workplace should be designed as an ecosystem of interconnected zones and settings that are destinations where people have choice and control over where and how they work. Not only does this allow movement throughout the day, according to findings in the Steelcase Global Report, workers are more highly engaged when they can choose from a range of spaces that best support the work they are doing.

When the workplace provides a range of spaces workers are not restricted to working solely at their desk and they can easily add activity and movement into their day.
Researchers recommend a range of 2 to 4 hours of varied movement—standing, walking and other activities—in a typical 8-hour day. For example, Allan Hedge, director of Cornell University’s Human Factors and Ergonomics programs, suggests this mix: in each hour of sit to 20 minutes, stand for 8 minutes (longer, and you may start to lean, which can lead to musculoskeletal problems), and move around and stretch for two minutes.

The British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2015 activity and movement can also be increased when the workplace provides a range of spaces workers are not restricted to working solely at their desk and they can easily add activity and movement into their day.

2) Support varied postures.

Activity and movement can also be increased when the workplace provides a range of postures from which workers can choose. When the workplace supports postures ranging from sitting and standing to leaning and perching, workers can become more active, comfortable and will be better supported.

3) Address standing concerns; make sitting truly active.

It’s important to note that just as too much sitting can limit activity, static standing is also not good for you. Avoid static standing, for a couple reasons. First, it doesn’t necessarily use more energy than sitting. Research by Catrine Tudor-Locke, PhD, a kinesiologist at the University of Massachusetts, found that workers expended about the same amount of energy seated as standing.

Second, static standing can cause problems. Researchers from the Sensory-Motors Systems Lab in Zurich and the University of Michigan found that standing for five hours a day contributed to long-term back pain and musculoskeletal disorders. Switch frequently between sitting and standing, that others positive health outcomes according to the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society. One popular way to do it is with an adjustable-height desk. It allows the user to move quickly and frequently between sitting and standing. Another healthy alternative is use of a treadmill desk. This incorporates active standing, walking and varied postures in a small footprint.

It’s okay to lounge at work. Since work is more collaborative, lounge and casual meeting spaces are increasingly important and varied movement—standing, walking and other activities—in a typical 8-hour day. For example, in large meeting rooms the space should support both standing and sitting that encourages movement during the meeting.

Seating adjustability.

Today’s workforce is diverse in age, gender, size and physical capabilities. Whether using a dedicated desk or moving from one space to another, workers need their space, furniture and tools to fit quickly and easily. People are more likely to be active, change posture and use different places the tasks they do while seated easier to perform. The idea is that this movement is good for the human body and prevents some of the physical problems that occur from sitting by making the tasks they do while seated easier to perform.

Design issues with today’s chairs.

Too often workers sit in chairs that do not support the normal activity that happens while seated. Many people like to recline in their chair (which should be healthy for you) but it pulls you away from the worksurfaces, distances you from your work, technology and information. Screens are no longer at eye level, hands come off the keys, and we strain our necks and shoulders to use our devices. That’s why we hunch, slump our shoulders and often return to a static, upright posture.

Also, when we recline, our lower spine naturally curves forward, yet most chair backs don’t move in the same way. A gap forms between our lower back and the chair, our back sags backward to find support and this puts the back in a hunched, unnatural posture.

Active Sitting

Sometimes people need to spend a lot of time sitting at their desk. The nature of their work requires it. But this does not mean that people cannot be supported properly. They need an active sitting experience. Active sitting is supported when the chair (the individual is sitting in) allows or encourages them to move. The idea is that this movement is good for the human body and prevents some of the physical problems that occur from sitting by making the tasks they do while seated easier to perform.

Get a chair that works like you

Supportive, ergonomic seating needs to encourage active sitting, and it should support the user in any posture, and encourage movement and varying postures. So as you recline, for example, the chair back changes shape, just like your spine. The tools we use change, but the basics of ergonomics are constant. Using just one posture—static sitting—puts strain on the body and can drain energy because of the lack of movement. This can not only lead to physical health problems, but cognitive issues too, such as poorer cognition, disengagement and a negative impact on overall wellbeing.

Active sitting helps us engage with the worksurfaces, our technology and materials because it keeps everything, even in recline, within what Steelcase researchers call the vision and reach zone. We’re encouraged to move, knowing we’ll be supported. Movement helps us stay fresh and productive. By introducing products that support people properly, you can create a more stimulating, healthier workplace where workers can move easily between different workspaces and engage in different ways of working.

Many people have sedentary jobs that require a lot of sitting, but the workplace can help us be more active, provide better support and more comfort, and that’s a boost to everyone’s wellbeing.