

Wellbeing Down Under

Architecture, design and real estate professionals in Australia have some innovative ways of thinking about how workplaces can support wellbeing.



A 360 VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE

Architecture, design and real estate professionals in Australia have some innovative ways of thinking about how workplaces can support wellbeing.

In fact, this nation of 23 million people has an impact on work environment wellbeing that extends to projects throughout Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

Australia itself holds an outsized place on the wellbeing map. It appears near the top of many health and wellness charts, from the Social Progress Index of 2013 that puts Australia 16th in the world in terms of wellbeing, to Columbia University's World Happiness Report, which places Australia 9th among all countries in average life satisfaction and 11th in average happiness. The Happy Planet Index ranks Australia 8th in wellbeing and 4th in life expectancy out of 151 countries.

To explore how wellbeing is integrated into Australian work environments, 360 conducted interviews with five leading workplace thinkers based in Australia who work with a wide range of industries around the world. Those conversations produced this virtual roundtable discussion with these experts, who collectively represent well over a hundred years of experience in workplace planning, design and construction.

How important is wellbeing as a work environment issue in Australia today?

Minnett It's increasingly important. Senior managers here tend to be focused on costs, efficiency, productivity—like everyone everywhere, I suppose— and now that they understand how wellbeing can influence productivity, it receives even more attention.

McCourt Work environments should help people fulfill their potential, help them create a sense of place and belonging, that we're part of something bigger than ourselves. Clients are asking how they take all these things, a combination of issues around wellbeing, and create a community where people can come together to experience something special.

Coster Clients are realizing that workplaces are predominantly not about square meters or furniture, they're about people. Health and wellbeing are obviously key elements of people performing at their best. So as leaders realize that workplaces can directly support people, the more that wellbeing issue becomes firmly on the agenda.

What does wellbeing mean to your clients?

Coster It's often discussed as an absence of sickness, mostly because the symptoms of being sick are easier to describe and measure than symptoms of wellness. The industry often looks at the ability of the environment to eliminate certain symptoms of sickness, helping people to be more well. I hope we can go beyond that and actually think about wellness in a positive sense, what it means to be a really high performing space in terms of wellness. What makes people feel really well, as opposed to what makes people feel less sick? How do we move beyond fixing the hygiene factor to a positive contribution to people's wellness?

Aznavoorian It means better business performance to them. Down here, organizations have understood the relationship between the way people feel, both physically and emotionally, and how they perform. This is partly due to the size of the country and its relatively small talent pool, which has led to an increased awareness of employee attraction, ongoing health, happiness and engagement. Also our smaller population enables greater agility; there is less hierarchal, precedent or legacy to contend with, making changes easier. A significant factor for Australia's focus on health is that we were not as badly affected by the recent recessions that consumed North America and Europe. This gave us the space to focus on other issues that affect performance like wellbeing.

Why has Australia become a thought leader in workplace wellbeing?

Dowzer Here in Australia there's more project leadership by company departments and human resources groups. When they lead projects, it's caused organizations to put more value on providing work environments where people have choice and empowerment.

Australia also has less structure in the bigger corporations. The other thing is our distance from the rest of the world is actually a wonderful thing. In the early days of these developing projects you weren't necessarily caught in a global structure or way of doing things. You could actually do things remotely quite easily and quite quickly because we weren't really on anybody's radar.

McCourt It's more than a belief that wellbeing is a good thing. It's actually a legal requirement in Australia. We have the Work Safety Act that states that work safety means health, safety and wellbeing of people in relationship to their work.

Coster Australia is a relatively new country without the long held traditions of older societies. It has a culture of early adoption, for instance with technology. We are an inherently social and relatively flat society compared to other places, so that plays out in the workplace. Generally speaking, there's a sense that all levels in the organization should be accessible to each other, and I think there's less hierarchy and division and you could argue, maybe respect.

There are also structural things here: we have relatively few tenant organizations compared to the much bigger economies of the world. Workplace designers are much more a part of building design here than in the U.K. and certainly North America. It's quite common here for the tenant to be engaged in the design process of the base building, for example, say for connectivity across the organization by integrating the design of stairs and atriums, for example.

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What goes into a workplace that enhances wellbeing?

Dowzer The outcome is different for each organization. Some need a large percentage of the floor plate given over to social space to support significant collaboration and community requirements. Others may require shared space located in high levels of daylight where staff work long or odd hours and experience flagging energy levels from disruption to their circadian rhythm. Other workplaces need internal showers to support demand for lunch time exercise, kitchens with healthy food options.

Coster I think there are four main things. One, the relationship between environmental conditions and wellness. Second, designing places that acknowledge and embed activity and movement as a fundamental part of how you go through your work day. Third, mental wellness. People need a range of choices of different spaces in which to work throughout the day. Choices psychologically give you control over your environment, controlling how you sit, where you work, etc. Helplessness and loss of control are indicators of stress and anxiety and even clinical depression. If you can remove people's sense of helplessness, help them choose outcomes through their choices, you can help inoculate against depression. Fourth, the expression of an organization's identity in the workplace in such a way that people want to be there because the mission and purpose is something they believe in and want to be a part of. You can help make people well by having them positive and engaged about the place where they choose to exert themselves everyday.

McCourt Another interesting phenomenon is biophilia, the idea that there is a bond between people and other living systems, and so natural elements like plants actually help people feel and think better. At our headquarters in London, we installed over 4,000 plants, or about 8 plants for every person. They help decrease toxins, balance the humidity and increase wellbeing. A lot of designers are looking at biophilia seriously as a component of workplace wellbeing.

Minnett At a minimum, a workplace for wellbeing is as healthy an internal environment as possible, using Green Star principles (Australia's version of LEED), for example, around access to natural light, fresh air, materials, plants in the workspace. But also we believe that more agile work places drive wellbeing because the individual is not being asked to go and sit in one spot all day. They can work in a sit/stand situation, go to a lounge area, or work at a desk. Movement and greater choice of space is an important part of wellbeing. There's no one thing, there are many things that tie into a more natural way of working that encourages wellbeing.

Aznavoorian Mobility is an important element for wellbeing. They say sitting is the new smoking; therefore, providing a workplace with a greater variety of places to go encourages movement. Sit/stand workstations, interconnecting stairs and limiting the number of printer stations are other tactics. We have tackled many of the physical aspects, now we need to focus on the psychological and emotional well being of workers to fully activate the contemporary workplace.

Dowzer With mobility, ergonomics becomes more important: having opportunities to sit, stand, to use different working environments and having a range of different settings. Another one is the interconnectivity of organizations by physical means such as stairs. The more open and transparent you make the work environment, the more likely people are going to get up and walk to somebody to have a conversation instead of sending an email. Unifying staircases or voids within organizations connect people physically, and stop people from automatically going to the elevator to go between floors. It's a fundamental business strategy to get people up and moving.

How does the organization benefit from a workplace that supports wellbeing?

Aznavoorian The workplace today is increasingly complex. Space does not stand on its own, it is impossible to isolate workplace or wellbeing from a number of other contributors. Recognizing there is a co-dependent relationship between workspace, technology, and people (their bodies, hearts and minds) is critical. Together they create an experience that will inspire and motivate people, and in turn, lead to better outcomes for the organization. There is an opportunity now to explore how the virtual environment might interact with the physical to further enhance this experience.

McCourt If you only look at individual strategies for improving wellbeing, they are hard to prove on their own. If someone says you add more natural light and productivity will go up a certain percentage, it doesn't work that way. Wellbeing strategies collectively make a difference, but every company is different and the same approach will have different effects for each company. There are many ways to improve wellbeing and together they definitely can increase performance, but there's no single, magic bullet.

Coster Consider identity economics; the idea is that people make economic choices based on both monetary incentives and our own sense of personal identity. For example, why would you pay more money for one car than another, if they're technically the same? The difference in the price you can charge is the difference that people place on brand identity. So it is in your workplace. There is a difference in what people will accept in salary to work in a place where they identify themselves as an insider to the mission compared to a place where they don't identify with it. You can measure the value of that difference. Workplaces that represent that value system you want people to identify with can arguably save you the extra money that you would otherwise have to pay them to commit their efforts to the firm.

Dowzer The happy/productive worker hypothesis is actually quite complicated. There are many ways to frame wellbeing: morale, stress, worklife balance, job satisfaction, as well as organizational outcomes in terms of absenteeism, customer satisfaction, the decision to resign, withdrawal, and harassment issues. Linking the designed environment to wellbeing factors adds more complexity. I think it's true that an organizational focus on wellbeing recognizes that having happy staff is of little value unless they are performing efficiently. It's also true that an efficient organization is of little value at the expense of wellbeing.

Minnett Look at the elements we're putting into work environments—more natural light, quieter spaces, rooms for yoga and massage, gymnasiums, offices that allow more mobility and movement and a choice in workspaces— all of these things help improve work/life balance and wellbeing. Ultimately these elements prove themselves to the organization in terms of reduced sick days, reduced turn over and better productivity.

Down here, organizations understand the relationship between how people feel and how they behave.

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