

Can the workplace actually make you healthier?

For many, wellbeing in the workplace means physical health: ergonomic furniture, a fitness centre and healthy choices in the cafeteria.



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But while these things are vitally important, they don't make up the full story.

Isla Galloway-Gaul, managing director of Inspiration Office - an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy, said that many organisations are thinking about wellbeing more holistically and realising cognitive health is just as important as physical health.

"All workplaces need to consider a range of health dimensions such as cognitive, emotional, social and financial too. Without these in the mix, the more traditional health considerations won't be nearly as beneficial."

A recent study conducted by Ohio State University and the National Institute of Mental Health in the US showed that the physical work environment dramatically influences emotional and physical wellbeing.

Said Galloway-Gaul: "Workers in an old-style office space - low ceilings, rows of cubicles, limited natural light, noisy air handling, and unattractive views - had significantly higher levels of stress hormones and heart-rate variability than workers

in more open, spacious, well-lit offices.

“Most worryingly, these rates stayed high even when workers were at home which underlines just what profound impact the workplaces has on everyone’s health.”

In other research, Steelcase, a worldwide firm of office architects and furniture designers, have identified some common principles for cognitive wellbeing at work:

- **Support a range of places** – Every worker wants some control over how they work. “Superior connections and support for technology, plus adequate array space can transform even a small footprint into an appealing, effective space for work,” said Galloway-Gaul.
- **Support an easy switch between the modes of work** – Different kinds of workplace settings make it easier for workers to tap into the vibe they seek and transition between work modes. “For example this could mean a quiet booth for solo work or a more relaxed lounge setting for a team chat,” Galloway-Gaul noted.
- **Support expectations for collaboration and privacy** – Although people tend to think of privacy in terms of other people bothering them, it’s really needs management to support a culture which doesn’t look down on people working in different ways. “The message needs to be sent to people that it is okay to work alone or in groups as you see fit,” Galloway-Gaul noted.
- **Make common spaces an instant fit** – Intuitive adjustments and easy technology connections make common spaces uncommonly supportive for on-the-move individuals and teams, enabling them to be efficient right from the start.
- **Help employees identify mental health risks** - “Promoting good mental health in the workplaces is one of the most important steps employers can take to improve their organisations. Helping people recognise the signs of illness such as depression can assist in earlier treatment and better recovery outcomes,” Galloway- Gaul concluded.

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