

Wellness in the workplace is a luxury and has no real impact on business performance

Defining Wellness

Wellness like health, can only be defined by the absence of it, hence by sickness or by being unwell.

Such a negative approach to performance cannot be tolerated in the world of business, which is concerned with positive things like value adding, profit growth and shareholder returns.

A cursory glance of the Standard Australia Glossary of Facility Management Terms HB261 (2001) makes no reference to either wellness, wellbeing or even health for that matter.

I could rest my case here!

If the term wellness is not mentioned by our premier "measurement authority" it is even less than a luxury, it is totally irrelevant. But then again neither does HB261 include a definition for performance. I'm sure this omission is proving really helpful to all those concerned with workplace performance generally.

A quick search of the PCA, BOMA, IDRC/NACORE/CoreNet and other significant web sites dedicate to CRE/Property or facilities management failed to turn up any references to wellness/wellbeing indicating again that this issue is not a performance issue to be taken seriously. We can probably conclude again that it's a luxury item.

However if wellness, like health is defined by its absence then it is impossible to fault the contribution the modern workplace makes to ensuring people are not unwell. Comfortable in summer and winter, adequate supplies of running water, fresh air, in many cases natural as well as artificial light, chairs to sit on, places to eat, have a coffee, chill out spaces, day care centres, medical facilities, gyms, rooms to meet, spaces to relax and socialise etc. I even hear one company even has Zen spaces. Many of these features are "known" to have a real impact on business performance. The evidence is abundant.

To expect the property industry or business occupiers to do more could simply create a "Pan Pharmaceuticals effect" with a lot of money being spent unnecessarily on the luxury of wellness, when a placebo could be just as effective.

Wellness is a fad

Could wellness be just another gimmick dreamt up by the workplace design community now that the open plan fad has passed its zenith? Could it be just a way of putting a positive spin on the realisation that modern workplaces are more complex and stressful with likely long-term negative health implications for occupants. Perhaps the real performance issue is the existing faulty product not the more expensive upgraded luxury item.

Also I didn't hear the press waxing lyrically about wellness in US General Tommy Franks' workplace as he bunkered down in the war in the desert of Iraq, and look at how well he performed!

The real workplace performance issues!

Our role as workplace professional is to help business maximise returns to shareholders. We must help simplify and standardise workplaces used by business, reduce business costs and risks so that the tools and processes used to deliver business performance are routinised and free of the vagaries of the human condition. We have a critical role in focussing on the necessities, not the luxuries.

We must remain focussed on inputs known to have a real impact on business performance; more iconic high rise buildings like the planned Grollo Tower in Melbourne, more intelligent buildings, bigger open floor plates, generic building designs, atriums, higher levels of building automation. Greener buildings. It must be as clear to you as it is to me, its more important for the industry to deal with the real issue of "sick buildings" than to be wasting its time worrying about sick people.

We all know workplaces involve a complex interplay of human, technology and spatial elements. But the real world of business must consider only effects where a clear cause can be demonstrated. Clear linear, cause and effect relationships, that's what's needed. To understand the multiple inputs, outputs and relationships that comprise "wellness" will take time and quality of thought; two things that in the property industry are definitely not commodities, but luxuries.

In the future we might be innovative, creative or game enough to use new workplace planning tools to map and display networks of human activities in the workplace and overlay the resources needed to deliver measurable outputs. This might move wellness from a luxury to a mainstream agenda item. It might also become part of facilities knowledge management...an accepted performance contributor.

But right now, in this rapidly changing world, the best thing we can do to help business improve performance is stick to our workplace knitting; negotiate some really good leasing deals, provide some up front financial incentives, throw in an existing fit out for free and allow business to get on with what it does best...making money.

Corporate social responsibility or individual accountability?

A recent study by the Centre of Labour Research at the University of Adelaide found that while longer work hours, intensified work cultures and job insecurity are imperiling the quality of our lives, governments, families and other institutions are also letting employees down. Labour laws, until most recently, schools and male participation in domestic/unpaid work, leave entitlements haven't changed much despite the changing nature of work and the workplace. The authors drew a number of significant conclusions;

- Most employees do not have the "luxury" of flexible working. They are under pressure to work longer and harder
- Work stresses are being "privatised"
- In the private home, chaos awaits. The office by comparison is a sea of calm

This survey confirms what we in the industry already know. The workplaces we provide are already too damn good. Employees actually make the lifestyle choice to spend *more* time in the workplace delivering greater output for the same or less money making such a positive contribution to performance that to include wellness as an issue is a nonsense. World data confirms the stress and pressure of modern life is related to the availability of options, that is the high level of choice we all have these days, and exists regardless of whether people are working or not. "

These findings seem to confirm that "Yuppies kvetching" - translated from Yiddish to mean "whinging", does not in reality deserve our sympathy. Remember, no-one owns the space of your own mind, only you!

Our federal government has the right policy settings for business. It has decided against such luxuries as funding paid maternity leave, pushed for more individual, performance based contracts, and much greater individual responsibility for health care and retirement. A government policy that favours alertness without alarm over relaxation and comfort has resulted in the sustained surge in corporate profits in recent years.

It must be clear, the key to performance improvement in the workplace is fear and anxiety not wellbeing. Management's focus must be 100% of people working 100% of the time at 100% capacity as an absolute minimum.

Where's the evidence?

Where's the hard data you may well ask?

The Centre of Labour Research findings were based on an in-depth survey of 250 Australians. These local facts clearly demolish the credibility of international surveys covering hundreds of thousands of occupants spanning many decades which have investigated the relationships between workplace variables and performance; the late Michael Brill and his team at BOSTI in the US, Franklin Becker at Cornell, Adrian Leaman at Building Use Studies, Frank Duffey at DEGW in the UK, Jacqueline Vischer at the University of Montreal in Canada, the late David Rowe at the University of Sydney to name but a few.

The available data on the subject might be considerable but to use any of their research findings might add a few thousand dollars to the cost of a new workplace, commit the industry to define KPI's against which performance could be assessed and lead to the inclusion of more competent and accountable professionals in the design and management process.

Confirming that workplace wellness and business performance really is a luxury item, recent research by NACORE, BIFM, RICS, RICS/FM and others found that while property holdings affect corporate financial performance the impact is not entirely clear and continuing study of this critical issue is unlikely to produce "quantitative results which can be generalised across different organisations" necessitating a case study approach rather than establishing numeric targets.

The research also found;

- that the industry consistently uses "proxies" in performance measurement (autonomy for choice, interaction instead of collaboration, satisfaction for performance, flexibility for I don't really know)
- There is little evidence to suggest training and education in the property profession is leading to improved business productivity and performance

Debate? What's to debate!

Separating out wellness/performance as a single cause-effect workplace issue seems in itself to be a luxury. Equally, adopting a more holistic or systems approach might have merit but it means the property profession looking at business performance in a more integrated way. If only we had the luxury of time to do so.

To argue successfully against the proposition that wellness in the workplace is a luxury and has no real impact on business performance will necessitate a fundamental, quantum shift in thinking for a conservative industry stuck in an outdated paradigm. This just doesn't seem possible. Wellness in the workplace is destined to remain a luxury item removed from the real issues which impact performance.

Let's face it. If we have profitable tenants the value of our property portfolio surely increases enabling us to provide better returns to investor retirees on the Gold Coast who can spend the rest of their days in luxury, contemplating their wellness because they have nothing better to do with their time. Isn't that a better way forward?

Brian Purdey
Managing Director
KODO
The Ark Workspace
Level2 50 York Street
PO Box Q1585 QVB
Sydney NSW 1230 Australia
T: 612 82431116
F: 612 82431122
M: 0410 483 922

Creativity Vision Leadership