

The Great Office Occupier / Developer Debate

# #3 Wellbeing and human-centric workspace challenge



# #3 Wellbeing and human-centric workspace challenge

It's time for landlords and occupiers to share the new challenges, collaborate on jointly beneficial outcomes and engage in the language of the future workplace.

Wellbeing is a difficult concept to pin down: it is both physical and intangible, practical and esoteric, and so can be tricky to measure with any accuracy. That said, the disruption from COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to create better, more human-centric workspaces. There are a number of actions and initiatives that both landlords and occupiers can take to improve the physical and mental health of employees and to make a meaningful difference to how space works for the people it houses. Wellbeing is not simply about the physical space and the surroundings. It matters what is done with that space. Speakers, concerts, events and adequate green space will all combine to make people happier, more connected and more committed to their roles.

Wellbeing is without a doubt becoming one of the most important items on a company's agenda. Investment has dramatically increased in recent years, and there is no sign of this abating. Consensus is that investment will continue to grow in the years to come, with companies increasingly appointing 'Wellbeing Directors' to their roster as the area becomes too expansive to be part of the role for HR or FM managers, as currently.

Companies recognise the value of wellbeing and the return more than justifies the outlay, though it is worth noting that many initiatives come at little,

or no, cost to the company: partnerships and collaborations can provide mutual benefits and so do not involve any direct charge. Good examples include opening up areas for pop-up restaurants/coffee vans or other caterers. The end-user might bear some, or all, of the cost, but will be willing to make the payment if what is provided brings them something new, something high quality and something they could not get before. It is vital to capture those "little drops of joy": be it an ice cream van, a concert or another form of entertainment, if a company can harness a 'feel good factor' in their space, their employees will be loyal and



Corporate occupiers see real estate as a supplement for a range of strategic agenda items, 37% cite wellbeing as one of these items.

Source: Knight Frank '(Y)OUR SPACE survey'



more productive. Using fit-bits (or other trackers) linked to the stairs in a building can give employees instant feedback on their fitness throughout the day and encourage staff to move around and keep active, although it is also worth pointing out that the use of fitness trackers should be carefully considered in an employment context. Simple psychological tricks and practising mindfulness techniques can make a big difference to a person's life and employers are starting to recognise that they can not only play a part, but also have a duty to actively encourage such activities. Naturally, there is some debate as to who will 'own' the wellbeing services being provided. As more and more wellbeing data is harvested and closer analysis is carried out, there will inevitably be a more rigorous debate around what is actually needed, what is effective and to whom it belongs.

The notion of partnership extends to occupiers and their landlords as well. Companies may seek to share facilities that were previously only available to head-tenants for example. These might include gym space, yoga classes or access to roof bars and terraces or other social amenities. The advantages are three-fold: costs can be split, the potential for connections and interactions increase and the wellbeing aspect is covered off.

Perhaps more significantly though, we expect to see occupiers reviewing, scrutinising and experimenting with their use of space more so than they have done in the past. Flexibility of space will be key for both tenants and their landlords alike, with break-out spaces, outdoor spaces, "get your head down" spaces, socialising

spaces, and spaces just to sit and be, all featuring in new office footprints. As such, having different areas available for different activities in the office, with different but appropriate levels of sound-proofing, will undoubtedly play an important part in any wellbeing package.

One thing this pandemic has reminded us is that humans are social animals. We strive for community and company so space that fosters and facilitates this will always be attractive. Whilst the enforced working from home experiment has been relatively successful, the casualty has been the mental health of workers, struggling with isolation, sub-optimal working conditions and a lack of interaction – in spite of technology's abilities to bridge that gap to some extent. Co-ordinated and effective wellbeing measures can minimise these struggles and turn the dial the other way and improve the health of those concerned. Places can become a destination, somewhere that inspires and restores as well as functioning for the more prosaic aspects of working life.

In addition, the pandemic reminded us of the importance fresh air and natural light plays, or should play, in our daily lives, whilst also enabling many to foster a greater appreciation for the natural world. As such, we expect to see trends in biophilic office designs which "bring the outside in" and which truly consider the impact natural light, air quality and temperature have on employees' health. Examples of such designs could include increased integration of living walls and plant life in the office environment, improving fresh air circulation and having more open windows, and utilising unused

outdoor space. Indeed, wellbeing through office design can take many forms, but all have the same aim of creating a setting which promotes health and productivity.

Finally, technology also plays a crucial part in promoting and enabling wellbeing initiatives. Landlords and occupiers can now embrace the various apps out there in the market which help facilitate community and connections. These apps include those which support space and facilities bookings, act as a concierge service, enable food/coffees to be ordered from the in-house (or local) offerings, and notify staff of discounts at local businesses. It is hoped that apps like these can bring people together in ways not seen before and help recreate a sense of community lost through the pandemic.

#### **Things for occupiers to think about:**

- Evaluate current wellbeing initiatives / services and consider how they could be improved or enhanced to entice employees back to the office.
- Relatively small tweaks to decor, such as using calming, natural tones, soft furnishings and more plants/greenery, could have a significantly positive impact on the office vibe.
- Prioritise natural light and fresh air wherever possible.
- Brainstorm ideas with your landlord and the other tenants in your building about how you can create "little drops of joy" for all occupiers (and perhaps for members of the local community too).
- Ensure you have suitable policies and procedures in place in regarding how different spaces in the office are intended to be used, particularly in relation to sound and noise. For example, are headphones required for all telephone calls in open plan spaces?



**Things for developers and landlords to think about:**

- The more inviting your building is, the more occupiers are likely to want to spend time there (and the more space they are likely to need to do so).
- Check the terms of existing leases to ensure that the costs of any proposed wellbeing services can be received from the tenant(s), if appropriate.
- Speak to your tenants about the type of wellbeing services that they would like to see in the building – would they attend a music recital held in the communal meeting rooms, or would a pop-up ice cream stall on a Friday afternoon prove more popular?
- Could you make better use of any redundant space in your building? For example, is there any space in the basement to create a communal gym, or could the rooftop be developed into an outdoor break-out area?
- Space which can be repurposed easily is likely to prove popular.
- Consider investing in apps and other technology to encourage occupiers to make the most of the building's facilities and to create connections with the local community. Does current technology support a more multi-purpose use of the building?

