

Viewpoint: The role of interior design in a healthy workplace

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In the last decade, wellness has played an increasingly important role in the design of workplace environments as people continue to commit themselves to longer hours spent at the office and struggle to strike a work-life balance. As the debate related to an increase in the number of working hours and the question of productivity continues, what has become evident is that the general well-being of the workforce is in decline.

Statistics related to trends in poor diets, increasing work-related stress, and a sedentary culture dominate conversation about the workplace. Employers and designers are learning more and more about how our physical surroundings

significantly impact our behavior, decision-making abilities, and overall health and wellbeing.

Randy Fiser, CEO of the American Society of Interior Design (ASID), recently kicked off UNCG's department of Interior Architecture lecture series with an engaging talk addressing these concerns. Mr. Fiser aimed to raise awareness about the health issues that arise from poor work habits and environments and discuss how design can reverse some of the consequences.

During the time spent indoors, 70 percent of the time is spent sitting. It should not be a surprise that this results in chronic back and neck pain and an increase in strokes and high blood pressure due to poor circulation and lack of physical activity.

Fiser discussed the design industry's response, the development of sustainable and wellness standards, and used ASID's national headquarters in Washington, D.C. as a model of an interior environment designed to promote health and well-being.

ASID's headquarters is the first commercial space in the world to receive both platinum ratings from the LEED and WELL Building Standard. The design of the space looked at four major environmental factors — air, water, nourishment, and light — to address the improvement of working conditions:

- Research has revealed that high levels of CO₂ adversely affect productivity and concentration, so meters were installed to monitor CO₂ levels throughout the day and fresh air circulates through the office when CO₂ levels reach a certain level.
- Water filtration systems were incorporated in sinks in the kitchen and water fountains, and ASID gave all employees a reusable water bottle.
- All carbonated sodas were removed from the kitchen, and coffee and juices were available in smaller cup sizes to promote portion control.
- The design of the interior program and space plan ensure that certain activities take place in spaces with access to natural daylight to enhance exposure. Light meters and gauges were installed to monitor to light levels in the office, and window shades automatically adjust according to light temperatures and the amount of sunlight filtering into the office.

Poor work environments significantly impact both the health of the individual as well as a company's productivity. More than 90 percent of a company's operating costs are linked to human resources, and productivity costs are 112 times greater than energy costs in the workplace. This creates a strong incentive to improve health and well-being in the workplace.

The department has taken a multi-pronged approach to integrating the wellness standards into its curriculum and studio coursework. Students engage in research that identifies the environmental factors that affect physical comfort and physiological processes and alter alertness, mood and cognition and apply their findings through evidence-based design that promotes health.

With health and wellness dominating conversation in the design world today, the interior architecture department at UNCG is committed to engaging students in design that promotes social, psychological and ecological well-being. We are working to provide this next generation of designers with a deep understanding of how well-designed environments not only enhance aesthetic qualities but play an active role in promoting health and wellbeing.