



GREEN SERIES

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Sustainability works

> People-centric benefits of 'going green' at work

WHEN we talk about green living, what often comes to mind is bringing "nature and sustainable practices" into the home. While this is important, many forget that for most of us in the workforce, a large bulk of our waking hours are spent at the office. Therefore, are we really fully benefiting from the advantages of an eco-friendly home environment?

With that, let's see how sustainable practices at the work place can benefit the people, indirectly, the business.

CONCERNING GREEN

At the recent International Urban Sustainability & Green Building Conference (IUSGBC) 2017, which was organised by Malaysia Green Building Confederation (MGBC) in conjunction with the International Greentech & Eco Products Exhibition & Conference Malaysia (IGEM) 2017, there were talks which highlighted a dire need for green initiatives in the workplace.

One such was on "Better Places for People and the Wellbeing Labs", delivered by UK Green Building Council (UK-GBC) sustainability advisor Elinor Huggett. The basis of Huggett's talk was gleaned from the results of a project called the Wellbeing Lab conducted by UK-GBC and WorldGBC. She shared with the audience how green initiatives, no matter how small, can be incorporated into an everyday office environment and elaborated how it can benefit the occupants/business.

"If you want sustainability to become mainstream then you absolutely must appeal to bottom-line (costs and expenses) as well," she said. "Being able to make a financial case for green buildings is really important. It may not be a main driver in a business set-up, but if considered and worked into the DNA of a business, in the long run the benefits can be huge and far-reaching."

The Wellbeing Lab report revealed that "there are synergies between design for human health and design for positive environmental impact". These are identified across several areas:

INDOOR AIR QUALITY AND VENTILATION

"Studies we looked up showed that improving indoor air quality and ventilation can result in an 8% to 11% improvement in the productivity of the people working in those areas," Huggett explained.

When incorporating natural materials into the office building design, take note of its volatile organic compound (VOC) levels. Adding plants into the office helps reduce the presence of internal pollutants such as carbon dioxide and VOCs.

Huggett suggests using the Nasa Clean Air Study as a reference guide

when choosing plants to incorporate in an area. (The study also appeared in our October interior design article.)

By implementing measures to keep the air clean and healthy, the need for mechanical ventilation is reduced, which in turn, reduces the energy needed to power the ventilation. The outcome: lower costs.

VIEWS AND VISTAS

Studies suggest that being able to look out the window and take a rest from the computer screen (or whatever "gadget screen" you are working on) gives your eyes a moment to reset. This results in a 7% to 12% increase in productivity.

A study by environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich is one of the most heavily cited studies to support this fact. Findings revealed that looking at nature garnered a more positive impact on the recovery process of hospital patients compared to those who lived in sterile environs (who took a lot longer to recover from their illness).

Scientific American writer Deborah Franklin also noted in her article "How Hospital Gardens Help Patients Heal" — that multiple studies have proven that spending just three to five minutes looking at views dominated by trees, flowers or water, can reduce anger, anxiety and pain, while also inducing relaxation.

If one has access to nature views from your work space, there is huge chance that one also receives sufficient amounts of daylight filtering into the work space.

Why is it important to invite

nature the once-over, try to invite some sunlight into your office space and gaze at nature every now and then. Bosses, don't penalise employees for "looking out the window" or "sun gazing", stealing time away from the device they're working on — you'll reap the benefits in higher productivity and fewer MCs among other ways.

AMENITIES AND LOCATION

Having amenities such as shops, restaurants and gyms is much more than just being able to enjoy a lovely setting to your surrounding office environment; it encourages people/employees to spend time outside — think fresh air, greenery, sunlight, and keeping active.

In terms of location, having really good public transport connections or even cycling facilities, will have an impact on both the employee's health and the environment. Having amenities situated "near enough" will encourage people/employees to take time off and leave their work spaces, encouraging one to get mobile/active, yet without requiring the use of a motorised/carbon-emitting vehicle.

The end goal is to encourage "active transport", which in turn reduces building associated transport emissions Huggett informed. Side benefits include better health as being active is good for the heart and overall wellbeing.

COMFORTABLE AND PERSONAL WORK SPACES

According to Huggett, giving people some personal freedom over their work space can increase productivity by about 3%. She suggests allowing staff the freedom to open windows (if at all they have access to a window) for appropriate lighting and temperature control of their working environment. She also says flexible seating arrangements, as in having the free-hand to decide where to sit, has an impact, on the company, the individual and the environment.

From "hoteling" (unassigned/reservable office spaces) to "hot desking" (minus the reserve function, which turns out like a first-come, first-served concept) and "alternative workplace strategy" (covering a broader idea of work spaces that define work zones beyond the usual cubicles and offices, as in outdoors or even indoors as in huddles in conference rooms, office pantries, etc.) — as in all circumstances, there are pros and cons.

However, Huggett shared that office designs which include more social spaces and visible staircases are one of her favourite health and wellbeing elements. "These are

brilliant thinking; they get people to move around more and interact with their colleagues more," she explained.

The freedom to choose one's preferred work area and being able to select comfortable surroundings and control temperatures have positive effects; based on the idea of creating stronger social groups that can produce better business results and cultivating better chi/positive energy, etc.

This "conscious design" also uses less energy without the need for lifts. However, Huggett added, "It doesn't work as well in high rise situations though. But even if within the floors of your spaces, people could take the lift up to your portion of the high rise at the beginning of the day, then the rest of the day, move between the different floors via the staircase."

In open-plan office layouts, the resulting background noise may pose a problem for concentration. Huggett recommends designing a variety of spaces so people can choose quiet or noisy areas to suit their preference. "Having a wide variety of space and the option to choose actually really helps people to move around and maximise their productivity at any one point."

Towards the end of her talk, Huggett shared that there is no point having healthy buildings which are good for the environment but not the people.

In her role at the UK-GBC, Huggett says: "People respond to the 'health in productivity' argument in a way that they don't with sustainability. Campaigning and working towards a more sustainable-built environment is always good for people in the long-run." She summons governments and those in the building industry to create buildings that are not just good for the environment, but supports healthier, happier and more productive lives.

THE BENEFITS OF GREEN BUILDINGS

There are many benefits to gain the environment, the economy and the people, across various levels. Plus points go beyond economics and the environment, and have been shown to bring positive social impact. Health and wellbeing of people who work in green offices or live in green homes are notably better.

- ▶ Workers in green, well-ventilated offices record a 101% increase in cognitive scores (brain function) — Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health / Syracuse University Center of Excellence / SUNY Upstate Medical School, 2015.
- ▶ Employees in offices with windows slept an average of 46 minutes more per night — American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2013.
- ▶ Research suggests that better indoor air quality (low concentrations of CO₂ and pollutants, and high ventilation rates) can lead to improvements in performance of up to 8% — Park and Yoon, 2011.

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