

---

# WELLBEING IN THE WORKPLACE

Part 4 of 4 Wellbeing series: **The Impact of Design on Employee Wellbeing.**



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This is the last release in our 'Wellbeing in the Workplace' series. Our research details the impact of design in the workplace from the employee perspective. This release highlights, the top ten most important design elements that contribute to good wellbeing in the workplace; also a discussion on the benefits to an organisation that embeds wellbeing into the workplace design.

## 2.0 THE BENEFITS OF DESIGNING WITH WELLBEING IN MIND

Fostering employee wellbeing is good for employees and organisations, in the most successful cases wellbeing considerations run through all elements of the employee experience, from the services or initiatives offered to the design and physical environment that people are working in. Encouraging and promoting wellbeing can prevent stress and contributes to positive working relationships whereby employees and organisations can thrive, encouraging these working relationships can be enhanced using design.

In this section we look at the outcomes and key benefits of well implemented Wellbeing initiatives through physical environment and additional complimentary services, from both the employee and organisation's perspective.

### 2.1 Employee & Organisation benefits

If organisations place employees' health and Wellbeing as a priority, they can demonstrate that they have a commitment to improving their worklife. Wellbeing needs to be seen and experienced. We are all affected by our environments and workplace design has a big part to play in how employees behave. Investing in employee wellbeing can lead to:

- Increased employee engagement
- Increased resilience
- Healthier and inclusive culture
- Increased employee morale and engagement
- Reduced sickness
- Higher performance and productivity day to day.

Our research highlighted that wellbeing services/ initiatives can fall short of their intended impact and potential if they are stand alone and isolated. To gain the benefits, employee wellbeing must run through every grain of an organisation and be embedded in its culture, physical environment, leadership and management attitudes for the employee's and organisation to reap the rewards. In return, an organisation can also expect to maintain employee loyalty and reduce turnover of staff, attract top talent, reduce presenteeism, and increase motivation.

Our research shows that when employees feel their work is meaningful, fair, feel valued and are supported by their organisation people have better wellbeing and feel more committed to the organisation's goals and values. Supportive workplaces benefit everyone, employees, the employer, organisation, customers and the bottom line.

At the core of all good wellbeing services/ initiatives is behaviour change, our environment can encourage and persuade people to behave in more productive and positive ways. With the right set of tools, including education, appropriate spaces, motivation and social support, people change behaviours.

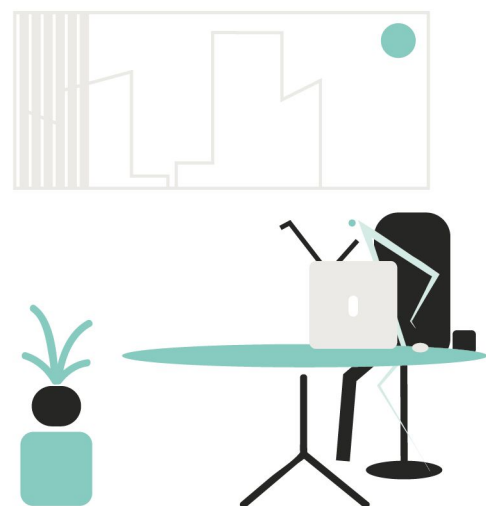
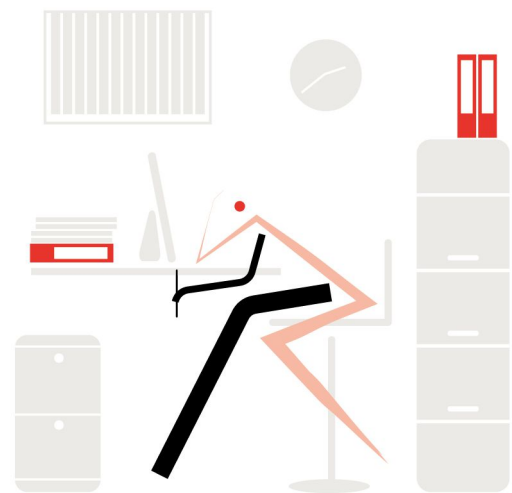
We spoke with Paul Dare – Head of Design at Morgan Lovell who discussed the benefits of a well-designed workplace on wellbeing, he said:

*“You want employees to be welcomed into work, enjoy work while they are there and for people to feel comfortable in the workspace. In return a company can benefit in many ways, some include a more productive workforce, increases profit based on higher productivity, less absenteeism and a positive culture which you see and feel”*

When you consider wellbeing in all areas of the employee experience including, the physical environment people have more personal drive, ambition and feel more inspired within their careers. One interviewee stated:

*“Our office has recently been redesigned, I feel more inspired and valued by the company that they invested in our working spaces. There are more options of spaces where I can do different types of work and we now have a wellbeing space which is useful. My experience at work is now more positive, there is a space where we can do yoga classes during the day, the canteen is offering healthier food options and has a better range of seating areas”.*

The same interviewee discussed how they were feeling stressed at work and wanted to continue to work from home as much as possible. However, now their office has been redesigned, they want to be back in to enjoy. The changes to the workplace which in turn, will support people to do their jobs better than before.



## 2.1 International WELL Building Institute

A good quality workplace leads to a less stressful and more productive atmosphere. The design and space we work in is a valuable business investment, if you invest in your workplace, you are ultimately investing in your people. The International WELL Building Institute is a tool for advancing human health and wellbeing into design, construction, and operations of buildings and backed by the latest scientific research. The certification is a set of strategies that outline performance standards for design interventions, operational protocols, and policies to support and foster a culture of health and wellbeing. Organisations can register their office or building to gain 'WELL' Certification which subsequently provides a roadmap on how to improve health and human experience through design. This people first approach has now more than 11,000 certified projects globally.

We spoke with Whitney Austin Gray (Senior Vice President at International WELL Building Institute) who discussed the organisational benefits to gaining a WELL certified building accreditation. Whitney stated:

*“Employees are your greatest asset...investing in people as an asset is demonstrating your purpose as an organisation. Being able to track and validate your investment and not just showing you have put forward effort but demonstrating the effect of that effort is important”*

*“Organisations reporting to stakeholders and shareholders use WELL to report what they are doing for the health and Wellbeing of their employees, this makes the invisible visible through certification which is also recognised by employees”*

The rating system is based on ten concepts which includes: Air, water, nourishment, light, movement, thermal comfort, sound, materials, mind, and community. Each of these concepts has further features with health intents. The process begins by registering your project on the WELL website (<https://www.well-certified.com/>) then you are guided through further stages. There is a range of certification levels that include bronze, silver, gold, and platinum offered depending on budget, circumstances and outcomes achieved.



Whitney Austin Gray



## 3.0 HOW EMPLOYEE'S VIEW THE DESIGN OF THEIR WORKPLACE

The surrounding environment has a dramatic impact on our wellbeing, which creates an important focus on the design of the workplace. Organisations should look to integrate Wellbeing into the design to support other services and initiatives they offer. Our research identified a top 10 list following the conclusion of twenty-two interviews carried out. The list highlights what is important to employees in relation to the design of their workplace and what change people are wanting/ expecting to see in the future.

These findings will support employee wellbeing in the workplace and contribute to overall satisfaction at work.

### 1. Available spaces away from the desk:

Employees want to be able to escape to another space to take breaks, have lunch, make a phone call etc. in a space that is different from the working area. It is important to people that they feel valued by their organisation, and this can be translated by providing a good quality, well designed space that is not filled with corporate branding and looks different to the main office space. Interviewees have discussed how this would make them feel their wellbeing is valued by the organisation if provided.

### 2. Choice of spaces for work or rest:

Our research suggests that there needs to be a few breakout spaces that are varied and different from one another. A variety in amount and design of the setting which considers views, seating, privacy, temperature, and comfort allow for options and choice. The more variety there is available the more it will suit the needs of the users. If someone is feeling a particular way, they would be able to find a space that works for them at that time and can defuse a situation.

**3. Workspace/ desk set up:** An important and practical element that enables employees to do the best they can in their job. Good quality desk chairs to ergonomically support the body, good IT and appropriate equipment required for the role. Employees are wanting to be offered good quality furniture that supports physical wellbeing which is flexible/ adjustable, catering for a wider audience.

### 4. Soft furnishings in breakout spaces:

Employees are wanting elements of comfort in the workplace. This has grown in importance since having to work from home due to COVID19. Employees have been used to working with their home comforts surrounding them. Employees want their organisations to offer a more comfortable environment. Our research showed that the need to incorporate soft furnishings is important for people who work in high stress environments such as military, finance, policing etc.

### 5. Range of different seating:

Interviewees discussed how they want to have good supportive seating for all areas. When breaks are taken, people want to move to more comfortable softer seating. Being able to put your feet up or get into a different position is good for the body.

### 6. Views and artwork:

Employees want things to look at. In roles where there are lots of screens, break out spaces need to avoid having TVs to offer a break from constant information. Artwork around the workplace is well received by employees. Elements of biophilia is popular to support and enhance wellbeing, this is known to calm the mind.

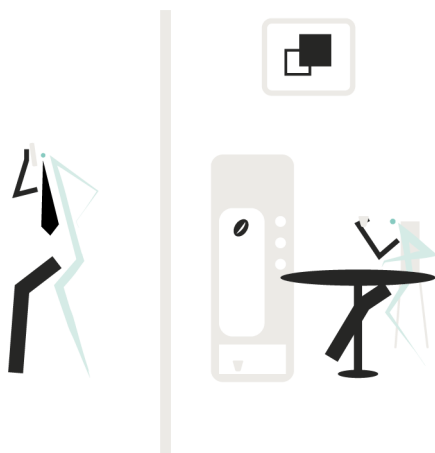
**7. Privacy in breakout spaces:** Sense of being watched by management discourages the use of these spaces. Interviewees highlighted the need (Particularly in industries and roles where people are exposed to trauma or high stress) to have private booths or pods where you can be alone with no interruptions to recover or take a break. Breakout spaces could be positioned so the rest of the office is not able to directly see into it, in some cases people feel judged when they are in breakout areas not working. If people can be observed whilst in this area, then there is a lower tendency to use the space.

**8. Natural lighting:** Employees value having lots of natural light in the office. Maximising this where possible has an impact on wellbeing our research identified. Interviewees discussed past/ current experiences of being in offices that are in basements or do not have many windows that let in light making their working environment darker. Employees felt that darker spaces made them feel more tired in the afternoons and felt more disorientated when going out for lunch if it was sunny outside. Natural lighting is a basic wellbeing human need and can improve performance, boost productivity, and help staff feel more engaged.

**9. Space for wellbeing activities:** Employees want to be able to take time during their working day for their own wellbeing, if an organisation creates a space for wellbeing it is noted that productivity goes up. Having a space that is flexible to host a range of different activities such as yoga classes, Reiki sessions or reading has been discussed. Employees feel that there is not enough space being allocated for wellbeing in some sectors where this is possible. Interviewees felt this would encourage more activities to be organised in the workplace, making it more accessible and possible to take part.

**10. Layout:** With more meetings now being held virtually, employees are concerned that noise will increase, and they will find the workplace difficult to concentrate with lots of meetings happening around them. Although open plan workspaces can work well when designed to encourage and foster communities the design and layout of workspaces need to include and consider individual spaces for people to take virtual meetings, such as pods or small rooms. Organisations should avoid being able to see from one side of the building to the other but create team 'neighbourhoods' where employees take ownership of their areas, but that are not closed off from other teams. Interviewees that were not in open plan spaces that created communities felt that this would be a positive way of working rather than feeling more isolated.

A community style open plan office space can result in higher performance because employees feel part of a neighbourhood which allows for ease of collaboration and common purpose. Localised areas such as a kitchen creates hotspots for other teams to naturally integrate and socialise.





**Quotes taken from interviews:**

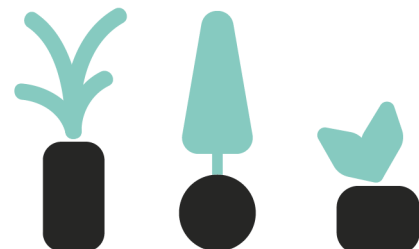
*“...psychologists were brought in to help the team. Psychologist noticed that it was an all-male environment with laptops and weapons everywhere. She requested to get some potted plants and soft furnishings, this was not much but created a nicer space to try and bring a bit of a softer feel to a hostile fighting environment. Went down well with the group, the human touch even with tough people”.*

*“Introducing biophilia is very important and something that has an impact on us. Even just looking at images of biophilia calms people down”*

*“We have informal meeting areas that have different groups of seating, you can easily take private calls or meet with a colleague in a more comfortable setting. It makes you feel more refreshed when you return to your desk when you are able to have somewhere else to go to”*

*“In our office there is space for wellbeing, but the chairs are desk chairs and there is nothing else in the room. It needs comfortable seating, reading material, plants and soft furnishings to feel more like a space for wellbeing”*

Based on our research, employees have more knowledge and expectation from their organisations on how wellbeing is approached. The design of the workspace is important to people so they feel they can do their jobs to the best of their ability, feel energised, motivated, and engaged.



## 4.0 WELLBEING FACTORS IN THE DESIGN

Wellbeing in the workplace is about how a space is designed. A space to make staff feel better. Ultimately trying to reduce stress levels and make the workplace more a welcoming environment to come into and be more productive in.

Paul Dare (Head of Design at Morgan Lovell) discussed with us some of the considerations that workplace designers bring in when designing for the wellbeing of employees. This includes:

**Biophilia:** You need to consider what can be done to make people feel less stressed at work. A popular topic and the easiest way of doing this is by adding elements of Biophilia, adding nature to a space. Biophilia does not need to be plants, it could be as simple as adding earthy green tones to a space. Biophilia has been proven to lower stress levels and improve productivity by 8% and improves air quality.

**Air Quality:** This is key to the workplace. The fresher air we get, the better we feel. It can decrease feeling lethargic and affecting our moods.

**Circulation in the space:** Rows of desks are a thing of the past, broken up desk groups create better working environments. Desks groups can be broken up by different settings and types of workstations. If you want to have a small or 121 meeting or do concentrated work, it can be done away from our desks in other suitable spaces.

**Furniture:** Furniture plays a huge part in wellbeing in the workplace. The flexibility of the desk is important. The size of the desk is getting smaller as technology gets better, desks that can move up and down to provide flexibility in how you work is good for your posture, blood circulation and body encouraging movement in people within our day to day working style, not just sat at a desk all day. The ergonomics of the chairs that are provided needs to be adjustable to suit what the individual needs and offer support to the body.

**Materials:** There are many innovative materials available that support wellbeing and health within the workplace. For example, you may decide to choose a material with antibacterial properties in it such as carpet. These types of carpets grab and holds onto dust until its hoovered at the end of the day, this means the air quality is going to be better. Consideration into materials that either reflect or absorb lighting depending on the space you are creating as well as noise absorbing materials aiming to lower sound levels supports the wellbeing of employees.

**Light:** We all need a certain amount of vitamin D per day. Morgan Lovell suggests you need to be within seven metres of natural light in the office and should be able to see natural light wherever you are sat. If this is not possible such as working in a basement then boosted lighting needs to be adequate to give supplement light.



## 5.0 WELLBEING FOCUSED DESIGN

In this section we look at two examples where organisations have undergone an office re-design, with a focus on improving employee wellbeing, that has resulted in effective and successful results. Both projects were designed by Morgan Lovell, who are leaders in the UK workplace design sector.

### 5.1 The Body Shop HQ, London Bridge.

Wellbeing was at the top of the agenda for The Body Shop HQ workspace. The new design was an opportunity to celebrate their cultural values and created a working environment that was sustainable, collaborative, and inclusive.

#### Key areas of the design:

**Sustainability:** It was important that The Body Shop's HQ reinforced the company ethos of sustainability. As many materials as possible from the existing building were re-used or recycled. Other sustainable design features included the reception desk which is made from recycled timber with the top surface made from compressed plastic waste retrieved from the ocean.

**Layout:** The new design adopted a collaborative open plan layout with desks laid out in agile clusters allowing for optimum productivity. Wellbeing was a focus for this design, and it was ensured that there were no seats more than seven metres from natural daylight. Designated quiet zones and library were created for concentrated work. Meeting rooms with glass fronts to create a sense of community were also included. Breakout spaces for relaxing including bean bags and TV's.

**Nature:** Linking to The Body Shop's sustainable roots, introducing biophilia was important part of the design. Natural materials, minimally treated timber and an earthy yet vibrant colour palette allowed for a backdrop to the foliage across the office space.



Communal space - Body Shop HQ



Privacy booths - Body Shop HQ



Open plan layout - Body Shop HQ

## 5.2 WaterAid, Canary Wharf.

WaterAid wanted to change the way their teams interacted with one another. As a charity, transparency through the project was highly important. Morgan Lovell consulted representatives from each team to find out how they could get the most out of the space involved users in the process to understand employee needs. Wellbeing and accessibility were one of the design focusses for this project.

### Key areas of the design:

**Hanging divide:** The office design is open plan; acoustics were important to enable comfortable noise levels but balancing with open communication. Movable hanging wall dividers allowed for smaller spaces to be re-configured, dividers have acoustic properties but could be opened to be more collaborative.

**Central tea point/ hub:** This area encourages time away from desks and a chance to refresh. It also provides an alternative work setting and brings people together. WaterAid wanted a flexible wellbeing area that could double as a townhall setting to host events or meetings. The colour palette in this space was inspired by the brand colours paired with nature-inspired finishes.

**Choose your own workspace:** The overall floorplate is 25,000sq ft. Flexible partitions enables the space to evolve as the use of the space does with standing tables, writable walls, and workstations with the aim to encourage collaboration. Teams can decide how to use the spaces and set them up to how best works for them. Included in the open plan space are individual phone pods, smaller soundproofed spaces to allow for confidential conversations. An area to record podcasts allowed for WaterAid to create material to support fundraising which saved them money on renting studio fees. Furniture was chosen to encourage new ways of working.

**Maximum light, minimum glare:** The space has floor to ceiling windows which was enhanced as a feature with views over Canary Wharf. Workstations were an off white to minimise glare and were positioned around the space to maximise the exposure to natural light and vitamin D.

**Wellbeing and accessibility:** Accessibility was considered in all areas of the design from height-adjustable workstations, accessible door handles including under-kitchen cupboards. To support employee wellbeing a mother's room was introduced, a prayer/ wellbeing space and with the movable partitions the space can offer lunch time yoga sessions.

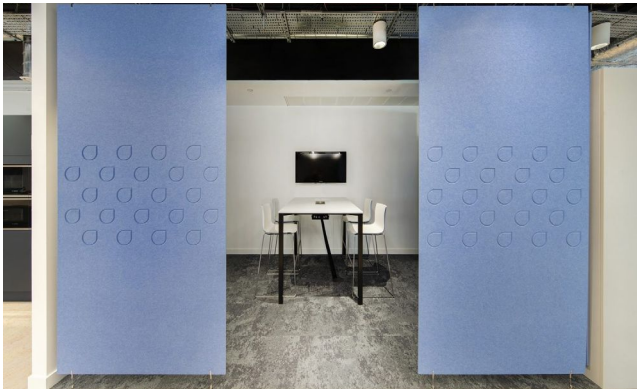
**Sustainability:** Sustainable and recycled materials were important for this project. A third of the existing furniture was integrated into the new design to avoid waste. All new furniture was sustainably sourced and environmentally friendly.



Staff kitchen - WaterAid



Central Tea point/ hub - WaterAid



Hanging dividers - WaterAid

Overall, 64% felt the physical environment has a positive impact on their wellbeing, this is encouraging and shows that organisations are aware of the importance of the workspaces, but this still leaves a combined percentage of 30% of participants feeling their environment has some impact or significant impact negatively on their wellbeing. Whilst most participants were positively affected by their surroundings at work, 6% are not aware of being positively or negatively affected by their surroundings at work.

## 6.0 DATA FROM SURVEY

The first question allowed for survey participants to choose more than one answer from a selection and the option for additional comments.

### 6.1 Survey Analysis

#### **Q: How do you feel the physical space you work in impacts on your wellbeing?**

During the interview phase of our research, it became evident that the majority of people were aware of the impact of the physical environment on their wellbeing. This depended on the nature of the job, for jobs within the public sector such as policing and NHS roles people were less aware of their environments having an impact on their wellbeing in the workplace. When investigated further, the workplace for these roles is not just within the confinements of a physical space, they are also outside. Employees that work in high stress environments such as military, policing or finance, discussed the need for a dedicated space that is used for employee wellbeing, a place to go to for recovery after experiencing workplace trauma/ stress, either with colleagues or to be alone. The results from this question highlighted 35% of survey participants felt that their workplaces positively affected their wellbeing significantly.

#### **Results:**

- ↑ **35%** Significant impact – I feel my wellbeing is **POSITIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- 29%** Some impact – I feel my wellbeing could be **POSITIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- 18%** Significant impact – I feel my wellbeing is **NEGATIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- 12%** Some impact – I feel my wellbeing could be **NEGATIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- 4%** I am not aware of my wellbeing being **NEGATIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- 2%** I am not aware of my wellbeing being **POSITIVELY** affected by my surroundings at work
- ↓ **0%** Other – Please specify



## Q: Is there more your employer could do to support wellbeing? \*Multiple answers

The results from this question heavily focussed on employees feeling that their organisations could allocate more time to wellbeing. At 84%, this is a significant percentage and far higher than the others. Our interview research suggests the same outcome; employees are given a workload that is not manageable and therefore unable to take time out of a working week to dedicate to their personal wellbeing. Initiatives such as team activities, walks, classes etc are very welcomed by the participants of our research but they rarely engage due to not being able to take the time. If organisations could propose a dedicated time slot weekly or daily for everyone to block time out to undertake something for themselves, there would be a significant improvement of employee engagement with the services being provided.

The second highest score at 38% shows that participants feel more money could be allocated to employee wellbeing. During our interview research it was recognised that employees want to feel valued and understood by their senior leaders, one of the areas that this links with is the wellbeing services people are being offered and how much of this was for the benefit of the employee. Employees expect their organisations to make a financial commitment to support and encourage their wellbeing, some services that worked particularly well for some of our interview participants included offering to cover the costs for a number of hours per week for childcare if in need, massages at your desk and enabling employee's some hours per week to participate in wellbeing services.

From an organisation perspective, investment into wellbeing accreditation such as the WELL Building Standards would ensure that wellbeing is deep rooted into the physical environment and provide all the required basics to satisfy employees in the workplace.

## Results:

**84%** Allocate more time to wellbeing initiatives

**38%** Allocate more money to wellbeing initiatives

**32%** Allocate more space to wellbeing initiatives

**10%** Other

## Survey participant comments to this question included:

*“Change the blame culture that exists in the organisation”*

*“Let staff know that they are supportive and serious about encouraging staff to engage in self-care--that there will not be repercussions for taking necessary time or asking for accommodations”*

*“A fairer pay structure”*

*“Train managers on the positive impacts to the business if they look after staff wellbeing”*

*“Better options need to be available”*



## 7.0 WHAT IS THE DATA COMMUNICATING?

The surroundings in which we work in are recognised as having an impact on our wellbeing whether this is positively or negatively. A greater focus is being put on the design and considerations of the workspaces we are provided with; this has increased in importance since working from home due to COVID19.

During this time, we all had to adapt our homes to allow for working from home. Over time employees have been able to make their working spaces personalised and individual, surrounding themselves with items/ objects that they wish to, positioning their desks the way they want to and having a space set up with all their preferences.

Paul Dare (Head of Design at Morgan Lovell) gave his thoughts on this and said:

*“People are wanting more personalisation than before. The pandemic has changed the way we work. When people go back to the office it needs to offer more than it used to. Employees are expecting more”*

The survey data communicates the importance of the design of the working environment. The majority of employees do feel the impact of the design on their wellbeing. Our research shows that employees feel more valued by the organisation when they work in offices that have been designed to provide improved facilities to enable employees to do their best work.

## 8.0 TIPS ON HOW TO USE DESIGN TO ENHANCE WELLBEING

It's important that you firstly have all the foundation blocks to a 'well' workplace, which supports employees to do their jobs to their best potential and for wellbeing to be built into the architecture and culture of the organisation. Once these are in place other elements can be considered, such as the design.

Wellbeing in the workplace is about creating spaces of psychological and, physical safety along with having the sense of belonging. This can be done through artefacts, design and by having an awareness of inclusion by making people feel welcome.

Dr. Melissa Steach (Workplace Wellbeing Knowledge Lead at Herman Miller) spoke to us and gave her thoughts on how wellbeing can be incorporated into the design:

**1. Remove labels** - Think beyond creating a yoga room or exercise space and remove labels from things. Integrating wellbeing into the organisation rather than having to assign a particular physical space to undertake wellbeing activities. Create opportunities for wellbeing along the workplace's natural pathways where you can spontaneously and easily take a break, have a private discussion etc.

**2. Furniture and accessories** – Comfortable, supportive seating is important. Use good ergonomic desk chairs to undertake work activities, and in other spaces like breakout areas there must be comfortable seating that is appropriate for a variety of tasks. Be mindful that seating heights and dimensions are not too lounge-like as it can be more difficult to get out of this type of seating. Provide a place where you can put your feet up, people often forget about this but having your feet up is comfortable and provides ergonomic benefits alongside feeling good.

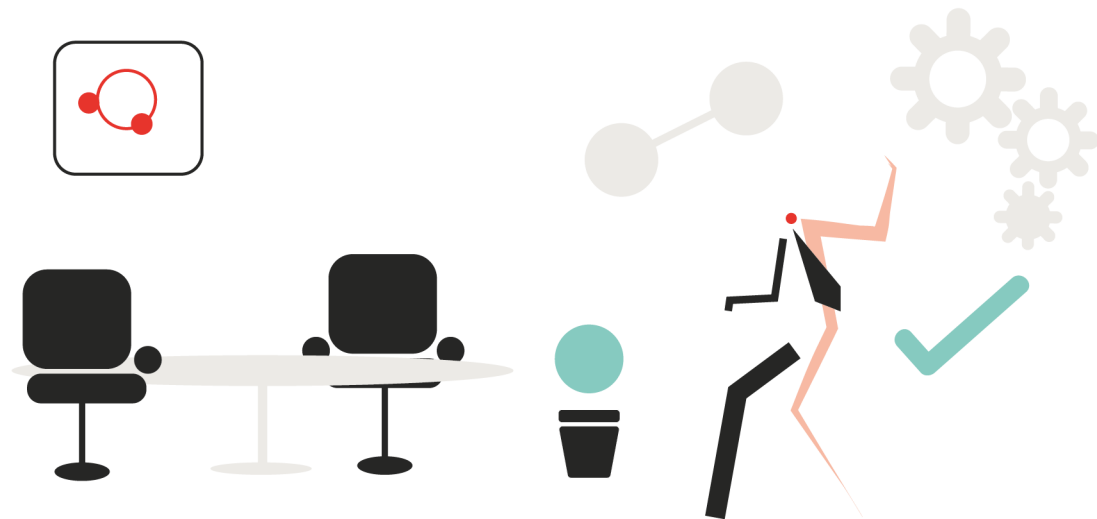
Provide coffee tables that are of a good height and not low level where you will bash your knees and need to uncomfortably lean forward to use it. These tables must be easily moved to provide the user with flexibility if you want it to the side of your seat or in front of you where you can spread documents out for an informal discussion with a colleague.

**3. Movement** - Include items that offer movement, this brings spaces alive and can be done with the addition of a feature such as a water station or visual screens.



*Dr. Melissa Steach*





## 9.0 SUMMARY

Our research highlighted that the interviewees who worked in organisations who were underinvesting in the design, basic needs and appearance of the workspaces were not as positive about their wellbeing in the workplace; they were also less likely to engage with any of the other wellbeing services / initiatives being offered. These results are testament to the changes the physical environment can have on an employee's life both physically and mentally. The design and appearance of the working environment is important to employees but not at the expense of the effectiveness.

Understanding what employees need to be great at their job is a vital part of the process. Most people do not want to be an average employee, people like praise and rewards for being great at what they do. The organisation must provide those tools, otherwise employees cannot be great at their jobs, they will feel demotivated and mental wellbeing can be impacted with the absence of the infrastructure enabling them to be great.

## 10.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the interview and survey participants, your insights into your experience with wellbeing in the workplace informed this article, thank you to all the professionals that were part of our research process for this release and included:

**Paul Dare**, Head of Design at Morgan Lovell

**Whitney Austin Gray**, Senior Vice President at International WELL Building Institute

**Dr. Melissa Steach**, Workplace Wellbeing Knowledge Lead at Herman Miller.

---

Author of Article: **Stephanie Butcher**  
Illustrations created by: **Marc Knight**

---