

The Healthy Workplace

How to Improve the Well-Being of Your Employees—and Boost Your Company's Bottom Line

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Synopsis

What constitutes a healthy workplace? Why do work and good health operate in opposition? What is making our working life so unhealthy? How can we change the environment to create successful business through workplace and employee vitality?

The Healthy Workplace (AMACOM, © 2016) illustrates the process of creating a healthy work environment using three main concepts:

- health issues caused by work and why the workplace is the appropriate realm to remediate them
- what makes human beings operate most efficiently and what can be done at work to support that optimization
- companies that have been successful with employee optimization through workplace health initiatives and how to build a business case of your own

The key concepts of *The Healthy Workplace* can be distilled into the following steps:

1. Understand the history of work. Getting a complete picture of the evolution of the workplace will help you to understand how it has become so unhealthy. Each era has its own specific challenges—from dangerous factories in the industrial era to non-stop sitting and staring at screens in our own.
2. Employ and encourage healthy practices. There are three main areas that require attention: energy, stress, and sleep. These are fundamental to optimizing human potential.
3. Change the physical design of the workspace. If possible, alter the physical work environment to include natural elements, create relaxation areas, and provide opportunities for exercise. Companies may have limited resources and space, but small changes can have an impact.
4. Build a culture of health. Leadership must demonstrate that a healthy workplace and healthy employees are a priority. This may take time and include a few missteps.

The basic elements of keeping us at our healthy best include getting enough sleep, good nutrition, integrating movement and exercise throughout the day, maintaining healthy stress levels, and working in a

healthy environment. What our minds and bodies need at a basic level is in conflict with our work style.

Based on *The Healthy Workplace: How to Improve the Well-Being of Your Employees—and Boost Your Company's Bottom Line* by Leigh Stringer, we discuss how to create a healthier working culture and improve financial earnings. We share our interpretations of these methods in the following pages.

How Did We Get Here?

Our sedentary lifestyle is a function of technological advancement. Of course, not all workers are seated for most of their workdays, but even manufacturing organizations and companies whose workers do manual labor can benefit from some of the suggestions in *The Healthy Workplace*. Technological advancements, workers' rights movements, and child labor laws have helped to take away some of the more unpleasant aspects of labor: repetitive activities, overly long hours in dangerous conditions, and injustice for children.

Where We Came From

For most of human history, work has involved some type of physical effort. We began as hunters and gatherers. After figuring out how to cultivate crops and domesticate animals, we stayed put, but work still involved a lot of physical output. With the advent of the industrial age, machines began taking over some of the more strenuous physical activities, making work more efficient and less taxing. However, factory life brought those workers indoors and subjected them to dangerous conditions with a lack of good air and light quality.

With the transformation from factory life to office life, some things changed for the better, but there were drawbacks as well. Although the dark, airless, smoky, and dangerous factory was exchanged for a better-lit and less dangerous office space, the design of most large offices still resemble a factory with its rows of workers and unnatural light. In addition, although recent laws have banned smoking from most indoor communal spaces, the air quality/circulation in most offices is poor.

The office worker has exchanged overtly dangerous conditions for covertly dangerous conditions. According to Stringer's research, 70 percent of Americans are overweight. Other nations are rapidly catching up. Being overweight leads to a whole catalogue of other health issues, including high blood pressure, musculoskeletal injury, heart disease, and various cancers. Of course, these cause many missed days of work as well. The lack of physical activity at work may be just as bad for us as those dark, dangerous factories.

Where We Are Headed

The Healthy Workplace offers two scenarios for our future: 1) we continue along the path of a sedentary lifestyle with no remediation and 2) we make some fundamental changes to the work environment. If we maintain the current path, employees will get sicker, health

care costs will continue to rise, and business will struggle with productivity and profitability. We spend most of our day working and yet our style of work – sedentary, poor nutrition, poor air quality and physical environment – is taking a toll on our overall well-being.

The majority of this book is devoted to exploring what our human bodies and minds need to function at an optimal level and how to bring those elements into the workplace. It is an exciting, creative, positive message. Small changes can have a big impact and a cascading effect on the work environment. It is possible to re-energize the workforce and to make companies more financially successful as a result.

Optimizing Human Performance

We all want to perform our best at work. We want to have energy, focus, and creativity, to be good employees and good leaders, and to set an example. To achieve this, we need to add some things to our day and remove others. These changes can be made on an individual level as well as on a comprehensive, workplace cultural level. The most effective way to sustain change is to change the overall environment of a workplace, which means leadership must show the way.

Energy

On a basic level, energy comes from fuel and activity. For humans, food is our fuel. In most developed nations, the trend towards processed, calorie-dense, nutrition-poor foods is on the wane. Unfortunately, it has done some irreversible damage to our populations—never before have the poor been the most overweight segment of the population. The most inexpensive food is plentiful and loaded with sugar, processed grains, and artificial flavors and colors. Happily, there is a movement to bring us back to eating real, unprocessed food.

Good nutrition is the foundation of our energy resources, both in quality and quantity. Eating poor quality food or too much food is associated with low energy, poor listening skills, disengagement, fatigue, and apathy. Experts in nutrition recommend eating every two to four hours: three meals and two to three healthy snacks. This strategy stabilizes glucose levels, improves metabolism, prevents muscle loss, and enhances energy levels, brain function and mood.

Activity is the other fundamental component of our energy resource. On a cellular level, it is the mitochondria that provide power to our human engine and it may be surprising to learn that they are not a fixed resource. Activity can actually increase the number of mitochondria in our bodies. Therefore, while we may think of physical activity as expending energy, it also creates energy. So, in addition to adding better nutrition, Stringer also suggests that adding movement to our workday will bolster energy levels as well.

Stress

You may have heard the phrase, “stress is the number one killer” in modern life. Indeed, the author reports that stress can contribute to anxiety disorders, depression, digestive

issues, heart disease, sleep problems, weight gain, and memory/concentration impairment. In the workplace, it reduces our ability to make well-considered decisions. While a certain amount of stress from competition or a looming deadline can have a positive effect on our creativity and productivity, overall, there is too much detrimental stress in the workplace.

Some of that detrimental stress is mental and some is physical. The mental stress comes from such things as long working hours, attempting to do too many things at one time, and not taking a break. Technology allows us to take work with us wherever we are and companies have come to expect employees to respond to emails or continue working on projects during personal time—either after working hours or during vacations. In addition, according to Stringer's research, US employees use only about half of their eligible paid time off.

As a result, employees are expecting too much from their diminished stores of energy, which can lead to ailments such as depression and heart disease. Adding to that are physical stressors such as spending too much time in one position and in ergonomically unfriendly furniture. Poor light and air quality also contribute to environmental stressors as well as simply spending too much time indoors. Eliminating negative stress from the workplace will serve both employees and the business in general.

Sleep

Sleep is health issue that goes to the core of our ability to learn, heal, and function. It is perhaps more important to our bodies than good nutrition. Stringer reports that nearly half of the world's population is plagued by sleep problems. People are chronically tired and, therefore, not performing at an optimum level. According to a study in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, productivity losses owing to fatigue cost companies approximately \$2000 per employee annually.

The Centers for Disease Control, as reported in *The Health Workplace*, says that between 50 and 70 million American adults are sleep deprived. Sleep deprivation is linked to car accidents and chronic diseases and conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, and depression. Stringer's research indicates that lack of sleep results in impaired cognitive and physical function, as well as suppression of creative thinking. Shift workers are particularly susceptible to changes in their circadian rhythms, resulting in sleep disturbance.

There are many ways companies can help their employees to get more sleep. Some have gone to the extent (and expense) of installing napping areas or sleep pods, but discouraging after-hours work and leading by example in that area may be just as effective. Also, encouraging employees to take regular breaks during the day, especially to engage in some kind of physical activity (preferably outdoors); to eliminate caffeine intake after 4:00; and to use their vacation time are just some of the ways changes at work can positively impact the night's sleep.

Success Story

Dr. Jim Loehr and Dr. Jack Groppel of the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute developed a Corporate Athlete® course based upon their work training elite athletes. Their research and experience pointed to four aspects of energy—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—which require a carefully orchestrated combination of fuel, activity, and environment to optimize. After taking the course, employees reported that they had more energy and better mental, emotional, and general health even 18 months after finishing the course.

The return on investment (ROI) for Johnson & Johnson was significant. With improvements in employee health, the company saved an annual average of \$565 per employee (2009 figures), resulting in an ROI of \$1.88 to \$3.92 saved for every dollar spent on the program. Their average annual medical spending was 3.7 percentage points below comparable companies. Aside from cost savings, the company also benefitted from employees who were more engaged and productive, resulting in business growth.

The Physical Workplace

Physical modifications to the workplace can have a tremendous impact on employee health and productivity. From simply changing the color of a wall or installing artwork that depicts images of nature to replacing the entire lighting system, small and grand modifications alike will improve the workplace environment. If you consider the tenets of the real estate industry, the highest bids go to properties in the most desirable locations and with the best views. People want to live—and work—in a place that makes them feel good.

Nature, Color, and Light

The Healthy Workplace describes our human longing to be in a natural environment—biophilia. A report called *The Economics of Biophilia* by the environmental consulting firm, Terrapin Bright Green, asserted that people who spent time in nature had improved stress recovery rates, lower blood pressure, improved cognitive functions, enhanced mental stamina and focus, elevated moods, and increased learning rates. The challenge of bringing the benefits of biophilia to the workplace can be met in many ways.

Ideally, views of nature should be authentic—trees, mountains, and flowers, etc. just outside the window, with every employee afforded a daily view. However, that scenario is not often the case. To make up for it, employers can make sure that any part of the building that *does* have views to nature is accessible to all employees for at least part of the day. In addition, artwork on the walls, plants (real or imitation), natural materials such as wood grain countertops, and outdoor landscaping will bring the benefits of nature to the workplace.

Light and color are other key elements to simulating nature in the work environment. Stringer suggests maximizing any source of natural light by using glass for room dividers whenever privacy is not a concern, and choosing lighter colors for walls, ceilings, and furniture to reflect natural light. There are also specialty lighting systems that mimic natural light and cause less eye strain than traditional florescent lights. The author also provides a list of colors and their impact on mood and creative performance.

Sound and Air Quality

At work, people need an environment that is conducive to interaction, confidentiality, and concentration. Furthermore, they need to feel that they are in control of their sound environment. Distracting noises are more annoying if employees feel that they cannot get away from or redirect them when they are trying to concentrate. Likewise, if a confidential meeting is prohibited by an open floor plan, this can have a negative effect on an employee's mood and motivation. Space should always be available for interactions away from the general population.

As mentioned above, most people spend an inordinate time indoors. Poor quality air may contain abnormal levels of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, volatile organic compounds, as well as toxins that are emitted from building materials, furniture, and cleaning products. These components can cause headaches, aggravate allergies and asthma, and cause other illnesses. Inefficient air circulation promotes the spread of communicable diseases and can cause sick building syndrome. Maintaining good air quality is essential to a healthy workplace.

Ergonomics and Space to Move

Neck, back, and shoulder pain are common complaints among employees who spend much of their working day sitting. If they happen to be working in front of a screen, add headaches and eyestrain to the list. Our bodies are meant to move, not to remain stationary throughout the day. Making small adjustments to furniture (or replacing it entirely), screen, and mouse positions can have an enormous positive impact on daily comfort levels for those who do task work. It is worth a company's investment of time and money to improve ergonomics.

Employees who are required to remain in one spot for the majority of their workday must be given space to move when they take necessary breaks. According to Stringer, a physical environment that gives one the feeling of openness—tall ceilings, room to move around, reasonable distance between work stations—is more conducive to creativity and reduces stress. Nobody likes to feel crowded or boxed in.

Building a Culture of Health Requires Leadership

Understand the Causes of an Unhealthy Workplace

Become aware of how technological advancements and the quality of our food have led to a culture that is mostly sedentary and overweight. As we spend most of our waking hours at work, it makes sense that the workplace should enhance rather than detract from our health.

Cultivate an Energetic Workforce

Stock cafeterias and break rooms with healthy food and provide areas for employees to store and eat food brought from home. These areas should be clean and well-lit. Provide time and space for employees to exercise. When possible, choose a facility that is in a walkable neighborhood close to public transportation.

Eliminate Stressful Conditions

Establish policies around eliminating stressors that negatively influence health and productivity. Encourage employees to take breaks during the day and to use their vacation time. Allow employees to choose where, when, and how they work. Flexible schedules that accommodate children's school schedules or family emergencies boost employee morale and motivation.

Enhance the Physical Environment

Bring nature indoors as much as possible. Provide inspiring and relaxing views of nature and organic elements such as plants in the office. Make sure employees have access to natural light, clean air, and comfortable surroundings. Give them space to move around and provide an area for relaxation and recuperation. When possible, include an exercise area within the building.

Lead by Example

Create a healthy workplace environment with leadership showing the way. A memo instructing employees not to send email after 7 p.m. will be immediately invalidated if management continues the practice. If an area is provided for exercise, build time for these activities into the schedule and make sure leadership participates. Healthy changes will be sustained only if employees witness that change coming from the top.

For More Information

As our working lives have become more sedentary and food choices more plentiful but of poorer quality, our health has suffered. From obesity to musculoskeletal issues to stress, employees are coping with debilitating health issues that impact both their personal well-being and their company's financial well-being. Stringer believes that if we continue on this path, things will only get worse. However, she is hopeful that companies that have successfully implemented healthy workplace initiatives will inspire others to follow suit. Healthy employees have more energy, are more productive, miss fewer days owing to sickness, and create an atmosphere that is conducive to creativity and growth.

Leading companies and organizations are seeing immediate and long-lasting benefits from investing in the health and well-being of their

employees. Having healthy employees doesn't just reduce overhead spending. It also bolsters business success overall.

If you've enjoyed our insights on Leigh Stringer's *The Healthy Workplace*, we encourage you to access the other *The Healthy Workplace* assets in the Skillsoft library, or purchase the hardcopy.

About the Author

Leigh Stringer is a Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design Accredited Professional (LEED AP), workplace strategy expert, and researcher whose work has been covered by national media, including CNN, USA Today, the Wall Street Journal, and Good Morning America. She works for EYP, and architecture, engineering, and building technology firm.

Leigh works with corporate, government, higher education, and institutional clients to help them create sustainable and high-performing workplace environments that enhance well-being and human performance. She is currently collaborating with Harvard University's School of public health (and others) to create new tools to advance and improve our well-being at work.

More information can be found on her website:

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Also by Leigh Stringer

1. *The Green Workplace: Sustainable Strategies that Benefit Employees, the Environment and the Bottom Line*, Palgrave MacMillan, © 2010, ISBN 978-0230103368.