

# The Connection Between Well-Being and Creativity



Employee well-being has always been a hot topic among business leaders. But for the most part, conversations just center on the physical well-being of employees, which helps explain why so many new office spaces are filled with things like free snacks, a gym, play areas, etc. However, when addressing employee well-being, employers must look beyond the physical aspects of the work environment and take a longer look at the areas that can affect the mental health of their employees as well. This is especially important since employee well-being has a direct connection to creativity in the workplace, which, in turn, has a direct connection to a company's growth and prosperity.

Since well-being and creativity are so critical for the future of employees and businesses, it is even more important for a proper focus to be applied to what really matters in the workplace. In this paper, we identify areas of a business environment that could negatively, or positively, affect an employee's well-being connected to creativity.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Employee mental health is costing American companies billions in lost productivity
- Technology is blurring the line between office hours and personal time
- Creativity in the workplace is important for innovation, which is a key to the success of many companies
- Workplace design affects employee well-being and creativity
- Stress is the most serious threat to well-being in the future

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Section 1: What is employee well-being and why is it important?   | 3  |
| Section 2: What is creativity and why is it important?  | 5  |
| Section 3: An environment that supports wellness and well-being is critical for creativity, and creativity supports increased well-being. | 6  |
| Section 4: The effects of technology in the workplace.  | 8  |
| Section 5: The effect of workplace design on a company's creativity.  | 9  |
| Section 6: How to design an office space that promotes creativity and improves employee well-being.                                       | 11 |
| Sources   | 14 |

## SECTION 1

### *What is employee well-being and why is it important?*



With the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, Congress created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to assure safe and healthy working conditions for working men and women. President Richard Nixon signed it into law on December 29, 1970.

Thanks to the creation of OSHA, an employee's physical health is no longer in jeopardy while he or she is on the job. But employee well-being shouldn't be defined by just physical safety. Mental and emotional safety should also be taken into consideration.

People spend about a third of their waking hours at work. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that an employee's mental health can be affected by the working conditions that greet him or her on the job.

However, poor working conditions can sometimes go beyond just the physical environment. For example, rudeness is an issue many employees face during their workday.

According to an article in the *Harvard Business Review* coauthored by Christine Porath, Associate Professor of Management at Georgetown, when employees were asked why they were rude or uncivil, over 25% point to their leaders and say, "because they're disrespectful". Over 60% say that it's because they have no time to be nice.

Surprisingly, Professor Porath also points out the unintended consequences of workplace rudeness. Experiencing, or even just witnessing, this behavior at work, actually affects people's cognitive ability to focus. They're not able to remember things as well and they're far less creative.



Proof of this can be found in an experiment conducted by Amir Erez, a professor of management at the University of Florida. He found that participants in his experiment who were treated rudely by other subjects were 30% less creative than others in the study. They produced 25% fewer ideas, and the ideas they did come up with were less original.

A more positive work environment usually translates to a more positive attitude among employees. And when employees feel more positive, they are more in the mood to think creatively on the job.

However, if the working conditions leave employees feeling negative about their job, work performance will decrease and absences will increase. A study published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry backs up that claim. It examined trends in costs associated with MDD (Major Depressive Disorder or Clinical Depression). At the time of that study, the total economic burden of MDD was estimated to be \$210.5 billion per year. Nearly half (48 to 50%) of these costs were attributed to the workplace, including absenteeism and presenteeism (reduced productivity while at work). Presenteeism associated with depression resulted in the equivalent of 32 incremental workdays lost (Greenberg et al., 2015).

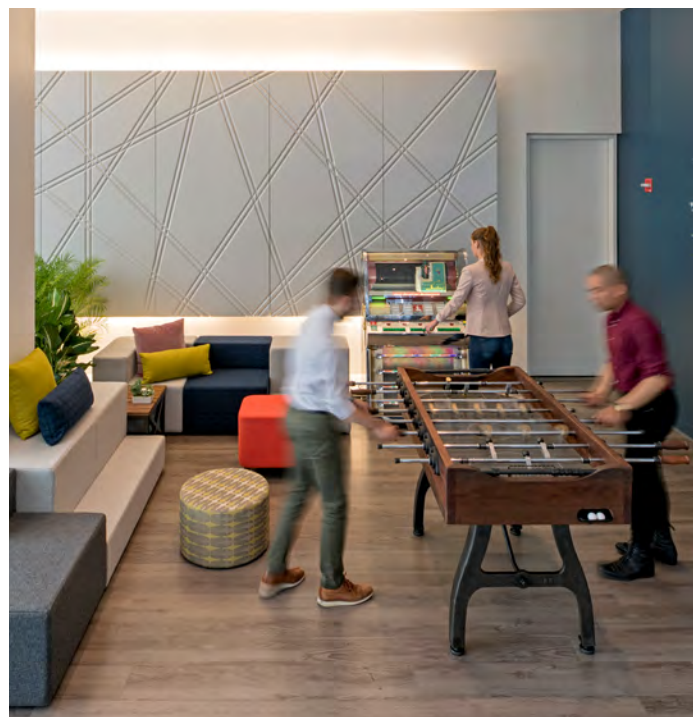
According to the American Psychological Association (APA), a psychologically healthy workplace should include these five components:

1. Work-Life Balance
2. Health and Safety
3. Employee Growth and Development
4. Employee Recognition
5. Employee Involvement

If your company doesn't have a serious plan that covers these issues for your workforce, chances are that your environment isn't as healthy for your employees as you think. Especially when it comes to their mental well-being. And when employee well-being suffers, so does a company's creativity and opportunity for innovation.



**\$210.5 Billion**  
Lost to Clinical Depression per Year



## SECTION 2

### *What is creativity and why it is important?*

There's a lot of talk about the need for creativity in the workplace. And none of it has anything to do with the type of artwork you choose to hang on your walls.

Instead these conversations center on the fact that organizations that encourage their employees to think creatively at work enjoy a distinct advantage over their competitors. In fact, creativity in the workplace isn't just a "nice to have" it's a "must have" if a company wants to be competitive.

So what does it mean to have employees be more creative at work? You've probably heard the saying, "two heads are better than one". Well, imagine how much better it would be if you had every head in your organization coming together and thinking about how to make your business more innovative, more profitable, and more competitive in today's marketplace.

A recent article in Fortune magazine highlighted an Ann Arbor company called Zimmerman's Community of Business as a perfect example of how companies can benefit when they unleash the power of their employees' creative thinking:

"Their Roadhouse restaurant was concerned that food costs were escalating. A dishwasher observed that he was throwing away huge quantities of fries each day. Working with the team, they tried an idea – decrease the initial portion size of fries and offer free refills. This idea saved money without compromising great service."

In his book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Daniel Pink explains why he believes that left-brain linear, analytical computer-like thinking is being replaced by right-brain empathy, inventiveness, and understanding as skills most needed by businesses who want a competitive advantage in the future.

Of course, thinking creatively isn't just something you can ask your employees to do and it will magically happen.

The creative process takes time. According to scientists, here's how an individual's random thoughts turn into a solution."

The five steps of the creative process:

1. Preparation. An individual sees a problem or issue and wonders if there's a solution. He or she will then do some research, create goals, organize thoughts, and begin to brainstorm ideas.
2. Incubation. As the individual processes the ideas, he or she starts to let their imagination wander while the ideas ruminate in the back of their mind.
3. Illumination. This is when everything comes together and the perfect idea reveals itself. Many times this happens when the person isn't even thinking about the project itself. Like when driving home.
4. Evaluation. The idea is shared with others. In addition to valuable feedback, this may also spark others in the group to add to the idea or refine it. The idea is then brought to his or her supervisors.
5. Implementation. This is the transformation of an idea into a final solution and putting it into action.

## SECTION 3

*An environment that supports wellness and well-being is critical for creativity, and creativity supports increased well-being.*



In an effective work environment, it's well-being and creativity that drive innovation and create happier employees. Nick Marks from the Happy Planet Index, a global index of human well-being explains, "People who are happier at work are more productive, more engaged, more creative, and have better concentration."

Having the opportunity to do things that will make an impact on their work environment is a powerful motivator for employees. No one wants to feel like they're just another cog in the wheel. Or worse, be treated like one.

A creative workplace gives all workers a way to voice their ideas, collaborate with others, and help spread new, innovative thinking throughout your business. By making employees feel more valued, they'll feel better about their job, better about their company, and better about themselves. Three things that are important to an employee's well-being.

Encouraging creative thinking leads employees to see beyond their job and focus on issues that will have a stronger business impact. While having employees spend time thinking about other things besides the job at hand might seem less productive, when those efforts are aimed at solving big-picture problems, a worker's productivity becomes more meaningful and the business becomes more competitive.

Talking about creativity at work, Teresa Amabile, a business administration professor at Harvard Business School and co-author of *The Progress Principle* said, "There's some evidence that great physical space enhances creativity. The theory is that open spaces that are fun and where people want to be, facilitate idea exchange."



“However,” she added. “In over 30 years of research, I’ve found that people do their most creative work when they’re motivated by the work itself.”

Regardless of their department or role, workers who participate in the creative process have the chance to take ownership of an idea rather than just do the follow-through grunt work for someone else’s idea. When employees are given this opportunity, they become more passionate and will work that much harder to see that idea come to life.

In May 2014, Adobe commissioned Forrester Consulting to investigate how creativity influences business outcomes. The study surveyed senior managers from corporations across a large cross-section of industries to find out how creativity impacts business results.

According to this survey, 58% of companies who said their firms foster creativity had 2013 revenues exceed their 2012 revenues by 10% or more. In contrast, only 20% of less creative companies performed similarly.

Here are a few other interesting findings:

- Among workers, a positive work environment was viewed as the primary condition for inspiring creativity
- 47% of respondents’ companies received awards and recognition for being a “best place to work”
- 69% of those companies also reported having a strong culture that supports creativity
- Overall, the more creative companies enjoy greater market share and competitive leadership

In a survey by IBM of more than 1,500 chief executive officers, creativity was ranked as the number one factor for future business success—above management discipline, integrity, and even corporate vision.

In another survey by Forrester, 82% of executives agreed that companies benefited greatly from creativity — including increased revenue and greater market share.

Fifty-eight percent also said they set goals around creative outcomes, while 48% have funded ideas that were born in creative brainstorming sessions.

Since its inception, it’s creativity that has given Apple its competitive edge. It’s a brand that not only encouraged others to “Think Different”, but also actually made it happen. Experiments have been done that show that whenever participants were shown the Apple logo, it actually sparked their creativity.

“Creativity is essential in business because it’s a differentiator,” says Tucker Marion, an associate professor in Northeastern University’s D’Amore-McKim School of Business and director of the Master of Science in Innovation program. “If you’re looking at an iPhone versus a Samsung, at the outset, they’re very similar. But once you start digging, there’s more creativity in the iPhone. Creativity lends itself to finding unique solutions to problems,” he says, “and to unique features on products, or unique business models and sources of revenue.”

Fostering creativity requires support from the top. Executives and business leaders need to nurture, fund and promote programs to increase creative thinking among its workforce. This includes early adoption of new technologies.

“People who are happier at work are more productive, more engaged, more creative, and have better concentration.”

*Nick Marks*

## SECTION 4

### *The effects of technology in the workplace.*

In April and May of 2018, Aruba, a Hewlett Packard Enterprise company, polled 7,000 employees across 15 countries to study the impact of technology in the workplace.

The study, called, *Digital Revolutionaries Unlock the Potential of the Digital Workplace* revealed both business and human benefits of more digitally driven workplaces.

In this study, they identified two distinct groups within today's workforce:

- The Digital Revolutionaries — employees that work in companies where new workplace technologies are in widespread use
- The Digital Laggards — employees who work in less-engaged workplaces that risk falling behind

They discovered that in addition to efficiency and productivity created by a digital workplace, the group identified as the Digital Revolutionaries also experienced significant personal satisfaction and well-being advantages.

Seventy-four percent said their job satisfaction is good or very good, while 70% reported their work-life balance to be good. Revolutionaries were also 59% more likely than the Laggards to say that they were learning new skills in the workplace, 61% more likely to say that they effectively accomplished multiple tasks during the day, and 65% more likely to believe their role is strategic to their organization.

Seventy-five percent of the Revolutionaries also reported positive well-being in the workplace, compared to 50% of the Laggards. A similar proportion (73%) praised their company's employee culture, with only 39% of the Laggards reporting the same.

According to this study, Revolutionaries were also more positive about their work environment and organization.

75% were happy about their company work culture and 67% were happy about the level of creativity.

However, technology in the workplace can be a double-edged sword. While it's usually associated with gains in productivity, technology can also cause employee distress.

Using data from two surveys of U.S. workers, Noelle Chesley, an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, found that increased technology use is linked to higher levels of worker distress, especially when it allows work to extend into an employee's personal life.

Work-related stress is created by a constantly increasing work pace, work interruptions, and the expectation to handle multiple tasks at once.

According to a survey done in 2008 by Pew Networked Workers, about a third of employees reported that technology use is a factor in creating a more stressful work experience.

The data also documented that technology is enabling work to seep into an employee's personal time. Employees feel the need to respond to their work email and phone messages after hours, on weekends, when they are sick, on vacation, or even while running errands. A factor helping fuel employee distress.

A 2014 Deloitte survey also points out that this trend of employees feeling overwhelmed is a direct result of the always-connected lifestyle and information overload of our high-tech business environment.

In earlier generations, you could leave the office at 5:00 p.m. and not have to think about it again until the next morning. With today's advances in technology, people are no longer able to leave their work at the office. Nor do many of their employers think they should.



## SECTION 5

### *The effect of workplace design on a company's creativity.*



According to a 2015 Gallup poll, only 32% of America's workforce feels engaged at the office. If that's true, that's an estimated \$500 billion every year in lost productivity.

But it isn't the work they have to do that's making them so unenthusiastic about their job; it's where they have to do it. Some are expected to spend their days working in an unimaginative little box. Right next to other employees in their identical unimaginative little boxes. Others are expected to be able to think while sitting out in the open amid noisy neighbors, ringing phones, and other distractions. In either situation, creativity and productivity suffer right along with the employee.

Ohio State University did a study to track stress levels of white-collar workers. They randomly split the participants into two groups. The first group had to work in an old office building with low ceilings, poor lighting, and noisy

air conditioners. The second group was sent to a newly renovated office with skylights and an open office layout. Within 17 months, the people working in the older building showed more stress, even when they weren't at work.

Young Lee, author of *Creative Workplace Characteristics and Innovative Start-Up Companies* wrote that the most important physical work environmental characteristics to produce creative, innovative ideas and products/services for growth and market competitiveness was a balanced layout that offered space for individual work and collaboration, technology interface for collaboration, and spaces for idea generation.

In other words, for a workplace to support every employee's well-being, it needs to offer a choice of spaces that reflect the type of work they need to do. Quiet, secluded space for when they need to work alone

or as a team of two. Open spaces for group meetings and brainstorming. And lounge areas to relax and recharge.

Recently, The Mayo Clinic wanted to see if different work environments really would affect the productivity of employees. So they built a “Well Living Lab” where they could control lighting, temperatures, background noise, etc. and compare the productivity of employees in different environments.

They found that the ideal office space for productivity consists of eight zones:

1. Home Base – Quiet area for concentrated, focused working
2. Open Plan – Supporting communication, meetings, brainstorming
3. Meeting Room – For conferencing, workshops, and training sessions
4. Breakout Area – For informal chatter or to recharge
5. Touchdown – For spontaneous, flexible working
6. Refuge Area – For confidential conversations
7. Resource Room- For equipment like printers, copy machines, etc.
8. Inter-zone Corridors – Not just a necessity, but also a chance to refresh, pump blood to your brain and legs, and spark creativity.

Giving employees control over where and how they work within your space can do wonders for employee well-being. Which in turn will help improve their productivity and creativity.

Another important step companies can take to help employee well-being and creative thinking is to provide an outdoor area where they can go for a walk. Researchers have found that in addition to the obvious health benefits, “walking opens up the free flow of ideas.”





## SECTION 6

*How to design an office space that promotes creativity and improves employee well-being.*



Most often, when discussing the design of a workplace, the focus is on the physical effects on the workers, but how does it affect a workers well-being?

Leah Stringer, a workplace strategy expert and author of *The Healthy Workplace* believes that, “human health should be the foundation of workplace design because companies thrive on the innovation and abilities of their people, and if employees are sick, overweight, stressed, sleep-deprived or disengaged, they prevent the company they work for from thriving and maintaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace.”

The amount of personal space and the type of personal space within an office environment can encourage or discourage social interaction between employees.

For example, the common belief behind having an open-space office is that filling an open area with a lot of people will generate more group interaction and idea exchange. But in reality the total opposite can be true. Too many people sharing a space can cause excessive distraction and conversation noise that will make it more difficult for employees to concentrate on the jobs at hand.

Usually when put into this type of environment, employees tend to huddle down in their space, put on headphones, and block out everyone and everything around them. Not exactly the type of employee reaction that would help your office achieve the cross-pollination of ideas that you were hoping for.



Another issue with distractions in the workplace has to do with employees who might suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). For these employees, who are easily distracted and have difficulty staying on task, having too many things going on around them will make even the simplest job difficult to do, adding to an increase in their stress level on the job.

To help minimize distractions for employees working in open spaces, consider using workstations and other modular furniture that offer a seated, visual privacy wall between employees. Sound masking and the use of sound absorbing materials should also be considered.

According to Ester Buchholz, a psychologist, psychoanalyst, and the author of *The Call of Solitude*, the need for “alone time” to let our thoughts wander and to figure things out are essential for original creative thinking and innovation.

Studies have also shown that when employees have the ability to control their level of privacy, the adverse effects of other workplace stressors are reduced.

Offering employees this flexibility on where and how they work within the office is also beneficial to any employees who suffer with any form of depression. For example, a person with depression would not benefit from being assigned to an enclosed workspace at the end of a hallway, or alongside a high-traffic hallway that offers little privacy. By offering other alternatives, employees with depression will feel better having control of where they can go to work.

Stress is something every person feels and experiences to some degree every day. One thing studies have shown is that psychosocial stress is a predictor of mental health problems. A beneficial workplace feature that has been shown to reduce stress and help people recover from stressful situations is windows. Another study suggested that just viewing nature, whether through a window or images (pictures) helped to reduce stress and support employee well-being.



Research has also shown that air quality and lighting at work can have significant effects on brain function and productivity. Poor lighting can cause headaches, eyestrain, and tiredness, which can all contribute to stress, and thereby, anxiety and depression.

Photobiology is the official term for people who suffer mood changes due to insufficient exposure to sunlight. However, the benefits of providing adequate light may have mental health benefits even for employees not diagnosed with this disorder. Research has shown that those with the shortest daily light exposure time reported the lowest mood. These findings led an international committee to conclude that the daily light dose received by people working indoors might be too low for good mental health.

That may be why, a recent survey by Future Workplace, an HR advisory firm, found that there's one perk employees feel is more important than coffee bars, gyms, and treadmill desks. The survey, *The Employee Experience* polled 1,614 North American employees and found that access to natural light and views of the outdoors ranked number one in desired work environment attributes.

The study goes on to reveal that over a third of employees feel that they don't get enough natural light. Forty-seven percent admit they feel tired or very tired because of the absence of natural light or a window in their office. And 43% feel gloomy because of lack of light.

Another study with 444 employees from the United States and India via an online panel showed that natural elements and sunlight exposure related positively to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and negatively to depressed mood and anxiety. Direct sunlight was a dominant predictor of anxiety while indirect sunlight was a dominant predictor of depressed mood, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Color has also been found to have an impact on a person's mood and behavior, and have an influence on employee well-being.

Natural toned colors such as green and blue hues can improve efficiency and focus, and reduce stress. Warm yellows can trigger optimism, creativity, and fresh energy. Vivid colors like red add intensity to the décor, and can inspire passion and boost physical activity.

Several ancient cultures, including the Egyptians and Chinese, were so sure that color could have an effect on people that they actually practiced chromotherapy, or the use of colors to heal.

As you can see by now, there are a lot of good reasons to care for your employees' well-being. And a lot of tools to help ensure that you do. In fact, it's something that should be at the forefront of any workplace design.

Gallup's most recent State of the American Workplace survey states that more than half of employees report better overall well-being as "very important". While work-life balance and overall well-being were the second most important factors when choosing to work for an organization.

Take care of your employees' well-being and you'll not only be rewarded with higher loyalty, you'll be rewarded with higher levels of job engagement and creativity. Two things your organization needs to have a competitive advantage, both now and in the future.

"Human health should be the foundation of workplace design because companies thrive on the innovation and abilities of their people..."

*Leah Stringer*

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