

HEALTHY GAINS

The new WELL Building Standard guides the way towards supporting employees by showing how workplaces can improve their health and wellbeing.

WORDS MICHELLE LUDWIG

100%



“Healthy employees mean healthy companies,” begins the Discovery ‘Healthy Company Index Report’, which presents survey findings of employee wellness in 151 South African companies.

Employee salaries are a significant cost of doing business. Eight days per employee is the average number of days lost to illness or injury, the report states, which translates to a cost of nearly R10 000 per person per year. Investing in the health of employees can thus yield a valuable return on investment. Not limited to reducing chronic diseases of lifestyle such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and chronic respiratory conditions, other benefits such as increased employee satisfaction, reductions in employee turnover and absenteeism, and improved productivity translate to significant gains to the bottom line.

“Employers have a unique opportunity to improve the lives of employees and their families by measuring, managing, and improving employee health,” the report says. This explains why employee wellness programmes are steadily growing as a priority for leading organisations.

THE RESEARCH CONVERGES

The flourishing wellness trend is evolving into a focus on wellbeing in the workplace, which goes beyond ergonomics to encompass the cognitive and emotional aspects of being healthy. In the past two decades, numerous robust studies have been conducted and volumes have been written on the correlation between our surroundings and human health. Fascinating research has emerged ranging from biologists who study the impact of light on the eye and our circadian rhythms, neuroscientists studying cognitive function and air quality, to psychologists conducting quality of sleep research. The workplace, where we spend one-third of our day, has been a particular research focus.

It is only more recently that the research results of varying disciplines have been compiled, debated and synthesized together. To this end, the World Green Building Council (WGBC) commissioned a report to investigate a range of office design factors and the relevant health research.

“There is overwhelming evidence, which demonstrates that the design of an office impacts the health, wellbeing and productivity of its occupants,” summarises the ‘Health, Wellbeing & Productivity in Offices: The next chapter for green building’ report from the WGBC, which is aimed at the non-technical real estate sector. “For many readers, that will sound so obvious it almost goes without saying. But it does need saying – loud and clear – because this evidence has not yet had a major influence on the mainstream real estate sector, and is not yet translating at scale into design, finance and leasing decisions.”

BUSINESS NECESSITY

With 90% of our time spent indoors, and a third of the day spent at work, it becomes imperative for employers to consider aspects of wellbeing when planning or constructing a workplace. The WGBC report states: “It is increasingly clear that there is a difference between office environments that are simply not harmful – i.e. the absence of ‘bad’ – and environments that positively encourage health and wellbeing, and stimulate productivity.”

“There is clearly an opportunity for organisations to think differently and use their physical premises for competitive gain,” the WGBC suggests. “This is true from investors through to occupiers, whether companies are trying to command a higher price for a high-performing building or looking to take the kind of space needed to help drive business success.”

A NEW TOOL EMERGES

The WELL Building Standard (WELL) was developed specifically to provide best practice guidance on factors that impact occupant health. It resides at the confluence of architectural design interventions, wellness programme concepts, and company operational practices with the clear priority being human health issues. Administered by the International Well Building Institute (IWBI), it is a third-party certification tool that can be used to inform the design process by providing a framework of interventions, which contribute to healthier workspaces that support employee health.

“Our mission is to bring human health to the forefront of building practices and reinvent buildings

so they are not only better for the environment, but also for the people in them,” says former IWBI senior vice president Michelle Moore. “Historically, sustainability has focused on the impact that buildings have on our climate and environment. Bringing wellness into the conversation adds a new emphasis on the individual, and opens up the field for research and development.”

At minimum, the standard provides a useful checklist of potential strategies to incorporate within any new building, renovation or interior fit-out commercial project. It addresses issues such as air and water quality, lighting, fitness, comfort, biophilia and healthy food. Upon successful implementation, projects can pursue the certification, which has global recognition. Notable aspects include:

- The first standard of its kind that focuses solely on the health and wellness of building occupants.
- The WELL Building Standard marries best practices in design and construction with evidence-based health and wellness interventions.
- Identifies 100 performance metrics, design strategies, and policies that can be implemented by the owners, designers, engineers, contractors, users and operators of a building.
- WELL is based on a thorough review of the existing research on the effects of spaces on individuals and has been advanced through a thorough scientific and technical review.
- WELL certified spaces and developments can lead to a built environment that helps to improve

the mood, sleep, comfort, nutrition, fitness, and performance of their occupants.

ALREADY GOING GREEN

The WELL Building Standard shares some objectives with other established green building rating tools, such as Green Star SA and Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). The developers of WELL were mindful of the interconnection, not only conceptually, but also in how the technical aspects of the programme have been developed and how the market would put it to use, according to Moore. Developers and designers who are familiar with and see the value of green certification will find that the WELL certification fits seamlessly into the same implementation process.

The Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA) supports the idea of certification, since independent validation through certification of building attributes and operations, and tenant behavior is critical to ensuring the industry moves forward in a measured and comparable manner. One of the GBCSA's stated purposes is to create an environment “where people and planet thrive”, explains Manfred Braune, the GBCSA's chief technical officer. The importance of health and wellbeing in buildings is considered intrinsic to green buildings, and thus has featured in all of the various Green Star SA rating tools. “There is significant synergy between the two certifications, and projects that target Green Star SA will have a significant head start in achieving WELL, and vice versa,” Braune says.



Green Star SA is primarily an intrinsic building and performance evaluation, where WELL is assessing occupant experiential factors, concludes Ludwig Design Consulting (LDC) after an in-depth comparison of the two tools. They have a 20% to 25% overlap of interventions, do not contradict, but prioritise different things. For example, the WELL Building Standard can be thought of as an expansion of focus for the Indoor Environmental

capex range, from what we've seen," says Moore, basing the number on the handful of projects that have been built and certified so far and the budget projections for many others that are progressing through the pipeline. "If the health and wellness benefits of the environment help eliminate one sick day per year for an employee or helps them to be more productive and engaged because they have a better sense of well-being, then you have your

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Quality (IEQ) category in particular. Green Star SA already addresses many of the big ideas – air quality, lighting, and occupant comfort, which are also rewarded in WELL, but WELL takes the focus further in some aspects and is more biased towards humans. WELL encompasses other human-centric activities such as eating, moving, and interaction. The support of these activities is not specific to a building's structure or captured by Green Star SA, but rather related to layout, company operations, furnishings, and policies.

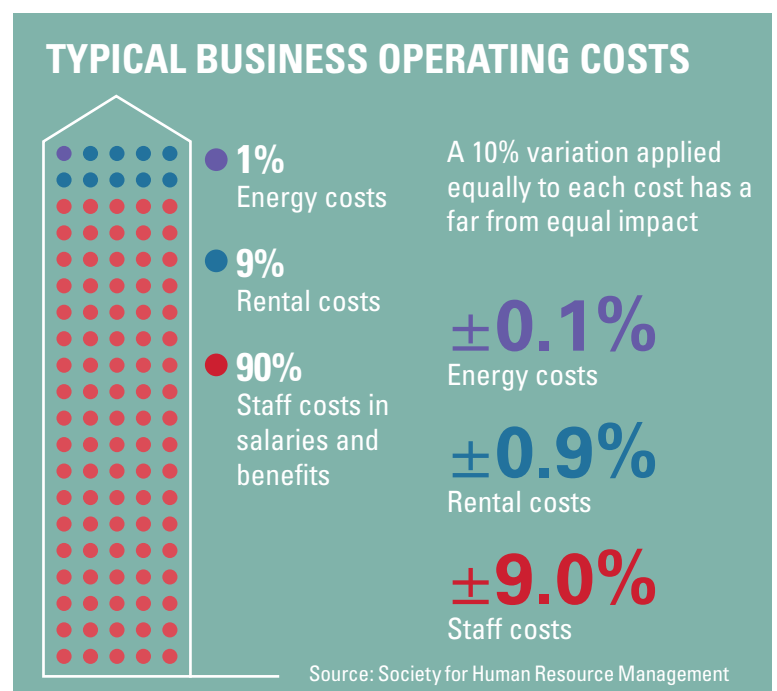
FOOTING THE BILL

Employee salaries and benefits comprise 90% of a business' costs and are typically 100-fold more than utilities. Where energy and water efficiency interventions often pay for themselves in lower utility bills, the payback for the investment in health and wellbeing comes in the form of human capital. Even a modest improvement in employee productivity will have significant financial implications many times larger than other financial savings accrued from building performance, such as energy conservation.

Early indications of additional costs to implement are promising. "Anecdotal evidence is that added costs for implementation are in the 1% to 2% of

payback," Moore says.

Many of the WELL interventions are best practice interior design, LDC suggests. Therefore given an enlightened, sophisticated design team, they should reasonably be within the scope of a 'green' project, particularly if they are targeting a 5- or 6-Star Green



WELLNESS FAST FACTS

Global wellness market industry combined

\$1.5 trillion

Healthy eating, nutrition, and weight loss - \$574 billion

Fitness and mind-body - \$446 billion

Preventative and Personalised health - \$432 billion

Workplace wellness - \$40 billion



Healthcare expenditure due to diabetes

(2015) Southern Africa only

\$3.4 billion

Health & fitness club industry revenue

(2014) for South Africa

\$910 million

(~R12 trillion Rand)



Sales of fitness wearables

(2015) Middle East and Africa region

+240%

from previous year



South African employee days of absenteeism (per year)

8 to 15 days

Employees who fail to show up for work who are not physically ill

2 out of 3

Top cause of lost work time

Sleep disorders

Source: Statista.com; CAMS Solutions; Occupational Care SA.


Star SA Office or Interiors. Additional costs include fees for registration and an on-site audit, which are scaled according to project size. Other likely costs include specialist testing of air and water, WELL accredited professional consultation, and upgraded lighting costs.

GETTING ON THE BAND WAGON

The WELL Building Standard certification was released just over a year ago and there are now eight buildings successfully certified with an additional 158 projects registered for certification throughout 18 countries. Roughly half are in North America, but notably, 36 are in China and 17 in Australia.

'Increasing worker productivity' was named by South African respondents in the latest World Green Building Trends Report as a top important social reason for building green, which was notably higher than other countries included in the study. "This shows a potential interest in the uptake of a building tool like WELL Building Standard to enter the South African market," explains Mark Noble of the V&A Waterfront Development Department. The V&A Waterfront continues to work towards being the greenest precinct with all new builds incorporating features that provide healthy environments, with benefits enjoyed by both building tenants and their employees. "Including tenant involvement and commitment has been part of our overall green

strategy. A tool like WELL is a great opportunity for building owners and tenants to collaborate to measure the impact of features on the overall wellbeing of building occupants."

Another tool in the marketplace is initially confusing, concedes LDC and suggests it can be viewed more as being another 'category' or bonus alongside the others for what constitutes a responsible and progressive building. Pursued along with Green Star, the concept of 'green building performance plus human performance' will set a new benchmark in the market and differentiate those companies who are tangibly investing in their employees' wellbeing. 

Full disclosure: Michelle Ludwig of Ludwig Design Consulting is a green building consultant and WELL Accredited Professional (AP). She is a regular contributor to *earthworks*, writing across a range of subject matters. www.MLDC.co.za

SOURCEBOOK

WELL Building Standard & IWBI • www.wellcertified.com

Discovery Healthy Companies Index •

www.healthycompanyindex.co.zaWorld Green Building Council • www.worldgbc.org

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