‘Office environments that support wellbeing are now a deal breaker for modern workers.’

— Kathryn Bishop, senior writer, The Future Laboratory

Having worked in spaces that included a recently flooded basement, a repurposed garage and an office with sloping floors, I can safely say that twinges of back pain and damp air are not conducive to high-quality work. Employee wellness and the influence of the working environment weren’t on the agenda for my employers. Getting the job done superseded any human needs. If you had a computer, an adjustable chair and a cup of tea, you were deemed fit for work.
Today, however, our ambition to feel well, whether through diet and exercise, downtime or creativity, has made personal optimisation part of our daily lives. It’s put workplaces increasingly in our sightline. With the average employee spending 47.2 hours at work each week, consciously human-centric workspaces are increasingly prevalent.

Office environments that support wellbeing are now a deal breaker for modern workers. A recent CBRE workplace wellness report says 80% of employees say wellness programmes will be crucial to attracting and retaining them over the next 10 years. The same report forecasts that by 2040, medical treatment and advice could also be part of the wider European workplace offer.

Arguably, a positive office environment that provides clean air, greenery, adjustable lighting and spaces for quiet work is the foundation of wellbeing in the workplace. But, increasingly, regular working environments are morphing into holistic wellness hubs.

Many of us have heard of Google’s playful office provisions, such as mini-golf and rock-climbing walls. But wellbeing in the workplace is evolving further. In Toronto, for instance, the women-only workspace Shecosystem promotes spiritual, physical and emotional wellness at work, with gathering and healing rooms for life coaching and yin yoga. Elsewhere, brand consultancy Space Doctors gives workers a week of paid leave to spend how they wish, such as partaking in stand-up comedy or creative writing courses.

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But do these wellbeing activities encroach negatively on workplace productivity and employee health? Employee wellness solutions provider Wellsteps found higher incidence of smoking and weight gain. Increased worker participation only occurred when monetary incentives were offered.

Emma Seppälä, science director at Stanford Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, says that workplace wellness programmes ‘don’t lead to any visible results’. She adds: ‘At best, these initiatives are nothing more than lip service or PR. But at worst, they actually cause more stress.’

While providing a pleasant distraction, workplace wellness threatens employee focus and productivity at work, and leads to heightened costs for individuals and businesses. This is particularly pertinent for those taking part in wellness and health programmes that are offset against their wages, as is common in the US.

‘It’s also hazardous to the health of your bank account,’ says workplace wellness critic and author Al Lewis. ‘If you do everything your employer’s wellness vendor insists upon, your out-of-pocket healthcare expense will probably rise for the simple reason that some wellness findings and recommendations will push you to get even more [paid-for] medical testing, and your employer’s healthcare spending will rise as well.’

The corporate wellness industry is worth more than £31bn ($40bn, €34bn) worldwide, according to Global Wellness Institute, highlighting the cost of workplace wellness provision. In time, businesses will have to gauge their return on investment with regard to wellness programmes to ensure they are doing them as much good as they should be doing their workers.

For more on wellness in the workplace, read our Self-care Spaces microtrend.