WORKPLACE WELL-BEING
WORKPLACE WELL-BEING:
HOW TO DESIGN FOR AND EVALUATE THIS CRITICAL ELEMENT—ONE THAT’S ESSENTIAL TO INTELLIGENCE, CREATIVITY, HAPPINESS, INNOVATION, AND PRODUCTIVITY
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INTRODUCTION

Thirty members of the interior design community assembled over a weekend in January to parse the phenomenon of well-being in the workplace, a timely and multifaceted subject with myriad implications for manufacturers and practitioners alike. The three-day confab addressed employee well-being as a necessary component in design strategy, and gave participants new perspectives on human-focused design. Clients are enlisting interiors firms (and their industry partners) to help increase employee productivity, satisfaction, and retention—and to improve their overall work culture. Ergonomic products and multiple work environments that support an employee’s physical, emotional, social, and mental health are regarded as design approaches that foster employee growth, choice, and engagement.

The event kicked off Saturday morning with special guest presentations. The three experts then stayed for the entirety of the weekend, functioning as a sort of “embedded” panel. This format sparked a highly interactive discussion and a wide-sweeping yet deep (and at times heated) dialogue over the course of the weekend.

Demonstrating the far-reaching nature of the topic, the well-being specialists came from very different backgrounds. Bringing these diverse viewpoints into the conversation proved a special opportunity for participants, who shared their own wisdom during the discussion and in their homework (excerpts from which are included herein).
**IR18 EXPERT PANEL**

**Roy Abernathy**, IIDA, a senior managing director of Savills Studley, is a corporate real estate broker and workplace strategist armed with an architecture degree and business-consulting expertise. Early in his career, Abernathy was a veterinarian and biomedical researcher, experiences that afforded him unique insight on the challenges of objectively measuring the impact of design on employee behavior, productivity, and well-being. Abernathy’s presence marked the first time a member of the real estate profession has participated in the annual Roundtable.

Sustainability ambassador **Kirsten Ritchie**, a principal/director at Gensler, San Francisco, spoke engagingly about her areas of focus, which include green product standards, sustainability rating systems, and biophilia. A civil engineer by training, Ritchie is a member of the Material and Technical Advisory Group at the USGBC, and serves as an advisor to the Health Product Declaration Collaborative. Offering big-picture perspective on well-being as a subset of sustainability, she also addressed a number of queries relating to material toxicity, manufacturer transparency, and designer liability.

A leader in innovative, transformational workplace strategies, **Lois Wellwood**, IIDA, principal at NBBJ, Seattle, shared a number of futurist insights. A practicing interior designer, Wellwood also directs client development and strategic growth, and thus had a unique angle on how design practitioners can reframe discussions with C-suite leaders to prioritize human capital. She shared neurological research about how environmental stressors compromise well-being and productivity—and how they can be mitigated.
HOW DID WE GET HERE?
THE GENESIS OF WELL-BEING

A futurist presentation by moderator Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA, contextualized the weekend’s topic within the broader landscape of cultural trends. Well-being has become something of an aggregator term: “The word ‘ergonomics’ was first mentioned at 2:14 PM...and we’ve been talking about well-being all day!” said OFS Brands’s Doug Shapiro, Ind. IIDA. “A few years ago, it would have been said 50 times by now. That speaks to how big-picture and all-encompassing the subject is.”

Well-being may be trending, but it’s hardly a new concept. Durst offered a long view that couched well-being as a byproduct of increasing prosperity and wherewithal, cycling back three centuries:

1715

The U.S. was not even a country yet. The average number of children in a family was 8 to 10. Society was largely agrarian, prosperity and leisure time elusive to most. But the seeds of American ambition and self-improvement had taken root. “Benjamin Franklin talked about well-being; think ‘early to bed, early to rise.’ He wasn’t addressing physical health only; the broader scope of well-being was one of his great points,” said Durst.

1815

A time of relative peace that saw a major push for westward expansion—“reflecting our pioneer spirit and sense of invention.” Our agrarian economy was just starting to industrialize, and urban design had much to do with improved life expectancy.
PREDICTIONS FOR THE WORD OF 2015 INCLUDE:
impact, presence, engagement, reflection, introspection, insidious, autonomy, freedom, resilience

America was one year in to WWI. “We were somewhat, but not wildly, prosperous,” said Durst. “The average family had four kids, women rarely worked, and there was a fairly even ratio of agricultural to industrial.” Children were no longer an accessory for farming, but a future resource to invest in. “We became even more concerned with education and wherewithal.”

We’ve experienced relative economic security over the last 75 years, and life expectancy has risen by decades. “We’re economically secure, we know more than previous generations did, and we are healthier,” said Durst. “We are the healthy, wealthy, and wise generation.” All the components of well-being.

WELL-BEING IS THE NEW GREEN
Well-being is gaining momentum for another reason: as an extension of the sustainability movement that has dominated the design landscape in the last decade. “Social justice and well-being both fall under the mantle of sustainability,” said Ritchie. “But sustainability 1.0 was approached purely from a resource-consumption perspective, instead of from a ‘people’ perspective. There was a disconnect in the marketplace, even though the notion of sustainability is holistic.” While sustainability has tended to be more in the purview of architecture, well-being depends more on interior design. “Energy consumption used to be controlled by a building’s envelope and systems,” said Ritchie. “Now that structures have become very efficient, the focus can shift to optimizing the efficiency of interiors, which gives designers much more responsibility.”

“In the beginning, the USGBC justified LEED certification by using energy metrics to show the return on investment. But the impact on people proved a much greater return.” JON STRASSNER, IND. IIDA, HUMANSCALE
THE ECONOMICS OF WELL-BEING

The topic has become something of a media fixation, as recent articles on the high obesity rates of call-center employees (Wall Street Journal) and the health and morale hazards of a poorly implemented open-plan office (Washington Post) attest. In the last six months alone, some 20,000 books on well-being were published, and another 1 million titles tackling the broader arena of personal fulfillment and happiness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of those books couched well-being within the context of work/life balance—or lack thereof.

Well-being is not just big news; it’s also big business. And the economic implications cut both ways: Boosting employees’ well-being also boosts an organization’s bottom line, while squelching it (via high-stress, butts-in-seats office environments) correlates to money loss. With health-care costs rising at a stratospheric rate, companies are paying dearly to accommodate their sedentary workforce.

Businesses of all stripes—from law firms to long-haul trucking operators—are thus embracing well-being as a strategy to lower their expenditures. Commerce, not altruism, is the motivator. “Driven by insane increases in health-care costs, corporate clients are asking, ‘What can we do to (selfishly) help our people, so we can have negotiating power with our insurance companies?’” said Ritchie. Many initiatives take the form of employer-sponsored medical screenings, incentives for meeting body-mass index and blood-pressure targets, gym-membership subsidies, and nutritious food options in corporate cafeterias. Organizations are also starting to take a more holistic view of healthiness that includes mental wellness and stress reduction, targeted via benefits like flex time, sabbaticals, and generous vacation packages. A Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that 71 percent of companies ranked wellness programs as one of the most effective ways to cut health-insurance costs.

Fostering well-being doesn’t just temper ballooning insurance costs. It has also been linked to increased efficiency and productivity, offering the tantalizing promise of an uptick in profitability. A state of well-being enhances employee engagement and lowers office absenteeism and turnover rates.

“Well-being is directly attributed to the long-term health, productivity, satisfaction, and retention of employees,” wrote Hollander Design Group’s Viveca Bissonnette, FIIDA.

None of this is news to designers, who have long considered it their duty to realize spaces that support and nurture human health and happiness, even when it’s not a client mandate—though it increasingly is. “The subject of well-being has come up in conversation more frequently with clients—especially large tech companies—in the last three years,” affirmed IIDA President Julio Braga, FIIDA, of IA Interior Architects. The tech sector is particularly enlightened about fostering wellness through benefits like yoga classes, bike shares, subsidized childcare, adoption support, mortgage assistance, and a souped-up roster of amenities catering to 18-hour workdays. “All the services that were once outside the workplace, from daycare to physical therapy, are now incorporated into it,” explained Ritchie. (Work-life integration is the term she used for the conflation of personal and professional realms that is becoming the norm.)

“We need to shift our thinking from design as a capital cost to design as a strategic tool. How much we spend on employees is far more than what we spend on real estate.”

JENNIFER BUSCH, HON. IIDA, TEKNION
As clients in all industries embrace a more nuanced definition of well-being—one that includes mental balance, social connection, purposefulness, and spiritual fulfillment—they are expanding the scope of their efforts to foster it. “We used to see this in a fairly limited way, and mostly from an operations perspective (i.e. flexible hours) and an ergonomics perspective,” said Felice Silverman, FIIDA, of Silverman Trykowski Assoc. “Now well-being means everything from mother rooms and play spaces to libraries and community areas.”

Thanks to intensifying competition for top-tier talent, recruitment and retention have become major concerns for every employer, adding fuel to the well-being fire. “Organizations will do whatever they can to keep good people,” said Silverman. “Consequently, they care more than ever how their employees feel—both physically and emotionally.” A smart move, since high turnover can have devastating financial consequences.

For all these reasons, well-being is changing how spaces are being designed and what products are being specified (and customized) for them. Practitioners are being challenged to devise creative solutions beyond the expected treadmill desks and sit/stand workstations. “Clients want to know what’s available beyond the trends,” said Alissa Wehmueller, IIDA, of Helix Architecture and Design. “What can they do to make healthy decisions inherently easy and obvious for the long term?”

But workplace well-being is also a field of inquiry with game-changing potential, presenting an opportunity for the industry to promote itself as the thought leader. “No one ‘owns’ workplace well-being yet—no Gallup or LEED has cornered the territory,” said Abernathy. “The window is open, but only for a short period of time.”

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### WELLNESS BY THE NUMBERS

| $3.4 trillion | Wellness is a $3.4 trillion industry, per the nonprofit research center SRI International. |
| $6 billion | A Rand Corporation survey estimated that the workplace wellness industry alone is worth an estimated $6 billion a year. |
| $73 billion | A Duke University study indicated that one-third of U.S. adults are obese, costing their employers $73 billion a year. |
| 86% | The Center For Active Design projects that if we continue on this path, 86 percent of American adults will be overweight or obese by 2030. |
| 20% | According to the Center for American Progress, it costs about 20 percent of an employee’s salary to replace them—a percentage that increases for top executives. |
THE CLIENT CONVERSATION

Every project is a protracted dialogue between designer and client. That back and forth once followed an expected rhythm and involved a familiar lineup of C-suite players. “The conversation started with the CEO’s vision and goals for the project, and was then filtered through the lens of the CFO and possibly procurement, who emphasized cost reduction and restraint,” explained Wellworth. Getting the best price per square foot was the goal as business leaders followed the party line that real-estate costs were the biggest percentage of an office’s overhead.

But organizations are starting to become more educated about the value of human capital and the financial benefits of an engaged, productive, and happy workforce. That realization has changed who is involved in—and who initiates—the conversation. “Today, we go in through human resources and recruiting, and work with a much broader range of client representatives,” said Wellworth.

Clients today bring up well-being early in the design process—often during the initial interview. In fact, the topic is frequently addressed at a project’s inception, during the real-estate hunt. Will the space allow for an internal staircase? How will this location affect employee commutes? Are there ample amenities in the immediate neighborhood? The earlier well-being is addressed, the better for everyone involved. “From both a design standpoint and as a cultural buy-in, wellness initiatives won’t be successful if they’re a layer added at the end,” said Wehmueller.

Staff comprises 80 to 90% of a company’s operating expenses.
WHO’S WEIGHING IN?

HUMAN RESOURCE DEPARTMENTS
HR departments are lauded as particularly effective champions of well-being—and helpful allies for designers. “I’ve found HR leadership to have the broadest views and highest expectations for workplace well-being,” said Shapiro. Added Wehmueller, “They are conscious of insurance rates, sick days, and work habits, and are able to advise on how employees will react [to change being implemented].”

FACILITIES MANAGERS
Some have observed facilities managers becoming involved a bit later in the process, but most felt that they are still the primary decision-makers—often to the detriment of design. “The facilities staff obviously wants to keep systems as simple and as modular as possible—a one-size-fits-all kit-of-parts,” said Wellwood. “And that does a disservice to the end user, for whom one size misfits most. The cost of real estate, rather then the cost of people, is still driving too many workplace decisions.” A culture shift may be imminent as they are being held more accountable for occupant comfort, and client satisfaction is coming into their performance evaluation. They now have a greater stake in thinking about the bigger picture and are getting more creative and open-minded about how to reduce overall costs.

USER GROUPS
These now include more end users, and their opinions are influential. “These groups tend to have lots of people without titles, but who know what’s happening in the workforce and what people need, and we are spending a lot more time with them,” said Wellwood.

RECRUITING STAFF

REAL-ESTATE TEAMS

IT

WELL-BEING CONSULTANTS FROM OUTSIDE FIRMS

INNOVATION OFFICERS

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT LEADERS

Staff comprises 80 to 90% of a company’s operating expenses.
DEFINING WELL-BEING

So what is well-being and how, exactly, does it differ from wellness? While the latter presupposes both physical and mental health, well-being is a more expansive concept with an emotional component: feeling fulfilled, purposeful, and happy (or at least content). Another truism is that everyone’s standards are different. Though the ingredients that combine to produce well-being are the same, each of us favors a different recipe. For instance, people tolerate stress to varying degrees. Some can withstand a high threshold while others feel unwell under even slight pressure. And for sedentary types, traversing an internal staircase a few times a day is enough to feel fit, while a former college athlete may need a daily lunch-hour run around the corporate campus’s nature trail. Some require conscious uncoupling from technology when they’re off duty; others need to stay plugged in to feel socially connected.

CHERYL DURST, HON. FIIDA, LEED AP Although Westerners have traditionally compartmentalized the aspects that make up happiness and well-being, we are finally starting to understand that all the facets are interconnected.

KENT REYLING, IND. IIDA, KIMBALL OFFICE Well-being implies a sense of overall health that goes beyond the physical to encompass the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of life.

MARK SHANNON, IND. IIDA, CROSSVILLE It’s not just about stress reduction but also about achieving a higher state of clarity, focus, and imagination.

KYLIE ROTH, IND. IIDA, KNOLL With the rise of knowledge work, employers can no longer just provide a physically safe environment, they must also look out for their workers’ psychological needs.

DOUG SHAPIRO, IND. IIDA, OFS BRANDS Well-being is a state of awareness and control over your emotional, physical, and mental health.

JAMES WILLIAMSON, FIIDA, GENSLER Well-being starts with an awareness of your own wellness needs.

PATRICIA ROTONDI, IIDA, CHIPMAN DESIGN ARCHITECTURE Well-being is setting up your life to work with you, not against you.

FELICE SILVERMAN, FIIDA, SILVERMAN TRYKOWSKI ASSOCIATES, INC. My personal definition of well-being is a state of balance, inspiration, and enjoyment—both physically and mentally.

FACTORS THAT MAKE UP WELL-BEING

Physical health
Mental balance
Emotional health
Social connection and a sense of community
Feeling of contributing to something bigger than oneself
Spirituality
Having a sense of agency and empowerment
Intentionality/mindfulness; consciousness of what one is trying to achieve
THE HAPPINESS FACTOR

Another key ingredient of well-being is, perhaps obviously, happiness. In fact, the relationship between happiness and well-being is a two-way street: happiness is intrinsic to well-being, but also depends on having achieved well-being. They are mutually reinforcing and codependent. Although entire self-help aisles are devoted to the attainment of personal happiness, it’s only more recently that contentment is being studied in the aggregate—i.e. a happy community. The Happy Planet Index, for instance, surveys the enjoyment level of entire nations (see box).

Clients have begun fixating on happiness as a factor of employee engagement; personal well-being underlies organizational well-being. Turns out that happiness is often tied to demographics and generational temperament. “[Studies show that] the youngest employees in any organization are usually the most unhappy,” noted Abernathy. (Many post-collegiates are still acclimating to employment, which could account for the low morale.) Gen Xers, who job-hop the most, are presumably among the less content. Happy people stay at their jobs longer—both of their own accord, and their boss’. “If there is a deterrent to grumpy, it’s that grumpy leaves first: You don’t fire the happy, engaged people,” said Abernathy.

HAPPY PLANET INDEX

Statistician Nic Marks, author of the Happiness at Work survey, recently developed the Happy Planet Index to measure “the degree to which happy lives are achieved by countries.” The giddiest: Colombia and Costa Rica. In fact, all of Latin America and Scandinavia both ranked high. (The U.S. clocked in at 105 out of 151.) A commonality among the victors? Marks concluded that what keeps us happy, healthy, and engaged—what creates well-being—are family structure and access to good health care.
BUT CAN WE MEASURE IT?

Clients not only want to engender well-being, they also want to quantify it—and, ideally, its impact on the organization. “We all know that well-being makes sense and produces great results,” declared Strassner. “But we need to create and share evidence of it—and stop asking clients to just trust us. The health-care industry has laid a strong foundation of evidence-based design, and the corporate world will soon be doing the same.” That is the very reason Savills Studley merged its workplace strategy and analytics groups. “Clients want the data behind the workplace decisions they are trying to make—metrics on performance, engagement, effectiveness, and efficiency,” said Abernathy.

Yet it is tricky to measure the impact of design with anything approximating scientific rigor. “In the biomedical field, you have to be able to exactly replicate the research, which you can’t do in design,” said Abernathy. “The design industry is largely based on intuitive knowledge, with no way of backing it up.”

And whereas physical wellness is straightforward to tally via BMI and blood pressure, the mental and emotional facets are trickier to assess. “It is much more complex to objectively measure how environment influences mood, versus how it affects nutrition or fitness,” said Braga. “Tracking it in a meaningful way will require methods that allow isolating elements of the work environment that contribute to the overall mood of the employees. It will also necessitate the involvement of several professional disciplines.”

Certainly a client’s HR department could assist with collecting data about employee (and employer) well-being, and would have a vested interest. “Why not ask them to participate in an enjoyment-quotient study, which they could use as a recruiting tool?” wondered Mohawk Group’s Chris Stulpin, Ind. IIDA. That would be a big attractor in Silicon Valley, said Studio O+A’s Primo Orpilla, IIDA. “Prospective employees always scrutinize a company’s ‘happiness’ factor.”

The million-dollar question is whether a direct link between well-being and productivity can be quantified. Productivity itself is nearly impossible to objectively measure, especially since what many employees are producing is thinking. But determine a way to prove that interior design can bolster employee productivity—and then guarantee that outcome—and the industry pay model could even change, with compensation or bonuses tied to performance.
Terrapin Bright Green recently published a white paper that measured the economic impact of spaces designed according to principles of biophilia. “They quantified what we’ve all known for decades—that access to light and views and nature is a positive thing—through metrics like absenteeism rates,” explained Bush. “So it’s been done on the pure sustainability side; maybe there is a way to do it on the wellness side. It’s an interesting model to look at.”

“There’s going to be a strong push to demonstrate productivity, which is really demonstrating value. The more you can do to set what those variables and criteria are, the more you can control the agenda.” ROY ABERNATHY, IIDA, SAVILLS STUDLEY
THE WORKPLACE WELL-BEING INDEX

What might a workplace well-being index be based on? What kind of information could be gathered, and what questions asked? Some suggestions:

QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYEES:

Does your employer offer enough variation in workspaces, from focus rooms to collaboration zones? Do you feel you have “permission” to use them at your discretion/as the need arises?

Is technology adequately integrated into your work area and throughout the office? Does your workspace support how you personally engage with technology?

Are your managers open and communicative about performance expectations (and how they dovetail with overall business goals)?

Was management open and communicative about the design attributes of the new/remodeled space, how it would differ from the former premises, and how to navigate any complications that might arise from those changes?

Do you buy into your organization’s mission and goals?

Do you like your workplace?

Do you feel a sense of belonging to your employer/organization?

Do you feel connected to/passionate about your work?

Are you physically healthy (according to accepted standards of BMI, blood pressure, etc.)? Has your health improved or been compromised since joining the company/moving into the new space?

Have you experienced any physical injuries related to work (back problems, carpal tunnel, etc.)?

What is your general mood in the workplace? How happy are you on the average day?

Do you find yourself laughing often? Swearing?

Does your work space allow you to move around frequently (via long corridors, access to internal stairwells, outdoor trails, employee-owned bikes, in-office yoga classes, etc.)?

Do you have access to nature through light, views, or the ability to work in Wi-Fi-equipped outdoor work areas?

Are there ample “real life” amenities located near your workplace (banks, dry cleaners, drugstores, childcare options, grocery stores, etc.)?

Do you have an easy commute?

Does your employer offer good benefits (affordable quality health-insurance plan, mortgage or adoption assistance, life or pet insurance, flexible spending, etc.)?

Do you enjoy adequate daily interaction with other staffers?

Does your work space support opportunities for interactions with staffers in other departments (i.e., cross-conversations between teams)?

Does management accept and support differences between individual work styles and needs?

Do you feel you are productive in the office?

Do you feel more productive in the office than outside of it (i.e., working at home, in a coffee shop, etc.)?
Are you comfortable in the office?

Are there opportunities during the workday for you to enjoy mindfulness?

Are you culturally aligned with your company? Do the organization’s goals dovetail with your own?

QUESTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS:

Is a full gamut of spatial genres—from focus rooms to collaborations zones—provided for staffers? Are any underutilized?

What is the overall physical health level of your workforce? Have you seen it improve in the new space?

Are mental-health problems (stress, anxiety, etc.) an issue among staffers?

How many employees have suffered from work-related physical injuries?

What are attendance and absenteeism rates (as related to the physical environment or consequences of ambient conditions and workstations)?

What are employee retention and turnover rates? Report by age bracket and years with the organization.

How high are your recruiting costs?

Have you been subject to many workers’ compensation claims?

How high is employee satisfaction overall?

How profitable has the organization been since the re-design/relocation? How much growth has the company experienced in that same period?

Do you frequently have to mediate disagreements between employees? Do you field many complaints about interpersonal interactions (for instance loud coworkers)?

Conduct a year-to-year (or month-to-month) analysis of employee time needed to work at home (versus working at the office). Has the ratio gone up or down?

What are your average actual health-care expenses per full-time employee (actual expenses paid, not insurance premiums)?

How effectively does the workplace support individual and organizational goals?

What is the return on capital spent on the physical environment and the process improvements supported by the environment?

Are temporary or perma-lance employees offered any benefits?

Many others could be added to the above list. “The International Wellbeing Institute’s Well Building Standard 1.0 lists 102 criteria linked to well-being, each of which has many parts,” said Ritchie. “They are looking at some 500 metrics.” So could interior designers.
**BIG DATA, BIG DEAL**

Data regarding workplace wellness could be collected via one of many new gadgets and methods:

**Apps** customized for employees’ iPhones or computers. These could be used to request feedback on certain wellness-related questions or for staffers to log in their daily mood.

**Push notifications** requesting real-time responses: “You could create online surveys similar to Happify, where people answer a series of questions and get a happiness score at the end,” said Sopwith.

“Items could be measured on a scale of 1 to 10 through management interviews or an online management tool like KeyneLink, and then get scored, graphed, and analyzed,” said Shannon.

“Because happiness is such an individual reaction, the best way to measure it is to ask employees if they are happy, via self-reporting online surveys, roundtable discussions, and one-on-one conversations,” said Shapiro.

**Wearable technology** has made the transition from sci-fi curio to everyday accouterment: the Fit Bit, the iWatch, and underwear with built-in electrodes to monitor heart rate. According to Forbes, there will be 100 million smart watches on us by 2019. Forecasters predict that the next big thing will be the smart ring, an even less obtrusive adornment.

Widespread adoption of healthier, better-informed workplace practices will be inevitable once we start to have the data to back them up. “Once you can measure something, it becomes important,” said Shapiro. “For instance, indoor air quality had a niche following until there was a marketable system to measure it—i.e. Greenguard—and then it became universally important practically overnight. Understanding design’s impact on well-being will not only help us communicate the value of good design, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the cost of bad design.”

**FROM DATA POINTS TO ACTION ITEMS**

Once workplace well-being data is collected, it has to be crunched by a trained analyst. “We’ll have access to massive amounts of data in the next few years, but our clients don’t have the ability, the mechanism, or the resources to interpret it,” said Abernathy. The task will fall on design firms to hire or have at their disposal an analyst to assist with such efforts. (It is also in a design firm’s best interest to be the one collecting and analyzing data, since they’d then own it.) “A skill that forecasters predict will be increasingly important in the next three years is ‘big data analyst’—the ability to drill down and connect the data to what it means for a particular organization,” said Durst.

Once conclusions are drawn, managers need to respond with the right actions. “As organizations begin to quantify the return on investment of employee well-being, they will need to more aggressively provide the resources necessary to support it,” said Tarkett’s Jeff Krejsa, Ind. IIDA. “Well-being will migrate from a human-resources function to a component of strategic direction and management, with results regularly reported, just like other financial measurements.” Results could be used to fine-tune design concepts and schemes, allowing real-time responsiveness. “Big data will provide regular measurements and the ability to quickly and accurately predict the outcomes of even small changes in the workplace,” said Abernathy.

But there is another possibility: Results will get ignored or swept under the rug. Consider the abundant health data we already choose not to act on. “Everyone knows that smoking can kill them, yet 25 percent of the population still smokes,” said Roth. “Will we really become any healthier just because we have more data? Or will we just know more?” Corporate inaction risks alienating employees, Krejsa added. “As soon as management asks for input and doesn’t react, employees will quickly disengage.”

The industry as a whole could benefit from aggregating data about individual workplaces that proves the benefits of investing in well-being via design interventions. That alone should be an incentive for designers to conduct post-occupancy evaluations—even when clients strike them from the budget to save costs.
PRESCRIPTION FOR WELL-BEING

Reyes posed the loaded question of the weekend: “How can workplace well-being be improved via targeted design interventions? We need a roadmap to help clients develop healthier workplaces that promote well-being, productivity, and comfort.”

Sustainable elements, healthy materials, and active-design features like standing-only conference rooms are being adopted with some frequency. But there was also a hunger for more evocative and holistic solutions. Designers and manufacturers identified various features—from focus rooms to thoughtful site selection—and discussed arenas of environment-behavior research that could inform even more novel strategies.

Well-being in the workplace is best supported by a variable, active, evolving interior with a balance of open-plan and focus areas carefully tailored to the activities taking place. These spaces are complex to envision and execute, requiring expert help and protracted and thoughtful planning. “You have to get deep into a company’s culture to understand the work styles,” said Orpilla. Almasy agreed: “A more varied work landscape that supports the unique needs and character of an organization and its individual employees requires more in-depth understanding and programing and a less formulaic approach to real estate.” The role of the designer becomes critical.

“For design to be successful, you must create a space that performs not only physically and aesthetically, but also psychologically.”

SCOTT HIERLINGER, IIDA, NELSON
1. **EMBARK**
on comprehensive programming.

Critical to addressing well-being is a generous programming phase, which designers should be prepared to fight for. “To get to that very bespoke design—for an individual or an organization—takes a lot of design resources and time, neither of which exist in the current business model,” said Almasy. Designers already find themselves on the defensive, fighting for elements and features they know will work best for a particular company, only to get shot down. “What clients are pushing back on is that you know their organization better than they do,” said Abernathy. It’s the design equivalent of cutting off your nose to spite your face.

There is another reason to agitate for an ample programming phase: The process is unique to the industry. It is an interior designer’s area of expertise, his or her competitive advantage. Designers develop a very intimate relationship with their clients to figure out who they are, what their culture is, and what they truly need. Practitioners should better promote themselves as human-behavior experts. They know more about society and culture, about how humans behave, act, and react in an interior space, than any other professionals. Build metrics and value around that.

2. **BALANCE**
open and enclosed spaces.

Design open offices the right way by attending to acoustics, providing ample opportunities for visual and aural privacy, and increasing the ratio of “me” to “we” space. Open-plan environments are a reality for a majority of clients who want them because of real-estate costs, but there are also myriad advantages to well-executed spaces, from improved collaboration to increased transparency and a sense of community. That said, designers will continue to be burdened with the task of battling the misinformed perceptions of “the evil, satanic open workplace,” as Durst jokingly put it. Implement variability and focus areas, and embrace smart programming and change management. “It’s essential to develop a program to ease people into this,” said Orpilla. “There should never be just open space; there needs to be the right balance of huddle spaces, phone booths, and closed areas.”
3. **LET behavior drive structure.**

Orthogonal floor plates often equate to an overreliance on cubicles and benching systems...which can make employees feel like rats in a maze. “Benching is not a workplace strategy,” said Wellwood. “It is a furniture solution with connotations of being able to save space. It does not respond to the way people work.” She advocated for inverting the typical order of events (i.e. designing the building shell first and then outfitting the interior): “What if we could flip it around so that behavior drives structure,” with buildings designed around the kinds of activities that will occur inside. As Reyling said, “Let’s move from environments that house people to environments that serve people.”

4. **BRING the outdoors in.**

“Light quality, biophilia, access to nature—these are trends with an impact,” said Ritchie. Indeed, there is ample data touting the health and financial benefits of spaces designed with biophilic touches, such as views of—and direct access to—the outdoors. Maximizing daylight will become an increasing priority, especially in stairwells and active zones. “Many European countries require daylight to be accessible no less than 30 feet into the base building, which I think will become a requirement here,” said Sickeler.

5. **DESIGN with human nature in mind.**

Darwinism as often referenced vis-à-vis workplace dynamics and interpersonal relations. “From an evolutionary standpoint, the office is a veritable microcosm of culture,” said Durst. “You’ve got your tribes, your hunter-gatherers.” But more and more designers are tapping into environment-behavior research that reveals what spatial attributes induce stress or calm, based on how humans evolved in the wild. Key features of the open office are major stress triggers: “It’s big and open with no place of refuge or sense of prospect, you can’t see what’s going on behind you, and you have zero control over the overall lighting level, temperature, and sound,” said Wellworth, noting that NBBJ engaged developmental molecular biologist Dr. John Medina to consult on such matters. Simple tweaks can make a difference, such as allowing employees opportunities to personalize their work space, ensuring the ability to switch a task light on or off, or using single benching rows where everyone faces the same way (versus each other).

6. **CREATE spaces that evolve.**

Williamson drew another connection to human evolution: “in our office, we talk a lot about habituation versus adaption—i.e. how your brain unconsciously acclimates to your environment. When people neurally adapt to their workplace settings, they fall into bad habits and become rote. Are they then engaged?” No. One solution is to create spaces that change. “Even something as simple as adjusting the lighting level catches people off guard in a good way, changing their experience.”
7. **FOSTER** socialization and friendship.

Design practitioners are tasked with creating spaces that foster community and engagement: barlike gathering areas, cafeterias with a coffeehouse vibe, group fitness spaces. “Greater attention is being given to social and collaboration areas, which are seen as having immediate impact on teammate well-being,” said Nelson’s Scott Hierlinger, IIDA. Opportunities to socialize are important for other reasons, Durst noted: “Yes, friendship is supporting and lovely, but friends also compete with each other, pushing you to do better work.”

8. **EMBRACE** variability and the “bespoke experience.”

2015 is anticipated to be the year of the curated, customized, bespoke experience—“created just for you, at whatever moment in time you’re in,” said Durst. “There is a market for making it about me, which is playing out in office design.” Employees want a work space carefully tailored to their particular tasks and work preferences. Or, at the very least, an opportunity to choose from a variety of work areas throughout the day: their dedicated station, a small enclosed focus room, a collaboration area, the library, etc. Said Stulpin, “I want a space that allows me to have many types of moments throughout my workday—from cooing to reenergizing with others.” A more variable, heterogeneous design also tends to “grow” better with the workforce over time.

9. **OFFER** just a few options—not unlimited choices.

How much “bespoke experience” is too much in the workplace? “How do you resolve the overall organizational goals versus designing for the micro-tribes?” wondered Stulpin. “We talk a lot about choice and control,” said Roth, “but studies show that the more choices we have, the more dissatisfied we are.” Then there’s the matter of uninformed choices, especially about ergonomics. “Someone says, ‘I think better in a hammock!’” joked Strassner. “Soon the inmates are running the prison and you are held accountable when things don’t work.”

10. **INCORPORATE** space to focus.

Continuous distraction and interruption—from technology, work culture, or poorly conceived open offices—has spawned a crisis of focus. Per the IIDA happiness survey conducted last year, 80 percent of respondents said that “constant interruption” was what they would most like to change about their workplace. Disruption causes blood pressure to spike and undermines sustained thinking: “It takes 15 minutes to get back to a place of deep concentration, and people are interrupted every 7 minutes on average,” said Busch. Offer enough enclosed rooms for employee use, and choose materials and features that dampen sound and allow opportunities to screen distracting views.

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**People are interrupted every 7 minutes on average.**
11. SUPPORT a workforce on the move.

Design spaces that encourage people to move around: standing-height desks, lengthy amenity-packed corridors, internal stairwells, and a variety of work areas. “Promote and encourage physical activity throughout the day, both at the individual workstation (sit/stand) and in the floor plan (mobility within the office),” said Busch. Strategies and features that came up:

- Offer sit/stand or variable-height desks (or treadmill stations) for all employees
- Design spaces for standing-only meetings
- Accommodate non-traditional seating requests, including exercise balls and rocking chairs
- Consider on-site workout facilities, bike storage, adjacencies to walking trails, and locker rooms with showers. Even conference or training rooms can double as studio space for yoga or Pilates
- Provide walking routes within and around the building, with distance markers (and energy consumption information) so users can track accomplishments
- Group amenities like bathrooms, pantries, printers/copiers, and break-out spaces into centralized support zones—ideally somewhere requiring a walk—to encourage movement and interaction
- Provide access to an internal convenience stair and/or renovate or upgrade egress/fire stairs to encourage regular use
- Place hallways adjacent to windows and/or offer creative walking paths in the space

12. RETHINK ergonomics for an active office.

Once upon a time, addressing ergonomics meant what Busch called “the cockpit thing:” designing workstations so that everything needed was comfortably within arm’s reach. Environments that encourage mobility allow workers to break up tensions, reducing our reliance on task chairs and articulated keyboard arms. “Moving around, you’re a lot less prone to repetitive injuries,” explained Ritchie. But ergonomics takes on a whole new meaning in this flexible environment. “The definition of ergonomics needs to expand,” said Susanne Molina, IIDA. “It must accommodate the worker who wants to be constantly moving.” Fast-adjusting chairs and accessible electrical outlets are now as important as proper screen height.

13. ENABLE borderlessness.

“Work is a deliverable, not a place,” said Ritchie. “More and more of us will be putting in 40- to 60-hour weeks, but only spending 15 to 25 hours at the office.” Advancements in teleconferencing and telecommuting are supporting free-range work habits. But there is a difference between enabling borderlessness and designing offices that practically force people to accomplish certain tasks at home—where conditions may not be optimal either. “We tend to idealize working from home, but many people have kids or lack room for a dedicated desk or work area,” said Pedersen. Borderlessness also entails being able to work anywhere within the office, abetted by Wi-Fi, portable gadgets, and EV charging stations. Employees should be realistic, however, about the kind of work that’s doable in a break-out area. “I know life is a big Apple commercial, but we remain cynical about the level of functionality that can be maintained [in ancillary areas],” said Strassner. “Can you comfortably work on your laptop in a collaboration space for 3 hours?”
14. CREATE
opportunities for
healthy sustenance.

“What does a design team have to do with healthy snacks?” asked Ritchie. “We have to design pantries so clients have adequate areas for storing fruit and nuts, prepping lunch, and microwaves/ovens/toast so smells don’t emanate.” Something as simple as designing spaces that support and encourage lunch prep opens up a much bigger can of worms about workplace protocol. “Then there’s an olfactory issue: Who wants to sit near where the tuna casserole is being heated? How far do we intercede in telling employees what they can cook and when?” Also smart, if less controversial, to consider: a higher density of water or hydration stations than codes require.

15. REMEMBER
that every new design solution invites new problems.

Take sit/stand desks and the common scenario of one person wanting to sit when their neighbor wishes to stand. Too often, the sitter feels visually violated by the stander. “We hear this all the time: People don’t want to feel looked-down on,” said Hierlinger. “Then you get into a situation where someone needs to compromise their physical well-being to accommodate another’s mental well-being,” added Herman Miller’s Alan Almasy, Ind. IIDA. Even a topic as straightforward as access to nature can become charged. “The increase of daylight and views has gone mainstream with lower-height panels and glass-enclosed offices,” noted Reyling. “While the benefits have been positively received, the concern of privacy has raised awareness for providing areas that address those needs, too.”

16. OVERSEE
on-boarding.

Coddling needs to be lavished on the back end of the design process, too: during and after the on-boarding. Change management is essential, a way to ensure that end users are properly informed and have realistic expectations, and that protocols are in place to help them navigate any issues that may arise. “Successful change revolves around change management,” said Hierlinger. “Teammates must understand what the space offers, how and why to use it, and that it is truly to be enjoyed and experienced. If they are not educated about expectations, the success of the project—and, by extension, well-being—is challenged.” Clients are not always willing to budget for this penultimate phase, which needs to be rectified. “There has to be a new expectation that change management is important, that not doing it lowers the probability that the project is going to be successful,” said Abernathy. Which is much easier to argue when one is armed with data backing that up.
17. **COMMIT**
   to post-occupancy evaluation.

Post-occupancy evaluation is another key piece of the puzzle, a way to ensure that users have settled in, and a means to identify any aspects of the design that should be modified or finessed. As with change management, post-occupancy evaluations can be a hard sell, an option many clients won't pay for. But do designers have an obligation—or at least an incentive—to provide both services anyway? Might designers need to stop thinking of these integral phases—which can both measure and safeguard outcomes—as optional? “Is post-occupancy just for the client’s benefit, or for ours, too?” asked Wellwood. It could be argued that it is for the betterment of our entire industry.

18. **ENCOURAGE**
   the client to take ownership.

Still, even when change management and post-occupancy evaluations are included within the scope of the project, there is only so much the designer can do to control the outcome in the long term; the client has to take ownership of the design. “Ultimately, it’s a C-suite issue,” said Sickeler. “You could hire change management, but the client’s management group should be the ones carrying their people through that process.” Metrics could motivate clients to stay true to the design intent. Armed with data about how to uphold well-being—and, therefore, productivity and profitability—clients would have ample incentive to ensure the best design is properly implemented and upheld.

**CONCLUSION**

Cultivating well-being is not a one-time effort, or something that ends once the punch list is complete. It needs to be continually nurtured, monitored, supported, and attended to. Designers and clients could take a cue from Nic Mark’s HPI Index: “In the countries that scored high, it is a government initiative to increase well-being and happiness,” said Durst. “They have a strategic plan as well as a champion and an enforcer for well-being.” Not to mention a motivated and invested community.
RESOURCES

READING LIST

Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia
Elizabeth Gilbert

Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail
Cheryl Strayed

Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School
John Medina

The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow’s Employees Today
Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd

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Kate Lister, “What’s Good for People? Moving From Wellness to Well-Being.”

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