

Attractive office space seen as health advantage for employees

By PATTI SINGER

Employees still hold meetings in conference rooms at Clark Patterson Lee, but that's not really why anyone goes into this particular one.

It's been transformed into a relax station, where employees can grab a free soda, do a puzzle, play darts or watch TV.

Chief executive officer Todd Liebert said he's often asked, "Really, you let them do that? Nobody abuses it. They use it when they need to."

The architectural, design and planning firm is living the wellness trend it builds for others.

Once narrowly defined as having access to an on-site gym or being able to buy fruit in the vending machines, workplace wellness is now a holistic approach that is reshaping what offices look like and how people move within the four walls.

"We start with sustainability," Liebert said. "Sustainability is all about creating buildings that are healthier for the people that are occupying them."

Walls made of living plants and illumination by natural light bring nature indoors. Floor plans are open and more of the space is designed for flexible use. Even the cafeterias are being made over, some with bar-height seating.

The corporate fortress has been breached.

"Old corporate America was like these prison buildings you went into," Liebert said. "You didn't want anybody to know

what you were doing. That's gone today."

An article earlier this year in Forbes cited a survey reporting that 87 percent of workers want a healthier workspace, which included such things as wellness rooms, sit-stand desks and ergonomic seating.

Millennials are one reason for the trend, Liebert said. "A lot of this is driven by generational change, although we all benefit from it."

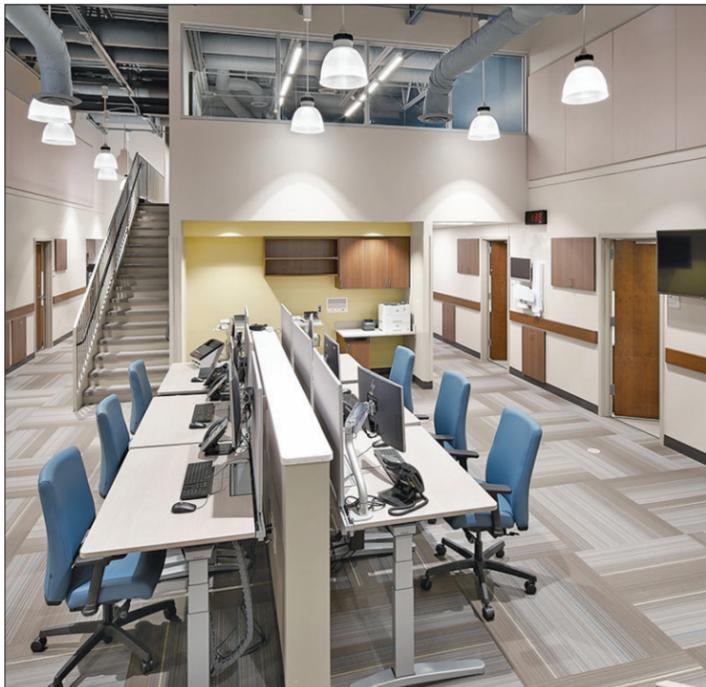
With employees in many sectors paying a larger share of their health benefits, changing the office design by making it homier could be seen as a way to take the sting out of a higher deductible. Beyond the comfort factor, inactivity increasingly is being seen as its own health risk, and workplace design that encourages taking the stairs and allows employees to move around throughout the day can be a strategy to promote well-being.

According to a January 2019 article in WorkDesign Magazine, the look and feel of the office also can reduce some of the hidden costs of health care such as employee turnover, disinterest and lack of productivity.

"It's a different world," Liebert said. "We're looking for the right employees. It's very difficult to find anybody today. ... You're trying to create an environment to attract them, to say 'I want to work there, look what they've got.'"

Employee input

Dixon Schwabl is well-known for its emphasis on wellness.



Above, Riedman Health Center staff area and mezzanine.

Photo by Kim Smith

Employees have always had a vote in what the interior space looked like. So the windows open to allow for fresh air. Every office has its own temperature controls. Collaborative spaces allow for team work. A koi pond lets employees enjoy nature as they go about their job.

"It's just a different way of doing your business," Dixon said. "It's not as sterile as some buildings."

She said that designing for wellness doesn't have to cost more.

"If you stop and think and put a bit more upfront thought into it ... what it ends up doing, your team members are far more productive and you are far more profitable without additional expenses. That's the bottom line from a fiduciary perspective. You're more profitable if you have happy employees."

Updated ergonomics

Over the past decade or so, ergonomics has gone beyond engineering the workplace (and the worker) to prevent injuries to a concept that promotes health.

An ergonomic approach provides a variety of workstations and uses an overall floor plan that makes people move. That may be because they need to find the private place to take a call from their child's school or to make an appointment with a doctor.

It also might be to consult with coworkers.

Peter Wehner, associate and architecture design manager at Passero Associates, said the influence of computer software can be seen in the popularity of collaborative spaces. "We like to be able to share documents in the cloud," he said. "A lot of times things are done cooperatively and being proximal to each other helps."

Office furniture – whether it's a stool at bar height in the caf-

eteria, a recliner with a wide arms to hold a laptop or adjustable desks – allows work to

happen throughout the building, said Anne Weis, an interior designer at LaBella Associates.

Different configurations also promote different postures that can help workers relieve musculoskeletal strain. A recent development is the sit-to-sit desk, which Weis said allows a person to adjust desk height for different tasks.

But it wasn't that long ago it seemed everyone wanted to be able to stand at their desk.

Workers of a certain age also remember their years working in a cube farm. The reasonable question is how much of the current trend is flavor of the month.

"It's more about the design collectively and having diversified space that reflects the individual and how they work," Weis said.

Mental health

Or what happens when those workers need a break.

Workplace wellness has expanded from physical health to mental and emotional health, and workplace design considers those needs.

"Decompression is probably the biggest thing we see with a lot of our clients, especially in the health world," said Liebert of Clark Patterson Lee.

The firm designed Rochester Regional Health's Riedman Health Center in Irondequoit and incorporated an expansive, naturally lit space for staff to take breaks. The firm also is building the seven-story Sands Constellation Center for Critical Care at Rochester General Hospital, which will have what's dubbed the Zen room for medical staff to take a breath.

It's not like the old days, Liebert said, where office workers felt like they were rowing a gal- leon.

"People have to have freedom to do things, places where they can get away from the stress of everyday life."

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CPL's new Relaxation Station is an office getaway for any employee needing a mental break during the day.



Provided photo

CPL designed the corporate headquarters for Analog Devices in North Carolina. The 27,000-square-foot building includes sit to stand desks; a green wall at reception; and a wellness room that includes an undercounter refrigerator, recliner, side table, and six lockers.



Above, a Riedman Health Center examining room.

Photo by Kim Smith



Above, the Riedman Health Center staff lounge.

Photo by Kim Smith