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by Jeanne C. Meister

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LAURENCE DUTTON/GETTY IMAGES

In an effort to support a healthier and more productive workforce, employers across the country are expected to spend an average of [\\$3.6 million on wellness programs in 2019](#). Think onsite gyms. Standing desks. Meditation rooms. Nursing hotlines. These are just [some of the benefits](#) companies are investing in.

But is any of it paying off?

The results of a [recent Harvard study](#) suggest that wellness programs, offered by 80% of large U.S. companies, yield unimpressive results — and our findings mirror this. [Future Workplace](#) and [View](#) recently [surveyed 1,601 workers across North America](#) to figure out which wellness perks matter to them most and how these perks impact productivity.

Surprisingly, we found employees want the basics first: better air quality, access to natural light, and the ability to personalize their workspace. Half of the employees we surveyed said poor air quality makes them sleepier during the day, and more than a third reported up to an hour in lost productivity as a result. In fact, air quality and light were the biggest influencers of employee performance, happiness, and wellbeing, while fitness facilities and technology-based health tools were the most trivial.

Organizations have the power to make improvements in these areas, and they need to, both for their workers and themselves. A high-quality workplace — one with natural light, good ventilation, and comfortable temperatures — can [reduce absenteeism](#) up to four days a year. With [unscheduled absenteeism costing companies](#) an estimated \$3,600 annually per hourly worker and \$2,650 each year for salaried workers, this can have a major impact on your bottom line.

[Other research](#) finds that employees who are satisfied with their work environments are 16% more productive, 18% more likely to stay, and 30% more attracted to their company over competitors. Two-thirds of our survey respondents said that a workplace focused on their health and wellbeing would make them more likely to accept a new job or keep the job they have. This means that companies willing to adapt to an employee-centric view of workplace wellness will not only increase their productivity, they will also improve their ability to attract and retain talent.

To get started, here are three steps you can take to improve your work environments and the wellbeing of your employees:

1. Stop spending money on pointless office perks. A good rule of thumb is to never assume that you know what your employees want — but instead, find ways to ask them. If more employers did, they might put less emphasis on office perks that only a minority of employees will take advantage of (like an onsite gym), and more on changes in the workplace environment that impact all employees (like air quality and access to light).

The number one environmental factor cited in our survey was better air quality. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said that fresh, allergen-free air would improve their wellness. Fifty percent said they would work and feel better with some view of the outdoors, while one third said they would want the ability to adjust the temperature in their workspace. Only one in three survey respondents characterized their office temperature as ideal.

Workplace Wellness Perks That Matter to Employees

A survey of 1,600 workers reveals that air and light matter much more than tech-based health tools.

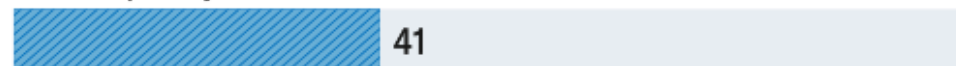
Air quality



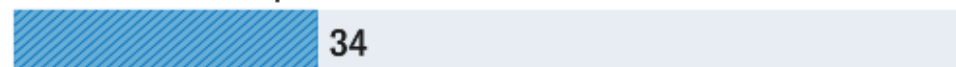
Comfortable light



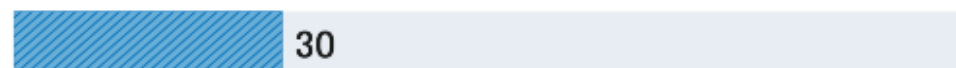
Water quality



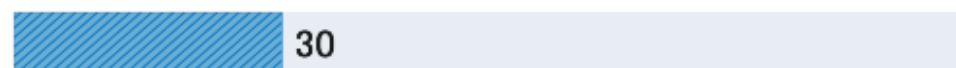
Comfortable temperatures



Connection to nature



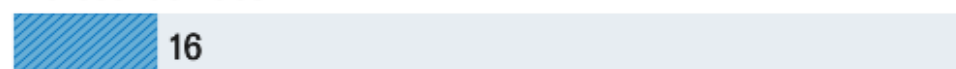
Comfortable acoustics



Healthy food options



Fitness facilities



Tech-based health tools



Source: Future Workplace



Noise distractions bothered more than a third of those surveyed, impacting their ability to concentrate. Employees said sounds like phones ringing, typing on keyboards, and distractions from coworkers all impacted their concentration.

Almost half of our respondents wanted to see their companies improve these environmental factors, and in many instances, more than they wanted to be offered office perks. The first step, then, is to take a look at where you are spending your money, and consider cutting expenses that aren't worth the cost.

2. Personalize when possible. We've all gotten used to personalizing our outside-of-work lives. We binge the shows we want to watch and listen to the music we like to hear, even if our partners or friends have different preferences. We adjust our thermostats without having to get up off our couches, and dim our lights to our level of satisfaction.

Employees are beginning to expect these same privileges in the workplace. Our survey revealed that employees, by a margin of 42% to 28%, would rather be able to personalize their work environment than opt for unlimited vacation. Specifically, what employees want to personalize:

- **Workspace temperature:** Nearly half want an app that will let them set the temperature in their workspace.
- **Overhead and desk lighting:** One-third want to control their overhead and desk lighting, as well as the levels of natural light streaming in.
- **Noise levels:** One-third would like to “soundscape” their workspace.

While these asks may sound exclusive to the personal offices of higher-ups — they're not. [Hewlett Packard Enterprise](#) headquarters is just one example of a company that has managed to help employees control the noise level in an open floor plan. Their building was actually designed to manage ambient sound in order to reduce worker distractions. Some companies like, [Regeneron Pharmaceuticals](#), have gone a step further, allowing employees to control the amount of natural light streaming in through the glass of their office windows with a cell phone app.

But for organizations that don't want to invest in a completely new building, there is a more organic route. [Cisco](#), for example, has managed the acoustic levels in their space by creating a floor plan without assigned seating that includes neighborhoods of workspaces designed specifically for employees collaborating in person, remotely, or those who choose to work alone.

This same strategy applies to light or temperature. You can position employees who want a higher temperature and more light around the edge of your floor plan, and those who like it quieter and cooler in the core.

3. Create a holistic view of workplace wellness. When deciding what changes to make to your organization, remember that workplace wellness is not just about the physical health of your

employees. It includes physical wellness, emotional wellness, and environmental wellness. To create a truly healthy work environment, you must take all three of these areas into consideration:

- **Emotional wellness:** [Give employees access to natural light](#), and quiet rooms where they can comfortably focus on their work.
- **Physical wellness:** Provide people with healthy food options, and ergonomically designed work stations.
- **Environmental wellness:** Make sure your workspaces have adequate air quality, light, temperature, and proper acoustics.

Companies that adapt to a more holistic view of workplace wellness will soon realize no one department alone can solve the puzzle. Our study results, [along with the results from the World Green Building Council report](#), push organizations to take a closer look at what changes they can make that will actually matter. My suggestion: consider how you can get back to the basics employees want, and invest in the core areas that will have the most impact.

Jeanne C. Meister is Partner, Future Workplace, an HR Advisory and Research firm and the co-author of two books on the future of work: [The 2020 Workplace](#) and [The Future Workplace Experience](#).
