Understanding Active Design: 
*The Rise of Human Sustainability*

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INTRODUCTION

As more and more companies embrace worker wellness, many are turning to the architectural and design communities for workspace solutions in support of a healthier workforce. Turning those sedentary office environments into spaces that can encourage healthier lifestyles is the central idea behind Active Design.

The New York Center for Active Design defines the overall concept as “the translation of health research into design solutions that amplify the role of architecture and urban planning in improving public health and well-being.” Yet translating this broad theory of Active Design and effectively applying it to work environments is an expansive and daunting challenge. What are the best ways to design the workplace to be intrinsically healthier? How can the architectural and design industry help organizations bring the concept of wellness to life in their physical workspaces?

In a proprietary study, KI researched Active Design in order to better understand current workplace initiatives, identify best practices, and create actionable insights that help foster Active Design. The project consisted of interviews conducted with professionals from top architecture and design firms, as well as a series of extensive surveys. One survey considered the perspectives of more than 100 average office workers. A second survey was sent to more than 100 workplace industry practitioners including architects, designers, and workplace strategists.

This paper presents the best ways in which Active Design is already taking hold, and provides nine practical principles for designing workplace environments that promote worker activity and create a healthier workplace.
A CLEAR NEED FOR WORKPLACE WELLNESS… BUT IS IT ENOUGH?

During the past decade, national interest in employee health promotion has spread rapidly. So prevalent is the awareness that 2014 has been dubbed by the Minnesota Department of Health as “the year of workplace wellness.” In Minnesota alone, 55% of employers with 100 or more employees now offer some sort of workplace wellness program. Nationally, 90% of companies employing more than 50,000 workers have wellness programs.

The reasons behind the active concern for worker wellness are clear. More than one third of U.S. adults are now obese, an epidemic resulting in estimated annual medical costs of more than $147 billion. Add in the costly loss of worker production that accompanies sick days and U.S. corporations have realized it is more effective to prevent than treat illness.

Wellness programs are indeed important, however conflicting evidence suggests that wellness programs alone are not enough to attain results or encourage movement in the workplace. According to one Harvard Research Study, medical costs fall about $3.27 for every dollar spent on wellness programs, and absentee day costs fall by about $2.73 for every dollar spent. In contrast, a Rand study claims wellness programs have a minimal impact on healthcare costs. Rand estimates that it takes an average of five years for a new wellness program to become cost-neutral, let alone generate positive ROI.

Additional studies in the recent field of inactivity research further challenge conventional beliefs that simply encouraging a healthy diet and regular exercise are sufficient to achieve worker wellness. Researchers are finding that inactivity even in small time increments is harmful, and a sedentary lifestyle can drastically shorten life expectancies. The workplace has become an incubator for sedentary behavior. “Exercise is not a perfect antidote for sitting,” says Marc Hamilton, an inactivity researcher at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center.
In the fine print of many studies affirming wellness program benefits, there are caveats suggesting the difficulty in measuring effectiveness due to lack of adequate control groups. Since most programs are voluntary, those individuals who are more motivated and already pursuing healthy lifestyles are disproportionately likely to enroll, which can skew the results to favor the positive side of benefits.

This phenomenon was also reflected in KI’s research when over 100 office workers were asked the question, “Do you feel encouraged to work out?” Of those who were self-described as “formal exercisers” (meaning, they regularly work out three or more times per week), 42% said yes they felt encouraged by their employer, versus only 3% of those who were self-described as “fairly sedentary.”

![Graph showing percentage of workers feeling encouraged to work out by activity level.](image)

The “sedentary” group was also 88% more likely to perceive that their organizations’ cultures would “not allow” them to work out, even though formal programs were offered. Clearly, workers are predisposed to project their natural motivations and practices into what the culture of their organizations do or do not encourage.

While formal programs are undoubtedly needed to encourage healthier practices, KI’s research suggests that such programs alone are not enough to generate healthy change. Instead, there are clear benefits from encouraging movement throughout the day. Therefore, creating environments that intuitively promote activity must become an indispensable part of wellness in the workplace.
THE PRACTITIONER / WORKER GAP

According to architects and designers KI surveyed, the “wellness in the workplace” discussion is increasing. Ninety percent of firms say that designing with wellness in mind is standard practice these days. However, KI research showed discrepancies between how quickly Active Design is actually being implemented versus employees’ perceptions about its adoption.

When asked to rank a list of 11 workplace priorities, there are notable differences between employees’ desires and the goals of practitioners—defined as architects, designers, and corporate end users/facility managers who are responsible for creating workplaces.

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<th>Workplace Priorities</th>
<th>Employee</th>
<th>End Users</th>
<th>A&amp;D</th>
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<td>Work Life Balance &amp; Flexibility</td>
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<td>Competitive Salary</td>
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<td>Advancement Opportunities</td>
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<td>Increase Collaboration</td>
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<td>Reduce Real Estate Costs</td>
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<td>Good Workflow/Destination Planning</td>
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<td>Improve Employee Satisfaction &amp; Engagement</td>
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<td>A Workplace Accommodating to Generational Differences</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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A&D: Defined as Interior Design or Architectural practitioners working for an architecture or design firm.
End Users: Defined as Facilities Managers or persons responsible for the workplace in a corporate setting.
Employee: Defined as anyone who works in a non-retail setting.
On average, employees ranked wellness as the fifth most important priority, yet it ranked sixth in requests to architects and designers, and ninth overall in priorities to the end users who manage workplaces.

KI also looked at those policies encouraging both informal movement throughout the day and formal workout programs. When asked, “Do you feel encouraged to move around throughout the day?” only 28% of employees said yes. When asked, “Do you feel encouraged to work out?” 53% said no, or that even if programs were offered, they felt they were unable to take advantage of such programs due to the organization’s culture.

**Do you feel encouraged by your employer to move around throughout the day?**

- Yes, via facility and culture: 35%
- Yes, culture, but not facility: 28%
- Yes, facility, but not culture: 19%
- No: 18%

**Do you feel encouraged by your employer to work out?**

- Yes, and I take advantage: 53%
- Yes, but chose not to: 14%
- Yes, but feel like I can’t: 10%
- No: 19%

As the average office worker makes increasingly conscious decisions to be healthier, workplaces must reflect, support and even encourage healthier practices. Although design practitioners are clearly doing their part to push the objective, corporate adoption rates appear to be lagging.
WORKPLACE TRENDS PAVE WAY TO ACTIVE DESIGN

Many of today’s spaces are being designed with various work zones to support differing work styles and functions that change throughout the day. This type of modern planning has increased in recent years and is leading to a significant shift in how space is being used. As a consequence, it’s also contributing to increased movement, the overriding objective of Active Design.

A decade ago it was possible to estimate the breakdown of space to be on average 80/20, with 80% of space dedicated to individual work, and 20% allocated to conference and meeting rooms. That balance has shifted dramatically for many companies in recent years. Today, a 50/50 division of space or even 60/40 is common, with the greater portion of square footage now dedicated to group space. More group space reflects a corporate desire for more collaboration, and a natural byproduct of collaboration is more natural physical movement as employees transition between spaces.

Furthermore, collaborative spaces give employees the ability to work in teams, which along with mobile technology allows them the freedom to choose where and how they work best. This freedom further supports wellness in the form of greater worker satisfaction and reduced workplace stress, providing yet another example of Active Design opportunities that are emerging by way of collaborative workspace design trends.
IMPACT ON ROI

Ultimately, most employers must consider the bottom line in all their space planning decisions and Active Design can well deliver the ROI companies need. For instance, physically healthy workers are more mentally engaged, and encouraging movement and choice in the workplace fosters not only healthier workers, but also more engaged workers. That adds up to measureable value.

The Hay group recently offered a study on engagement and the link to ROI by showing the bottom line benefit to a higher level of engagement. Its studies showed that high levels of employee engagement can boost revenue growth by between two and a half and four times. There was also a 54% increase in employee retention and an increase in customer satisfaction.

However, a startling statistic revealed by The Gallup survey in 2012 notes 70% of American workers are disengaged. By employing Active Design practices in the workplace, companies can aid in creating a healthier, more engaged workforce that’s also great for business.

A number of corporations have recently started implementing several Active Design principles as part of an overall wellness program. As the companies measure ROI, it is evident that the new workspaces have significantly impacted employee recruitment. The percentage of people accepting jobs has increased and several offer full office tours as part of their recruiting regimen.
9 PRINCIPLES FOR ACTIVE DESIGN IN THE WORKPLACE

Turning Active Design concepts into actionable and functional plans is today’s latest challenge for both professionals and businesses. Below are nine best practices built on feedback from KI interviews and surveys with workplace design professionals and employees that can help accomplish effective Active Design.

1. **Implement Daylighting.** Daylighting consists of removing tall barriers, bringing in natural light and reducing the need for artificial light. Sixty-three percent of employees surveyed felt their workplaces were designed with this practice in mind, while 79% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.

   There are many health benefits to natural light,¹¹ and the practice has become more commonplace with the quest to secure LEED certification. Daylighting strategies include reducing panel heights, relocating offices to the core of the space rather than lined along walls, creating glass-walled meeting rooms, and selecting spaces with large and plentiful windows. Architectural walls made of glass, such as KI’s Lightline® product, provide a great way to infuse light into a space and can also be a more cost-effective and flexible solution over traditional drywalls.

2. **Create a Variety of Work Spaces.** As workstations shrink in size, it becomes vital to create a variety of spaces for individuals to work within other than traditional desks. According to Joan Blumenfeld, Global Interior Design Director for Perkins & Will, “What we are doing for companies is providing the same number of seats, but in different formats; formal conference rooms, meeting rooms, a café with lounge area, lounge spaces. There are all kinds of other ways to work besides sitting at a desk in an office or workstation. We are providing a lot of different workplace settings that people can get up and go to. This idea is driving a lot of the changes we are seeing in workplace design in the corporate world.”¹³

   Fifty percent of employees surveyed felt their offices were designed with this practice in mind, while 75% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing. Flexible workspaces also give employees choice in where and how they work best, increasing productivity and reducing stress.
3. **Encourage Face-to-Face Communications.** Providing a layout that encourages face-to-face interaction over electronic communication is an obvious way to promote movement and increase team building. Again, 50% of employees surveyed felt their offices encouraged this, while 74% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.

This practice is as simple as locating all employees on one floor, with clear sight lines to one another in an open floor plan. Mark Hirons, Principal/Design Director of Interiors for Cannon Design, which recently relocated its Chicago office says, “We are now all on one floor, which makes them 40% more likely to meet face to face. If you can see someone, you are 40% more likely to walk over there than call or email.”

4. **Offer Healthy Food Options.** There are many ways employers encourage employees to eat healthier. They include providing healthy snack options in central locations, thereby encouraging workers to move. Providing access to healthy choices is likely to encourage employees to take advantage of better choices. This can be as simple as vending machines in a central location offering healthy options.

Many companies are including a central café and lounge space to provide one central location for healthier food as well as encourage interaction among employees during meal and break times. Only 53% of employees surveyed felt their offices provided them access to healthy food choices, while 57% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.

5. **Encourage Movement at Work.** When it comes to encouraging daily activity, employers are getting more creative. Some now provide walking paths and even encourage walking meetings, which has been shown to increase creativity. Only 47% of employees surveyed felt their offices provided them options for intentional physical activity at work, while 62% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.
6. Design Flexible, Open Multi-Use Spaces. While meeting areas of the past included boardrooms or conference rooms outfitted with tables and chairs, communal spaces can now be designed with a variety of uses in mind.

According to Marlene Liriano, Director of Interior Design with HOK, “Flexible spaces are now commonplace; conference rooms that double as studio space for yoga/pilates and other activities can also support wellness programs. It is cheaper for them [corporations] to bring people in to the office than to support someone out [sick]. If space can double or pieces of these spaces can double in their functions, that is innovation.”

Only 32% of employees surveyed said that their offices had a space for multiple wellness uses, while 46% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.

7. Subconsciously Inspire People to Take Stairs. One Active Design area that continually excites architects and designers is the ability to create visually appealing stairs. Well-designed and intentionally located staircases subconsciously encourage people to take the stairs instead of escalators or elevators. Only 29% of employees surveyed said their offices encouraged this via facility layout, while 49% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing.
8. **Incorporate Height-Adjustable Worksurfaces.** Perhaps one of the most readily under-executed principles of Active Design is the use of standing height worksurfaces or height-adjustable worksurfaces, to the unfortunate detriment of today’s workers. A 2009 University of Queensland study found that even when adults meet physical activity guidelines, sitting for prolonged periods can compromise metabolic health.\(^{13}\)

Additionally, at the 2013 annual meeting of the American Medical Association, AMA adopted policy recognizing potential risks of prolonged sitting and now encourages employers, employees and others to make available alternatives to sitting, such as sit-stand desks.\(^{14}\)

Despite this mounting evidence, only 23% of employees surveyed cited having access to standing height worksurfaces, while only 46% of practitioners defined this as standard practice or increasing. KI offers a variety of height-adjustable worksurfaces that can aid in decreasing the negative effects of prolonged sitting.

9. **Allocate Outdoor Workspace.**

One of the biggest “aha” moments in KI’s research was with regards to outdoor workspace. When asked, “Does your employer offer outdoor space where you can work?” only 15% had such space available to them, and the overwhelming majority of those employees surveyed (69%) wished for access to outdoor space.

Only 32% of practitioners cited this as standard practice or increasing. KI research suggests that outdoors is likely to be the next “new workplace.” This will require more than just furnishing a table and chairs; attention must be paid to managing glare, providing seamless connectivity to the internet, and creating an atmosphere where employees can physically go, work and feel refreshed.
SUMMARY

As the average office worker makes increasingly conscious decisions to become healthier, workplaces will need to reflect, support and encourage healthier practices. This must include, yet go beyond wellness programs in the workplace and evolve into the intentional practice of Active Design. By using the nine principles KI has identified, workplaces can naturally encourage healthier lifestyles and promote inherent movement throughout the work day.


