**NEWS ARTICLE**

Wellness is the new benchmark in workplace design excellence

**31 October 2023:** While remote work levels remain higher than before Covid-19, workforce and real estate data reveal a continued uptick in office occupancy and demand as companies rebound from the pandemic. A silver lining is the impact on office design, especially as companies embrace wellness to entice employees back to the office and at the same time keep them as productive and as happy as possible.

According to research, it is widely recognised that interior office space can affect health in several ways. Here four main workplace design strategies are key: Design for comfort aims to reduce or prevent health complaints, discomfort, and stress, following a pathogenic approach. The other three take a salutogenic approach, promoting health by increasing resources for coping with demands through positive design.

Design for restoration supports physical and mental recovery through connections with nature, design for social well-being facilitates social cohesion and feelings of belonging, and design for healthy behaviour aims to promote physical activity in the workplace.

**Jean Swanepoel**, Head of Design at office design and build specialist [Trend Group](http://www.trendgroup.co.za), comments that commercial design is probably one of the more complex forms of design. “With residential design, you are working on an individual’s sole environment, and their specific design taste. But when you create an office environment that has multiple individuals with multiple different opinions, lifestyles, backgrounds, ethics, morals, and religions, it does become very complex. It is great to create such a multifaceted environment as a platform for wellness, but corporate culture must be considered as well.

The traditional approach was simply ‘here is my space, transform it into this’. Now factors such as the psychology of employees and how to best to accommodate their present and future needs are increasingly important. Head of Design **Stacey-Lee Kruger** points out none of these items were even on the table back in the day. Now it has become more prevalent as companies begin to understand the concept of wellness and the benefits it can bring to a workplace and its employees.

“Now when we look at a workspace plan it is not only about accommodating a certain number of people, but how to integrate them in the best way possible so they take ownership of their workspace and have everything they might need,” says Kruger.

“Workspace design is quite dynamic at the moment,” says Swanepoel. “From our side, we present to the best of our capabilities and expertise to facilitate companies to embed a culture of wellness.” A simple example of such a holistic approach is to understand that an ergonomic chair is not best for wellness if it is not coupled with a height-adjustable desk or a monitor stand. Wellness is about connecting all of these diverse elements into a cohesive whole, she adds.

The role of the interior designer in this process is to implement wellness as an overarching concept, from ergonomics to creative lighting designs. “When we propose a workspace plan to a client, what is at the forefront of our thinking is how people will work throughout the space. It means creating different environments. When we explain a design to a client, we want them to get excited about their space and how it can promote and activity as a health benefit.”

Swanepoel says wellness does come at a premium, so Trend Group always strives to balance design and functionality. “As designers, we want the space to look great, but also for people to have all the benefits, and comfort of the space.” Whereas the traditional approach was to calculate the square meterage per employee, now it is much more about how individual benefits can be catered for. “What we attempt to convey to clients is that everybody wants a space that fits as many people as possible to get the most value out of your rental, but at the same time you need to know what can really fit into the space to make it functional and usable for all,” notes Swanepoel.

Kruger defines a healthy workspace as an office environment “for the staff and not just where work takes place. Now it centres on considering the staff in the space itself, the value of which extends far beyond the real estate itself to getting the most out of it by ensuring it is as appealing and as functional as possible.

“It is about accommodating the needs of the employees and the company,” adds Kruger. “As a designer, we have to strike a balance in creating an environment where you can break away whenever you need while at the same time be able to connect and interact freely.” A key consideration here is the type of industry, as this affects the type of finishes and furnishing used, for example.

“We want to provide a sense of comfort and practicality. Nowadays a lot of office workspaces are looking to achieve a Green Star rating. It is a very holistic approach. People tend to think about wellness as having a few potted plants scattered around the office. We look at everything, thinking about the space and narrowing it to the granular level of the properties in the finishes themselves,” says Kruger.

She adds that this places a huge responsibility on interior designers, especially as part of the overall professional team. “While it is challenging for us, it is how we grow in our own development and design. In terms of always trying to get it right, when working with other consultants and architects, we always strive for a good partnership. There is a lot of push and pull to get it right and everything aligned, all to the benefit of the client. It certainly makes us more dynamic in our approach and gives us insight and knowledge that we can ultimately impart to the benefit of our clients,” says Kruger.

While there are pros and cons to the hybrid work approach, Swanepoel says companies are faced with the challenge of trying to create hybrid agile workspaces as well as futureproofing the office to expand as needed. “Having employees returning to the office means they are taking ownership of their workspace. Now they are presented with options, especially in terms of the hybrid working environment.

“You have the option of how you want to work within that space, especially as people become more attuned to their workspace environment. It also makes the company consider what it needs to provide for different individuals as opposed to just looking at the total head count.” Swanepoel says companies can boost productivity significantly simply by incorporating basic wellness measures, flexibility, and a certain element of individuality that conveys to employees that they are trusted and valued by the company.

What gives Trend Group the leading edge in office workspace design is not only that it utilises the latest digital tools to create mock-ups and virtual walkthrough models, it also has a Design Colab co-located at its Sandton office where clients can physically interact with and touch furniture and finishings for a more tactile experience and understanding of the design concept.

“Our clients come to the Design Colab to see the furniture and have the textiles in front of them, along with all other materials that will go into that space. It is a good way of presenting to a client, in conjunction with a virtual walkthrough model. It connects the design to its look and feel,” says Kruger.

Looking at the latest trends, Swanepoel says that South Africa, by virtue of being behind the European market, has access to tried-and-tested solutions. “It is much more than simply selecting a colour palette. Now it is complying with rigorous international health and safety standards, including fire-rated materials.”

Another trend gaining traction, especially as companies continue to downsize to cut costs due to the hybrid model, is convertible spaces. For example, a boardroom can double up as a meeting space or breakaway area when not in use. A major factor influencing office design is the growing role of technology. Whereas server racks used to be hidden away in the basement or crammed in next to the printer, IT rooms are now an integral part of workspace design.

“We look at the overall functionality of the space because IT is actually dictating how it needs to be laid out. Technology is also important for wellness, as being fully equipped with plug points and other peripherals reduces stress and allows workers to be more productive,” notes Swanepoel. Another trend is refurbishments, especially as starting from scratch is often too prohibitive for smaller companies.

“We do a lot of refurbishment projects,” confirms Swanepoel. “There is that component of acknowledging their existing furniture and incorporating some existing elements because it helps achieve a Green Star rating. We meet them halfway to come up with a solution that, while integrating corporate identity with wellness and technology to promote successful hybrid working,” she concludes.

**REFERENCES**

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**Notes to the Editor**To download hi-res images for this release, please visit <http://media.ngage.co.za> and click the Trend Group link to view the company’s press office.

**About Trend Group**Trend Group specialises in office interior design and refurbishments in the commercial, industrial, and retail sectors. We are a comprehensive, solutions-driven company that operates on a turnkey basis. We offer a streamlined approach to design, procurement, and construction delivery, covering all aspects of the project solution. We are a proud Level 1 B-BBEE accredited company.

**Trend Group Contacts**

Cayleigh Zeidler

Marketing Manager

Phone: (010) 596 5956

Email: cayleigh@trendgroup.co.za

Web: [www.trendgroup.co.za](http://www.trendgroup.co.za)

Gavin Dickinson

Business Development Director

Email: info@trendgroup.co.za

Web: www.trendgroup.co.za

Phone: (010) 596 5956

**Media Contact**

Andile Mbethe

Account Executive
NGAGE Public Relations
Phone: (011) 867-7763
Cell: 073 565 6536
Email: andile@ngage.co.za
Web: [www.ngage.co.za](http://www.ngage.co.za/)

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