

3 factors to boost everyone's well-being at work

Follow these professional prescriptions to remedy ailments of the modern workplace.



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When American Express rolled out its new work model in March 2022, called Amex Flex, it gave employees the opportunity to choose from three ways of working: in the office, at home or a hybrid approach combining both. Although prioritizing work-life balance in its work design was something that American Express had done for years, the company sought to give people greater control over how and where they worked, following the pandemic.

American Express CEO Stephen Squeri [said at the time](#): “Offering flexibility has always been a part of our culture, and with Amex Flex, we want to achieve the best of both worlds —

recapturing the creativity and relationship-building of working together in person, while also retaining the flexibility and progress we have made in a virtual environment.”

The move was in line with research suggesting that employees experience higher levels of well-being when they have more control over their own work schedules. It is one of several elements that contribute to workplace well-being.

According to [Dr. Pilar de Castro-Manglano](#), a psychiatrist at the [Clínica Universidad de Navarra](#) in Spain, companies are still in a period of adaptation following the global health crisis, which had an unprecedented impact on the mental health of workers.

“Extreme confinement measures and family stressors triggered high levels of anxiety and depression, while eating disorders and other addictive behaviors also spiked,” she notes. She urges companies to invest in measures that can help boost well-being and consequently productivity.

Here are three key factors for companies to consider that will contribute to everyone’s well-being at work.

1. Physical comfort

Productivity and job satisfaction are tightly linked with physical comfort. Whether in the office or at home, [a comfortable environment](#) is an essential ingredient for maximizing performance and ensuring good health.

“Poor workplace design has been associated, in many scientific studies, with different pathologies,” says Dr. Alejandro Fernandez-Montero, a specialist in occupational medicine at the [Clínica Universidad de Navarra](#). “Companies and workers should be aware of these risks and apply measures such as adapting the workplace to the person, maintaining properly lit and ventilated spaces, and creating rest, socialization and exercise rooms.”

Fernandez-Montero cites these top risks:

- **Musculoskeletal disorders.** Poorly designed workspaces that require forced postures or repetitive movements increase the risk of musculoskeletal disorders, which are the most frequently reported work-related diseases.
- **Mental health problems.** Poorly organized tasks or a lack of natural light can contribute to work stress and affect the mental health of workers, presenting a greater risk of depression and anxiety.

- **Fatigue and drowsiness.** Again, a lack of natural light and poorly ventilated spaces without windows can also affect the body's circadian rhythm, leading to sleep problems such as daytime drowsiness and difficulty falling asleep at night.
- **Eye problems.** Limited exposure to natural light and a lack of relative humidity in the workplace can affect the eye health of workers, increasing the prevalence of problems such as eye dryness, redness and visual fatigue.

Moreover, many jobs require workers to be sedentary throughout the working day, which increases the risk of obesity and cardiovascular disease, Fernandez-Montero adds.

Air quality has become a growing concern since it has been found to reduce cognitive function. One [Harvard study](#), conducted across six countries in a range of fields including engineering, architecture and technology, found that high levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) and lower ventilation rates (measured using CO2 levels) were linked with slower response times and less accuracy in cognitive tests. As such, companies should test the air quality of workspaces and take steps to address risks.

Quality of sleep is essential because it can add years to people's lives and improve mental health. According to [one study](#), men who regularly sleep well could live five years longer than those who don't, while women's lives could be extended by two years.

"Sleep leadership" was the focus of a [BBC article](#) featuring the CEO of the tech firm Basecamp, Jason Fried, who prioritizes sleep in order to be more effective. Fried applies the eight-eight-eight rule, which means eight hours for work, sleep and "life" equally.

"It's kind of gross — this idea that you 'need' to work so much, and that's the thing that'll get you ahead — putting in ridiculous hours," Fried comments in the article. "No one has the stamina or mental capacity to do 14 hours of work."

In fact, a growing awareness of the importance of sleep has even led to a new luxury travel niche — [sleep tourism](#) — with expensive resorts around the world now offering sleep retreats.

2. Environments that facilitate focus

Work life today is one of constant interruptions, with urgent emails, WhatsApp messages and phone calls blocking our ability to focus. The inability to put focused attention on a task for a significant amount of time has become a health concern for both adults and children.

According to the British journalist [Johann Hari](#), author of the bestseller [Stolen Focus](#), our

capacity to focus is being “stolen” from us by systemic forces such as technology-induced task-switching.

IESE Prof. [Sebastian Reiche](#) recently put Hari’s book under the microscope in a blog post, “[Can I have your attention, please?](#)” Reiche agrees that people are “indeed getting worse at paying focused attention to a single task,” while also losing the ability to “do nothing” and ignore devices.

“What’s more, we are living in a world of complete information overload, increasing sleep deprivation, bad diets and constant stress,” Reiche says. “But in order to pay attention well and focus on something for a sustained period of time, our brains need exactly the opposite: a good rest, proper nutrition, mental well-being, manageable workloads and some slack time to let the mind wander.”

Hari believes attention should be viewed on three layers: spotlight (our immediate attention); starlight (long-term goals and vision); and daylight (the ability to have mindful attention and see our purpose clearly).

As [Reiche comments](#), “If we are unable to pause and recognize our whereabouts in terms of attention, thoughts and emotions in the present moment — and our choices or priorities at large — we will continue merely reacting to what is happening in our life, instead of proactively shaping it.”

Ways that employers can seek to increase concentration and focus at work, according to the [Society for Human Resource Management](#), include:

- **Take regular breaks.** Encourage employees to take breaks and give themselves rewards for longer periods of concentrated work.
- **Good lighting.** As already mentioned, lighting has an important impact on the ability to focus and be productive.
- **Rethink office spaces.** Give people spaces to recharge and choices about where they can work so they can focus best, whether it’s in a quiet, smaller space or an open, noisier one.

“It’s difficult to concentrate in open spaces,” says De Castro-Manglano. “We need a certain level of silence to work. If open spaces are necessary so that people are accessible or visible, then glass partitions, for example, that can insulate noise would be optimal to improve performance.”

Interestingly, smartphones may not have the negative impact on relationships and creativity that has often been perceived.

A well-known study carried out in 2013 indicated that the mere physical presence of a cellphone in a meeting had a negative impact on social interactions. But more recent research, led by IESE assistant professor [Claire Linares](#) with Anne-Laure Sellier of HEC Paris, found this was not the case.

Their [study](#), involving 356 volunteers split into 136 groups who carried out creative tasks, showed that the presence of a cellphone versus a notebook did not have a negative impact on social interaction or creativity during their tasks.

As people have gradually become more accustomed to the presence of technology, smartphones may not have quite the detrimental impact they once did, [the researchers concluded](#).

Nevertheless, De Castro-Manglano argues that society is “now experiencing a pandemic of behavioral addiction to the use of technology and social networks. On the one hand, they improve our access to people and information, but on the other hand, they worsen our communication, making us less capable of establishing healthy relationships, which technology can’t teach us.”

3. Autonomy and decision-making

Autonomy and the ability to make decisions in the workplace have been shown to have a highly positive impact on employees’ mental health, boosting intrinsic motivation and engagement. As companies implement back-to-the-office policies, some firms are seeking to let employees have more choices over their work conditions than in the past.

Going back to American Express’s introduction of Amex Flex, when people were given the choice of how they wanted to work, the majority chose a hybrid format. While there are various pros and cons of working at home versus in the office, in the end it may have been the ability to choose that proved decisive.

Control over the time, pace and location of work can boost well-being and job satisfaction, although women and men may experience the benefits of autonomy in different ways. According to [one study led by the University of Birmingham](#), women reported benefiting the most from flexibility in work times and locations, while men were affected more positively by autonomy in work tasks and pace.

Regardless of working arrangements, De Castro-Manglano stresses the importance of protecting workers' personal time and respecting work schedules.

“When schedules are respected, we can be more efficient, leaving time to rest and come back energized and motivated. Too much pressure generates stress, which is harmful to our performance and our physical and mental health,” she says.

While autonomy is vital, she urges companies to also offer training for developing empathic communication skills among staff members in order to foster greater interpersonal collaboration. Competitive atmospheres generate mental stress in both online and face-to-face environments, she says.

“The idea is to generate [human alliances that are enriching by connecting with people](#) around you, so that you can depend on each other. In the end, isolation does not enrich people,” she says, noting that hybrid work arrangements should be carefully implemented and adapted to the needs of each worker.

Finding the right recipe

Well-being involves a complex mix of the physical, mental, emotional and social dimensions of overall health. It means creating the conditions in which individuals and teams can thrive, leading to maximum performance and ongoing improvement.

De Castro-Manglano offers this caveat: “Work should give people a sense of improvement. Nobody wants to work in a place that impedes their growth, socially, professionally and, above all, as a person.”

Read also

“[How to manage stress before it manages you](#)” from [IESE Business School Insight #159](#).

Beatriz Arantes discusses [how the design of your physical work environment fosters personal well-being](#), from an interview in [IESE Business School Insight #153](#).

The IESE case study “[American Express: deciding on a hybrid work model after the COVID-19 crisis](#),” by John Almandoz, Sebastian Reiche and Larisa Tatge, is available from [IESE Publishing](#).

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