

Business

Seeing Green

Add plants at work to increase the green on your bottom line.



Plants can help sustain a healthy office environment...and increase the green on your bottom line.

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You've seen him: The employee who just doesn't function at maximum productivity, who misses work frequently due to illness, who complains of vague health problems such as irritated eyes, nose, and throat, dizziness, fatigue, or headaches. Before you write this person off as a chronic slacker, consider this: poor indoor air quality can cause all of these ailments - - and that's just the immediate effects. Long term, poor indoor air quality can cause serious disease, including heart disease and cancer.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), most people spend 90% of their time indoors. Yet, the indoor environment sometimes has higher levels of pollutants -- 10 times more --than the outdoors!

There's good news, however. You can improve a building's air quality -- and therefore employee comfort and health -- with the simple addition of plants.

Worker Productivity

We know anecdotally that workers are more productive when they are comfortable, free from distractions and stress, and in an aesthetically pleasing environment. But thanks to numerous scientific studies, businesses now have data to support their investment in plants.

- Studies by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) reported that 40% of absenteeism was attributed to indoor air quality-related illnesses. Research also shows that plant-filled rooms contain 50-60 percent fewer disease-causing airborne molds and bacteria than rooms without plants.
- NASA reports that "sick building syndrome" is widespread in energy efficient buildings because toxins become concentrated inside the sealed office buildings so there is less air exchange between fresh, outdoor air and stale, indoor air. Further data published by Bio-Safe Incorporated confirmed that energy efficient, sealed office structures are often 10 times more polluted than the air outside.

- In an eight-month study at Texas A&M University, researchers demonstrated that plants lowered workplace stress and enhanced productivity by 12% over work environments with no plants.
- A study by Washington State University determined that plants in offices cause the relative humidity to increase and stabilize at the recommended range of 30 to 60 percent for human comfort and health.
- Studies at the Agricultural University in Oslo, Norway found that symptoms such as fatigue, headache, sore/dry throats, coughs, and dry facial skin decreased by 20 to 40 percent when plants were included in the office.
- Charles First, an architect with Trammell Crowe in Richmond, conducted studies in Ohio to explore factors that might improve worker satisfaction and productivity from a facilities/design perspective. First said his results showed that adding plants to break areas and in workstations contributed positively to employee satisfaction.

Why Plants

According to Connie Balint, president of Virginia-based Buckingham Greenery, a commercial interior landscape company, plant leaves absorb certain organic chemicals and destroys them in a process called metabolic breakdown. "Plants effectively act as filters in a building, taking in toxic chemicals through their roots and converting these substances into a source of food and energy," she said. "They take in carbon dioxide, a toxin, and produce oxygen, which people need to survive."

Jay Quell, director of general services at The Hermitage at Cedarfield, notes that plants can serve as the proverbial canary in the coal mine. "They can be great indicators when things are not right with the indoor air quality," he said."

Balint says plants also have a positive emotional impact on people. "There are numerous studies that show that simply adding plants and flowers can improve innovation and creative problem-solving. Plants just make people feel good."

A comfortable, attractive workplace helps companies attract and retain high-quality employees. Fred Drake, buildings and grounds manager for Henrico County, is an advocate of plants in the workplace. "We do it for the visual appeal," says Drake. "Plants are generally well thought of. Many employees bring in their own plants; it makes their [workspace] feel more like home."

Plants serve other functional purposes as well, such as guiding the flow of traffic and establishing barriers. Plants also help absorb noise, which reduces distractions and employee stress.

What You Can Do

May is Clean Air Month and a reminder to companies not to overlook the importance of a healthy work environment.

Balint says it's easy to incorporate plants into the workplace and typically costs less than many types of office decor. "This small change can have profound effects. The investment in

employee comfort and productivity can give companies an edge in an increasingly competitive marketplace."

Balint offers a few tips for using plants at work to improve air quality and employee productivity:

- Choose plants that are good at removing toxins such as spider plants, English ivy, chrysanthemum, philodendron, bamboo palms, and ficus trees, all common indoor plants.
- Use plants strategically to block and redirect traffic and absorb noise, reducing employee distractions and stress.
- Tasteful and appropriate use of plants makes a space look expensive, which enhances a company's brand and image. Be sure to take proper care of your plants so they always look fresh and healthy. Use the health of your plants as a barometer of the health of the building.
- Do not overdo it. Research shows that 15 to 20 plants are enough to clean the air in a 1,500 square foot area.

Indoor plants in the work environment contribute positively to employee wellness and productivity and reduce toxins that cause sick building syndrome. For more study results and additional information, visit Plants at Work (www.plantsatwork.org), a program sponsored by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, or Buckingham Greenery, www.buckinghamgreenery.com.

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