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A recent FIS roundtable debate – sponsored by BRE and the International WELL Building Institute, and conducted under Chatham House rules – enabled industry specialists to discuss well-being solutions for office buildings



Round the table

- **David Frise**, chief executive, FIS
- **Joe Cilia**, technical director, FIS
- **Martin Townsend**, director, BRE
- **Ann Marie Aguilar**, director of operations, Europe, IWBI
- **Victoria Lockhart**, director of business development, Europe, IWBI
- **Joe Croft**, head of environmental and sustainability, Overbury & Morgan Lovell
- **Ed Dixon**, environment manager, Land Securities
- **Zoe French**, environmental and sustainability manager, Overbury & Morgan Lovell
- **Martin Gettings**, group head of sustainability, Canary Wharf Group
- **Philippa Gill**, partner, Verdextra
- **Elina Grigoriou**, director, Grigoriou Interiors
- **Oliver Heath**, director, Oliver Heath Design
- **Paige Hodsman**, concept development office environments, UK and Ireland, Ecophon
- **Richard Hollis**, associate director, AECOM
- **Katie Livesey**, associate director, Anthesis
- **Mark Randall**, managing director, IOR
- **David Savage**, technical director, HKS
- **Steve Thompson**, associate director and head of digital manufacturing, PCSG
- **Jon Khoo**, innovation partner, Interface

CALL FOR

Action, not words, was the FIS clarion call when it pooled industry expertise on health and well-being with the support of the Building Research Establishment – which operates the BRE Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) – and the International WELL Building Institute.

Practical steps to make every office fit-out meet the health and well-being needs of the office workers within – not just more talk – was the demand. What resulted was an impressive array of ideas.

The industry needs to challenge preconceptions and change minds. But in this area, crucially, the focus needs to be from the bottom up, not just the top down.

Educating and empowering office workers to seek improvements to the places in which they spend many hours a day was one ground-breaking idea. “If we can create consumer demand for well-being, we can change a lot quicker than if we must convince the top down that there is a return on investment,” was the view of one delegate.

There were even suggestions that the industry should encourage the BBC, or other broadcasters, to include programmes about health and well-being in the workplace – shifting perceptions of good design away from

the soft furnishings and matching curtains of so many TV design shows.

The problems with the traditional top-down approach were plain, said participants.

“Middle-aged white men at the top are the stumbling block,” said one. Another added: “I met a CEO who thought that as he’d had to struggle in terrible conditions, and coped with it, everyone else should”

For these leaders, budgets are more important than well-being. “Economics is a tool, but it’s become the aim,” said one.

Anything to do with health and well-being, and its natural partner sustainability, is seen as an unnecessary add-on – not core, but a waste. The word “emotion” is often seen as a dirty word by this generation of managers, a sign of weakness. And that results in a problem for everyone who works for them.

Then there’s the fact that most tenants never meet their landlords and that most landlords are pension and investment funds whose main concern is income, not the people paying into the pensions.

Even if they own a building that’s operated with high standards and expectations, said one delegate: “If someone says: ‘I’ll take four floors but I’m not following your rules’, you’ll take that rent”

These are the people who need targeting,



REVOLUTION

“We have associated value with cost but the two are not linked. What is valuable to you and your staff is more important”

agreed delegates, with real data on the return on investment of well-being in design and management of buildings. They need educating on what it is and why it is important.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Different stakeholders need to be brought together, they said. One delegate cited a meeting between human resources, facilities management, the project manager and the designer, who all learned from each other as misconceptions and misunderstandings about each other’s needs and restrictions were exposed through conversation.

Pension funds and other investor owners need to meet with tenants, delegates agreed. And customers should meet suppliers throughout the supply chain so there are more open and transparent conversations, breaking down mistrust.

But this is long-term, hard work. And the real change will only happen when the next generation of managers takes over, bringing



Pictured, clockwise from bottom: Martin Townsend and David Frise; Zoe French; Philippa Gill; Mark Randall; Richard Hollis

“The mind-set of some people won’t change: they will have higher sickness costs and staff turnover tomorrow than they have today”

Pictured this page, clockwise from right: Ann Marie Aguilar; Martin Gettings; Jon Khoo; Joe Cilia; Steve Thompson; David Frise; Ed Dixon

more modern ideas and expectations with them. To really speed up change, a revolutionary approach is needed, working from the bottom up.

The conversation was radical: “We need to democratise well-being. We need to make it mainstream. We need to think: ‘how do we avoid company boards?’” was one comment.

“We need to empower people to tell the decision-makers that they don’t like their offices,” said another.

It starts with the youngest, said another: “We need to teach our children to tell their teachers that they don’t like their classrooms.”

That means using a different language. It means office labelling – like food labelling – that highlights issues such as air pollutant levels and noise dampening. It means explaining in simple terms the benefits of different aspects of well-being and how it affects workers, not bosses and bottom lines.

There was concern among participants about over-simplifying well-being, which could undermine the design and management skills needed. Any consumer awareness campaign should clarify that different people respond in different ways and a well-designed office incorporates elements that suit a variety of people doing a plethora jobs with multiple ways of working.

“People must not assume that what works for one will work for all. We are each different and will respond in different ways,” was one comment.

Well-being should not be reduced to a tickbox list or simple rules, but needs to be explained in simple-enough terms for people to embrace it – a tough ask, everyone agreed.

VOICE OF THE WORKERS

Attention turned to those working in offices. For this bottom up approach to work, workers need to have the means, channels and encouragement to speak up and make demands. Few do, for fear of being painted as a troublemaker, at best putting their career on hold and at worst facing the sack. “How do we as an employee get listened to?” asked one delegate.

This was where the idea of engaging with the



“When everyone realises that the built environment is crap they will vote with their feet. Do we want to be behind, or do we want to be disruptive?”

media to promote well-designed office and work environments in an interesting and entertaining way came alive.

“Design is being taken out of the process. You see a space plan and a furnishings board, but there’s no design involved,” said a participant. “The social norm is what is on TV. We need a different TV design show.”

The third sector – charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and campaign groups – was seen as a potential model. An office well-being campaign should study their tactics and borrow the best, using online petitions and social media to spread messages and lobby for change.

Several delegates believed a trickle of ideas can quickly turn into a flood. A few floors in an office building using the best in well-being and design would be noticed by those passing to other floors and less healthy offices. Those people will want to consider the office environment when they make their next career choice.

“Young people are far more health-conscious,” said one participant. “They know what they are putting into their bodies. They will choose their employer accordingly.”

And many new graduates are already much more health conscious and pollutant-aware. They understand the importance of health and

“Change only happens when the risk of not changing is greater than the risk of change”

Pictured this page, clockwise from left: Kate Livesey; Paige Hodsman; Martin Townsend; Victoria Lockhart; David Savage; Oliver Heath; Joe Croft; and Elina Grigoriou (centre)

and the grey suits agree to make minor changes and not go the whole hog. “The risk is if getting through only results in ‘what are we going to do to make things a little less bad?’ when what we need is to clear the decks and start again,” was how one contributor put it.

The first step in this campaign is to find and publish and promote exemplars – real examples where health and well-being has worked, been measured and success recorded. There are now studies that are starting to empirically measure the improvements and financial benefits – that elusive return on investment – that well-being being designed in to offices can bring. Measured reductions in staff turnover, quantified improved productivity, recorded reduced sickness and absenteeism all needed to be demonstrated. The industry needs to produce more and to promote it more widely.

Case studies are crucial too. Offices where well-being has been integral need to shout and sing about their success. Firms should produce factsheets and data sheets and release their environment measurements of noise, pollutants, air quality, alongside the human, subjective comments of the office workers.

It goes back down the supply chain too. One contributor had asked all suppliers for detailed information on their products sustainability and well-being measurements, despite knowing most would not produce them, or be able to produce them. The company was then helping its five biggest suppliers to compile that information so that the next time they asked, it would be easier.

If everyone did the same, producing that data – and choosing products with better scores – would become the norm. One manufacturer also said that the industry should demand new products to meet their requirements – “you demand it, we will make it” was the message. The demand for change came from all sectors of the industry from the top to the bottom of the supply chain.

It may be 100 years since the Russian Revolution but the construction industry is about to face a revolution of its own. Well-being is the new ideology. The (internal) walls are about to come tumbling down.

“We’re conditioned to think that although the office is too dirty, too hot and too noisy to work, because I get a pay cheque at the end of the month, that’s OK”

well-being and will be choosing their employers on that basis. Those with the poor offices will struggle to recruit.

Added up, it’s an impressive manifesto, but there are huge risks and challenges to overcome. Post-Grenfell, participants were concerned that regulations for fire safety could have unintended consequences, reducing natural ventilation, introducing more pollutants and slashing sustainability.

Even swinging public opinion behind well-being and health issues could hurt the sustainable side of development, which should go hand in hand with well-being. That had to be watched carefully too.

Another risk was the industry itself failing to live up to the ideals it was promoting. The biggest killer of construction workers is suicide. Construction sites do not live up to health and well-being standards. And that is not just for the manual trades.

Architects, surveyors and project managers might have fine offices but can spend “four years and windowless basement” as one put it, while running a major construction project. If the industry itself cannot make improvements for its own staff, it cannot tell others to ‘do as it says, not as it does’.

And little steps were not enough, the panel agreed. A real concern is that the beancounters