Editorial

Health and safety and health and wellbeing

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While workplace safety considerations are often given prominence by organisations, health and wellbeing considerations are more difficult to quantify and tend to be given less attention.

With evidence that employee disengagement is increasing, it is also important to provide workplaces that positively influence employee wellbeing. It has been said that the focus is often on symptoms of disengagement such as distraction, lack of interest, poor decision-making and high absence rates, rather than the root causes. I have previously suggested that the workplace may be a key root cause.

A healthy working environment can be defined as an environment that is free from negative health contaminants and where safety hazards are reduced to the minimum. A healthy working environment will contribute to staff feelings of wellbeing.

One of the key negative health aspects of buildings is sick building syndrome. This phenomenon emerged as a recognised workplace problem in the 1980s. With the move to more energy-efficient buildings, the environmental conditions for sick building syndrome have been created. Symptoms of illness relating to sick building syndrome include eye, nose and throat irritation; dry skin and mucous membranes; skin rash; mental fatigue; headaches and airway infections; cough; hoarseness, wheezing, itching, hyper-sensitivity; nausea and dizziness. These symptoms will generally disappear shortly after leaving the building. Thomas-Mobley defined a sick building as ‘one in which 20 percent or more building occupants experience similar acute health effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a building, but no specific illness or cause can be identified’. Sick building syndrome can be caused by poor ventilation, enabling the build-up of indoor pollutants. It has also been shown that management can create an organisational culture that increases the sensitivity of the building population to environmental conditions: for example by setting inadequate environmental performance standards, lacking suitable building performance data, failing to anticipate the consequences of change, ignoring job stress factors or responding slowly to environmental complaints.

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are present in buildings, particularly in new or recently refurbished buildings. They are typically associated with materials derived from petroleum products and arise in off-gassing from a variety of building products, furnishings, cleaning products, paints, adhesives, carpeting, upholstery, panelling, plastic,

vinyl, copying machines, computers and hundreds of other office products. VOCs are emitted in varying amounts by the lubricating oil in mechanical parts of office printers. These include substances such as benzene and formaldehyde, which in low concentrations can cause skin irritation and dry throats but in higher concentrations are linked to cancer.

Building occupants may be exposed to many pollutants simultaneously and although exposure to individual contaminants may be extremely low, the combined effects over time may be much more significant.

Contaminated air may also result from contamination of fresh air intakes such as emissions from the building itself or other nearby buildings; vehicle exhaust from street traffic, car parks and loading docks; contamination from industry, streets and construction sites; or outdoor contaminants from other sources being transferred to unexpected situations by wind currents. A further example of indoor air pollution is airborne particles, which were found in a recent study by He to be produced in significant quantities from office printers. They concluded that toner cartridge and the age of the cartridge could be the most significant factors affecting printer emissions.

A range of research has documented the beneficial effects of plants in removing indoor air pollutants. The first evidence of the ability of indoor plants to remove air pollution was presented by Wolverton in 1984. Plants also have the ability to remove offensive odours, particularly ammonia. They found that diffusion time became longer as the molecular weight of offensive odours increased.

Plants in the workplace therefore do more than just look good. They have a beneficial impact upon our health and wellbeing.

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Managing Editor