

Innovating to achieve sustainable wellbeing inside the built environment

The essential element of any innovation is the human relationships that enable it to happen and these are the most likely to be left out of any published article sharing process and outcomes. The innovation under consideration here focused on refurbishing an area within an existing unused and neglected area within a University building. The vision behind this project was 'sustainable wellbeing within the workplace' and aimed to create a physical environment that brought together best evidence on sustainable procurement for materials and furniture; and made use of colours, textures and images that would promote wellbeing for those working within. The two main players involved in the refurbishment were academics, one had expertise in relationships between sustainability and wellbeing, and the other was the project lead.

Interestingly, as this project progressed traditional providers routinely employed for building work began to see this project not as something to laugh at or mock but rather by the end they became champions for this vision of 'sustainable wellbeing'. This progression was achieved by influencing beliefs and values as well as building confidence. We focused on those individuals who already had some interest in this area and encouraged them to have the confidence to question their normal practice. We also relied on the underlying principles to be somewhat self-demonstrative: working on the idea that as an environment changes, so do attitudes. Following the creation of this space it has begun to influence how academics are organising their own personal work spaces and is influencing future building and refurbishments within other university buildings.

So what were these principles? We know that certain physical features in the workplace can induce a stress response: a lack of natural lighting and non-opening windows; close-packed uncomfortable seating that invades personal space; or bland, monochrome colour schemes and harsh linear features to name but a few. Once stressed, a person is primed to respond to any subsequent events, making increased errors or reacting with irritability to situations normally well within their capabilities. Yet simple changes to a physical environment can help alleviate any stress, making use of inherent responses that we all have. Making the most of windows which look out onto trees or gardens, images and artwork with organic shapes, even the textures of natural materials used create sensory impressions which have been shown to benefit health, reduce illness and increase positive mood. Even plants in workspaces can improve a person's ability to concentrate on a task, improve the air quality and reduce errors and fatigue. Through using materials such as wood, water-based paints and recycled or reused materials – all more sustainable resources than are commonly used in institutional environments – the process of procurement and renovation (or development of new spaces) is itself more sustainable than the norm. By going further and building on the relationship with existing suppliers, we found surprising enthusiasm and interest when trying to source non-standard materials and furniture. Indeed sharing our growing knowledge on what was achievable in relation to sustainable procurement seemed to further enthuse and motivate the team to focus on our shared vision of sustainable wellbeing within the work environment.

Now the space has been created, it doesn't end there. The aim is to continue to promote pro-sustainability with the clear knowledge that such measures also have a direct positive impact on wellbeing this area is now being discussed across the university at all levels. Simple things like flexible working hours can avoid pollution-creating rush-hour traffic and natural lighting and ventilation reduce energy bills and are rated as more pleasant and better for health. As a rule of thumb, environments that are better for humans are those that are ecologically healthy and beneficial for our wellbeing on a local and global scale.¹

Changes to normal practice may be perceived as requiring extra effort and challenges. However

if confidence is built through having a clear vision and supporting individuals to take risks then the sceptics can themselves become champions. However, this can only be done through building relationships and partnerships, nurturing change and innovation – beliefs all too often seen as negative concepts across the National Health Service and higher education sectors where effort only rarely goes into building and supporting the relationships that enable change to happen successfully. Innovation cannot be undertaken without perceived risk, and encouraging others to take risks requires active support strategies: leadership that itself embodies the values being promoted.² Growing ‘champions for change’ from existing staff and seeing their enthusiasm as assets to support innovation (an approach which emerged from a community development background³) was successful. The team (from the architect to the painters and decorators and everyone in-between) moved from the ‘usual suspects doing the normal stuff’ to questioning and interrogating every element of a renovation project in relation to the overarching values guiding it: sustainability and wellbeing. It is important to note also that just influencing some members of the project team (as often happens within NHS-based change) is not enough. The whole team was changed to the extent that future building and renovation projects in the institution are being informed by these values.

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