

# Creating Thriving Work Environments: Prioritizing Wellbeing and Flow in Workspace Design.

By  
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## Introduction

Step into a world where work and wellbeing coexist harmoniously, where the confines of traditional offices are shattered, and creativity thrives in every corner. This journey unveils the transformative potential of a new frontier in workspace design, tracing the path of a groundbreaking research project that seeks to redefine how we create workspaces. Although initially focused on coworking spaces, it became clear early on that the concept applies to the broader context of all office design. Therefore, we continue to use the term "workspaces" to give it a broader application.

Gone are the days of monotonous cubicles and noisy open plans, where personal lives were mere afterthoughts. Today, a new breed of workers yearns for more—a seamless integration of their professional and personal selves, to encourage more attendance, we must create workspaces that promote productivity and equally foster wellbeing, mimicking the comfort and ease of home in this post covid hybrid world.

The changing dynamics of the modern workforce have set the stage for a revolution in workspace design. Drawing on the transformative power of positive emotions and the science of happiness, we embark on a quest to craft offices that transcend the ordinary. Inspired by years of groundbreaking research on the science of happiness, we build on this work of 100's of scholars including Barbara Fredrickson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. What sets this exploration apart is the foundation of my own work with 20 years in the lifestyle field, a founder of coworking spaces and 7 years of doctoral research immersed in workspaces, providing invaluable insights into the connection between workspace design, wellbeing, and the enhancement of flow experiences.

This article presents the fruits of years of research, bridging the academic world and real-life applications. It provides actionable strategies to equip you with the knowledge

and tools necessary to create a workspace that not only inspires you but also silently encourages you to reach your full potential. This novel approach to design, which views employee wellness as a central element rather than an afterthought or mere add-on, (think meditation apps etc.) heralds a revolutionary shift in the way we perceive and construct workspaces. The goal being to feel “well” the minute you step into the space.

Witness the real-world application of this PhD research at Village Workspaces in Los Angeles, a thriving ecosystem that has housed esteemed companies such as SoundCloud, Shopify, Done and Done (Selling Sunset), Casamigos, Vox Media, and Billie Eilish Management, to name just a few. Village Workspaces has become a haven where productivity, wellbeing, and creativity flourish.

## **2. The Research and its Purpose:**

Building on a foundation of two decades of experience in the lifestyle field, including roles as an author of 5 books, a lecturer, journalist, media commentator, and psychologist, I have always centered my teachings around seven core principles:

1. Cultivate Intimacy and Connection
2. Prioritize Mind, Body, Spirit Health
3. Choose Flow Experiences
4. Embrace the Present Moment
5. Foster Lifelong Learning
6. Practice Generosity
7. Harness Thoughtful Environmental Design

These principles not only laid the foundation for my research project but also sparked a comprehensive ambition to reorient wellbeing within the realm of workflow and flourishing workspace design.

My research journey commenced with an in-depth exploration of the extensive body of literature on workspaces, office design, flow, wellbeing, and happiness. However, my approach was not confined to theory and academia; it was also deeply rooted in practical, firsthand experiences.

Over a span of six years, I embarked on an ethnographic research voyage across six different workspaces in London and Los Angeles. (Including WeWork, Cross Campus,

Henry Wood House, Writers Junction, Santa Monica Village, Westside Village Workspaces) This immersive journey offered a wealth of diverse insights and perspectives.

Subsequently, I assumed management of an existing boutique space, formerly known as the Working Village. The space was rebranded as the first Village Workspace, (aka the Santa Monica Village) enabling continued research within a practical, operational context.

To gather a broader range of data, I conducted numerous interviews and surveys with members of Santa Monica Village. These interactions centered around their unique needs and preferences within the framework of the seven wellbeing principles outlined above.

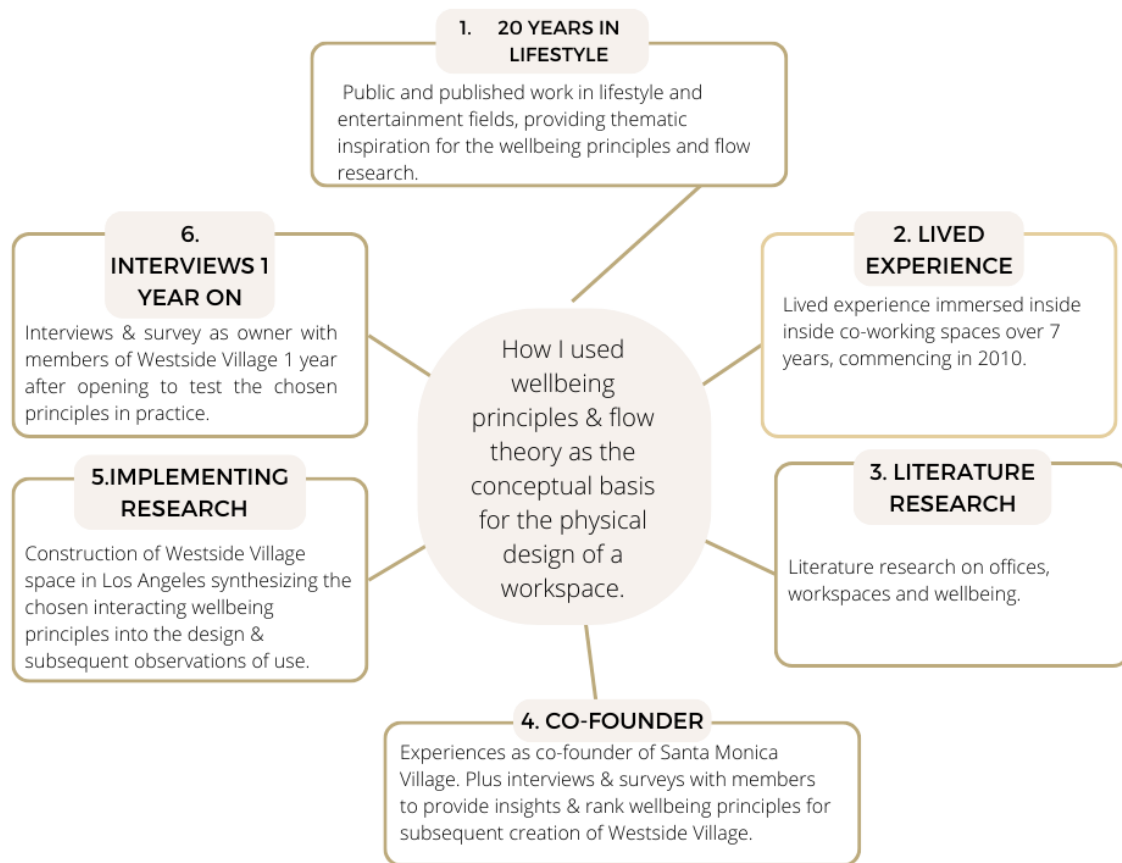
The rich and interlinked data collected through these multifaceted methodologies were instrumental in the design and construction of a new, expansive 17000-square foot workspace in Los Angeles, named the Westside Village Workspace. The insights did not just guide design decisions but were crucial in prioritizing a list of wellbeing features based on user preferences. The aim was to balance the creation of an optimal work environment while ensuring cost-effectiveness.

Following the construction phase, I dedicated a year to observe how individuals interacted within the Westside Village Workspace. Through two sets of informal interviews, conducted a year apart, I evaluated the workspace's effectiveness in promoting wellbeing and flow. This process also helped identify areas that might benefit from further research or design improvements.

The overarching research questions propelling this project were:

- 1. Can wellbeing principles be identified and validated to be physically embodied in the construction of a workspace?**
- 2. How can these principles be effectively implemented in practice?**

This in-depth research process allowed for an unprecedented understanding of the interplay between workspace design, user experience, and the impact on overall wellbeing.



*Figure 1: My journey to build a principle-based co-working space capable of inducing wellbeing for its members.*

## Finding 1: The Key Principles of Wellbeing for Workspace Construction

One of the key discoveries from my research was understanding which of the original seven principles were most relevant during the construction phase of a new working space. Drawing from my personal experiences, existing literature, and research conducted at our Santa Monica Village location, (formerly Working Village) I realized that four principles stood out as being most critical during the buildout and design stage. These also happened to be the ones that members highly valued in comprehensive interviews at Village Santa Monica:

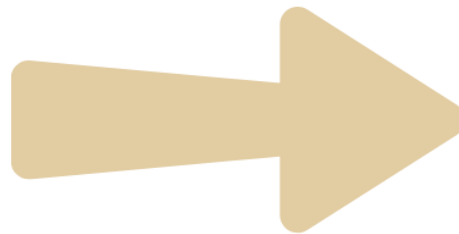
1. Fostering a state of flow
2. Promoting mind, body, spirit health
3. Building meaningful connections
4. Being environmentally design conscious

I found that the principle of 'taking notice' could be integrated within the environmental design factors. Meanwhile, the last two principles, 'giving' and 'learning', were more relevant to the day-to-day operations of the space, rather than the physical buildout itself. Consequently, when planning the construction of the Westside Village Workspace, our focus centered on these four principles. This initial phase of my research helped answer the first research question, as it identified which principles were most relevant to wellbeing and could be tangibly embodied in the physical construction of a workspace.

## WELLBEING PRINCIPLES INTEGRAL IN THE DESIGN OF A WORKSPACE

### 7 INITIAL CORE PINCIPLES

- To Connect
- To Foster Flow
- To Be Healthy
- To Give
- To Learn
- To Take Notice
- To Be Sensitive to the Environment



### FINAL 4 CORE PRINCIPLES

- To Connect
- To Foster Flow
- To Be Healthy
- To Be Sensitive to the Environment

*Figure 2: Wellbeing principles integral in the design of workspace that promotes wellbeing, productivity, and flow.*

## **Finding 2: Linking Wellbeing Principles to Physical Design**

The second revelation that I had was about the intricate interplay between the wellbeing principles and their physical manifestations in a workspace. I initially thought of the seven wellbeing principles as distinct categories, but as my research unfolded, I discovered that they often overlapped and interacted with each other.

For instance, when I was at the Henry Wood House workspace location, part of the Office Group in London, I noticed that something as simple as an ergonomic chair embodied multiple principles. This chair, designed for comfort and proper posture, helped users focus on their work—aligning with the principle of flow—and contributed to their health by preventing problems associated with improper seating. This is how it worked:

### **Ergonomic Chair = Flow + Health**

At another location, Cross Campus in Santa Monica USA, windows played a pivotal role in the design. They allowed users to take a moment to appreciate the view, which not only facilitated a state of flow but also had health benefits such as exposure to sunlight. It also linked to the principle of environmental consciousness. Here's how the interconnection looked:

### **Window View = Flow + Environmental Consciousness + Health**

Similarly, I realized that negative factors like noise in shared areas could disrupt the flow, increase stress levels (affecting health), and potentially cause friction among coworkers. Thus:

### **Noise = Disruption of Flow + Health Impact (stress) + Relationship Conflict**

These insights were crucial in guiding my approach to designing our workspace. But my journey of discovery didn't end there. I was about to have a third important realization.

### **Finding 3: The Four-Factor Model for Construction Stage**

In my quest to redefine workspace design, a crucial development was the emergence of a Four-Factor Model for the construction and design phase. This directly answered my second research question: How do these wellbeing principles interact in a practical setting?

The goal was to create a workspace that enhances work productivity, boosts physical and psychological wellbeing, and fits within budget constraints. After rigorous research, four key principles stood out as critical for the Westside Village project's construction plan. Addressing these factors was essential to meet our members' wellbeing goals.

1. **Problem A** - Balance privacy and noise: We needed a combination of private offices and open spaces. This would effectively handle noise issues and provide the necessary privacy.
2. **Problem B** - Cater to diverse work styles: Our space needed to offer a multi-location work experience, allowing members to choose their ideal work settings throughout the day.
3. **Problem C** - Prioritize space, light, and views: We aimed to provide ample space, natural light, and appealing views wherever our members chose to work.
4. **Problem D** - Craft a nurturing environment: The design had to inspire warmth and health, cultivating an atmosphere that nurtures inspiration.

These factors formed the core of our new model, a guiding blueprint for constructing the Westside Village Workspace. The result was a workspace that not only met practical needs but also promoted wellness and productivity

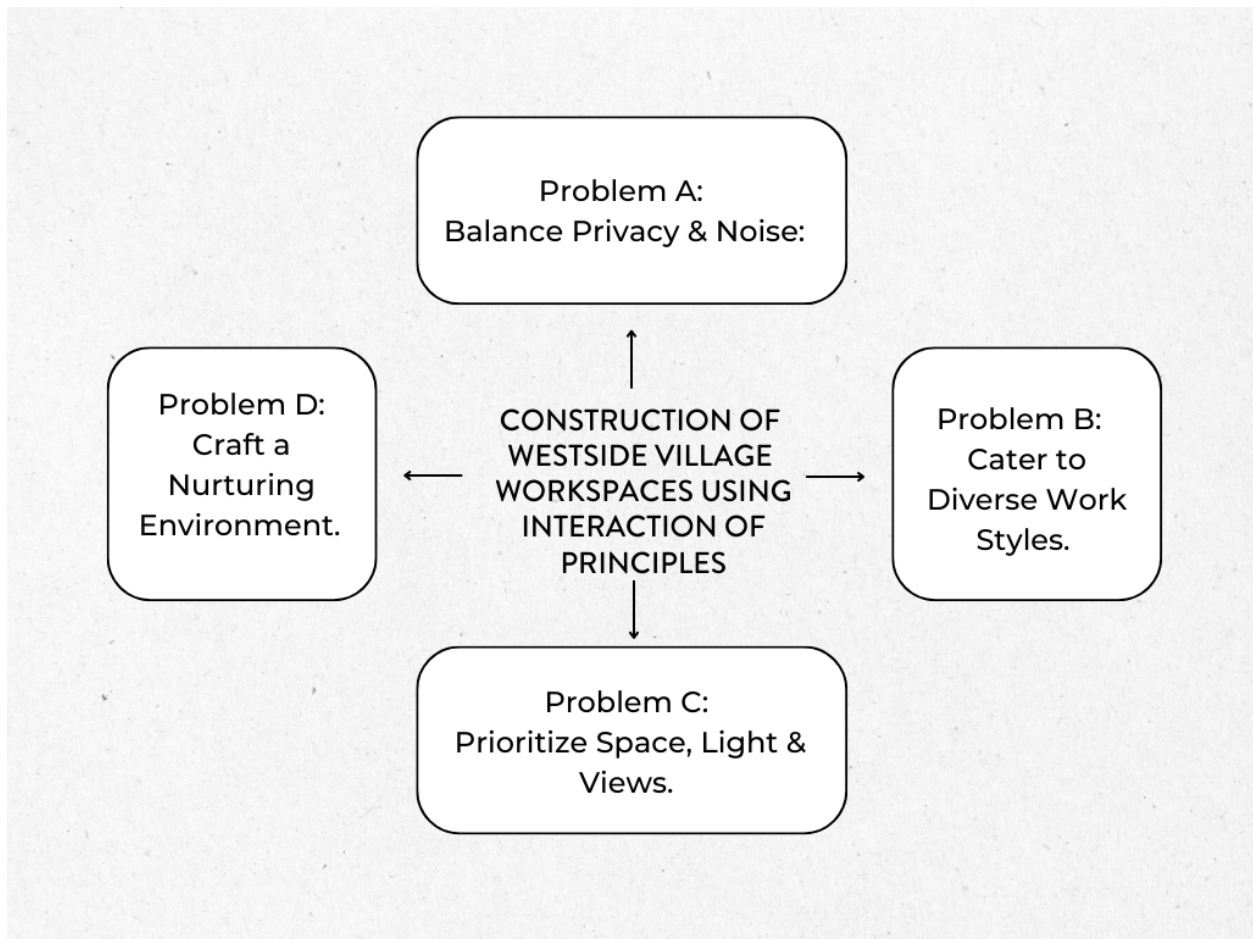


Figure 3: The new working model for designing the Westside Village Workspaces

### Synthesizing the Wellbeing Model in Workspaces

Based on my research and experiences in workspaces, workers thrive when they can control their environment, but we must remember that various aspects of these spaces interact and affect productivity and wellbeing together, rather than in isolation.

### Synthesis for Problem A: Balancing Noise & Privacy: The Case for Mixed Use Workspaces

Balancing open spaces with private offices in a work setting is crucial to tackle noise and privacy issues. While open offices are popular for fostering camaraderie and information flow, they are often rife with distractions due to high noise levels. This



problem, confirmed by both research (Kim & de Dear, 2013; Jahncke et al., 2012) and my personal experiences, necessitated a solution.

Consequently, the Westside workspace was designed with many private offices (42 in total) and less open space (2,000 square feet), prioritizing user preference for privacy (Sundstrom et al., 1980). This design consideration also acknowledges the needs of introverted individuals who comprise one-third to half of the population (Cain, 2012) and the need for quiet spaces to foster creativity (Beckerman, 2015). To further reduce noise, each office incorporated soundproof glass, carpeting, and walls, and soundproof booths were provided in open areas. Ambient music, proven to reduce stress and enhance productivity (Alvarsson, et al., 2010; Haake, 2006; Hallam, 2012; Jahncke & Halin 2012, 2012; Lesiuk, 2005), was also employed to create a conducive shared working atmosphere.

Figure 4: Westside Village Workspace Prior to Implementing the Wellbeing Design

## *Space Before Implementing Research & New Design*



Open Area



Kitchen



Entrance



Offices-

## Space Design After Implementing research



Bright conference room



Offices on the outside with windows & light pouring



Entrance



Cafe area - for meetings



Active Open Area with Bar & Cafe behind



Coworking area, with private phone booths

Figure 5: Westside Village Workspace Post Implementing Research & Design

### Synthesis for Problem B: Craft a multi-location work experience of multiple ways of working

Mitigating noise distractions and creating a conducive workspace environment entails effectively managing both space and behavior, addressing acoustics and design. To that end, Westside Village Workspace was built and designed to provide members with the autonomy to choose their work location based on the nature of their tasks or their mood at any given time. We achieved this by creating distinct zones: active and quiet spaces.

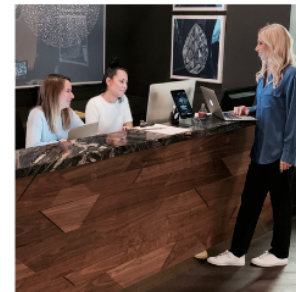
The active spaces, including the reception, bar, café, and kitchen areas, were designed to foster social and serendipitous interactions (Dishman, 2015; Sias & Cahill, 1998); The quiet spaces, such as breakout areas for informal meetings, open workspaces, private

offices, conference areas, and multi-purpose rooms, cater to focused work or quiet collaboration (Lee & Brand, 2005; Thoring & Mueller, 2015.)

Members at Westside Village expressed appreciation for this flexible design, selecting areas such as private offices, the bustling café, or the quieter open spaces depending on their individual needs. For a change of scenery, they could opt for the Star Wars-themed library area for informal meetings or relaxed work. Additional facilities such as conference rooms, a multi-purpose room, and a sound studio for podcasts were also made available for use.

This design approach, which emphasizes spatial diversity and user autonomy, contributed to an increased sense of empowerment and a positive attitude among our members. This finding aligns with Liegel's (2014) observation on the benefits of changing locations for task separation and inspiration.

## Westside Village Workspaces



*Figure 6: Westside Village Workspace Awards & Result of Research in Action*

### **Synthesis for Problem C: Ensuring Natural Elements and Spacious Design for Holistic Wellbeing**

As part of prioritizing wellbeing in workspaces, it was essential to integrate natural elements into the workplace, particularly natural light (Weil, 2011; Zee, 2014) and plants (Browning, Ryan, Clancy, 2014; Bringslimark et al., 2007; Human Spaces, 2014; Raanaas et al., 2011). The Santa Monica location's lack of windows was seen as a limiting factor in member interviews. To cater to our inherent need to connect with nature physically, mentally, and socially (Frumkin, 2001; Berman et al., 2008), we incorporated natural materials, light, views, and other elements of the natural world (Jensen, 2018).

Although premium offices exclusively offered ocean views, we aimed for all members to share the beautiful surroundings. Research shows that exposure to natural light in workplaces can enhance employee vitality and improve sleep (Boubekri et al., 2014), underscoring the importance of our connection to nature for overall wellbeing (Colarelli et al., 2016).

Therefore, we ensured that both private office members and open space members could share the views and benefit from the healthy natural light. We designed Westside Village to have open areas, exposed 15-foot ceilings, and extra-wide walkways to provide plenty of personal space (Meyers-Levy, 2007). Three strategically placed conference rooms facilitated space utilization among the different offices and prevented overcrowding, allowing members working in open spaces and offices alike to enjoy the view.

### **Synthesis for Problem D: Ergonomics and Aesthetics Foster Wellbeing**

Addressing Problem D, we prioritized ergonomic furniture to encourage movement and varying postures. This decision was guided by research highlighting the health hazards of prolonged sitting (Mak & Thomas, 2005; Kay, 2013; O'Neill, 2014; Dunstan et al., 2012; MacEwen et al., 2015; Dunstan, Howard, Healy, & Owen, 2012; Pronk,

Katz, Lowry, & Payfer, 2011). Ergonomic chairs were used across the workspace and office areas.

We created a warm ambiance with soothing colors, balanced with energetic yellow and red accents (Kwallek, Woodson, Lewis, & Sales, 1997). Furniture offering posture support and eclectic design elements added visual interest, while brain-stimulating games and healthy refreshments fostered relaxation.

Our objective was to imbue the Westside Village Workspace with wellbeing principles, creating an environment that was not only people-focused but also warm and inspiring. Our design journey was both challenging and rewarding, a fact underscored by positive feedback from members and commendations from publications such as Ivanka Trump's "Companies We Love: Village Workspaces" and Locale magazine. Moving forward, we plan to add more phone booths, and single-person offices, to further enhance our member experience.

A year after opening Westside Village Workspaces, the question arose: Had the incorporation and synthesis of wellbeing principles been successful, and what areas still required improvement?

### **Member Feedback: Strengthening the Work Experience**

Although much more comprehensive here are some very top line valuable insights from Westside Village members shed light on their experiences and highlight areas of appreciation and potential enhancement. The following table presents a selection of member comments, categorized as "What Members Appreciate" and "Where Can We Do More." This overview provides a glimpse into overall member satisfaction and identifies areas for further development.

#### **What Members Appreciate:**

- Aesthetically pleasing space
- Availability of multiple workspaces
- Inspiring ocean views
- Diverse community
- Supportive and welcoming atmosphere
- Spacious and comfortable private offices

### Where Can We Do More:

- Organize more social events to foster community
- Add a gym or workout area
- Provide more healthy snack options at the bar
- Implement an app for member connectivity

This valuable member feedback assisted in refining and enhancing the experience at Westside Village, ensuring that the space continues to align with the wellbeing principles while addressing member needs and aspirations. As a result of the feedback all were fixed apart from the gym!

### Ranking Wellbeing Principles: Insights from Westside Village:

The table below provides a rank order of the principles of wellbeing in the workplace based on member feedback at Westside Village. The average rank reflects the importance placed on each principle by the members. This ranking offers valuable insights into the priorities of members when it comes to their wellbeing in a working environment.

Rank	Principles	Average Rank (Westside Village Workspace)
1	To Flow	1.6
2	To Be Healthy	2.4
3	To Connect	3.2
4	To Be Sensitive to the Environment	3.8
5	To Take Notice	5.1
6	To Learn	5.4
7	To Give	6.5

*Figure 7: Rank of wellbeing principles in interviews at Westside Village Workspace*

The member feedback and ranking presented here offer invaluable insights into the experiences and preferences of workspace users. They serve as a guiding light for future enhancements, ensuring that the workspace remains aligned with member needs and fosters an environment that promotes wellbeing, productivity, and flow. It is worth noting that, even with other research not included in this article, the principle of 'Flow' consistently emerged as the top priority for our members.

## Interpretation of Member Feedback on the top 4 Wellbeing Principles:

- To Flow: Westside Village effectively facilitated flow, with prompt improvements made to the acoustics in conference rooms based on member feedback.
- To Connect: Members expressed a desire for more interactive events despite effective measures in place. To address this, regular social events and an online platform were introduced to enhance member interaction.
- To Be Sensitive to Environmental Factors: The workspace was praised for its hip and sophisticated environment, with a balanced mix of open spaces and offices. Conducive breakout areas were also appreciated.
- To Be Healthy: Members valued the natural light, quality lighting, healthy food options, picturesque views, and ergonomic furniture. Health-focused initiatives like a meditation room and healthy snacks were added.

These member findings provide insights into the success of these top four wellbeing principles at Westside Village and highlight areas for further improvement and enhancement.

Rank	Principle	Importance to Santa Monica Members (n=18)	Importance to Westside Members (n=18)
1	To flow	21.70%	26.20%
2	To be healthy	21.10%	21.10%
3	To connect	13.40%	18.30%
4	To be environmentally sensitive	12.50%	16.10%
5	To take notice	12.50%	10.80%
6	To learn	11.00%	8.80%
7	To give	7.70%	7.60%

Figure 8: Comparative Survey Rankings of Wellbeing Principles Santa Monica Village Workspace Vs Westside Village Workspace

## From Research to Real-World: Practical Implications for Workspace Design

Considering the findings presented in this study, we propose several strategies for workspace design that could potentially enhance productivity and wellness. These strategies are not prescriptive but are meant to guide practitioners and policymakers in formulating more effective workspace layouts.

1. **Diversification of Spatial Utilization:** The findings suggest a need for a balanced mix of private and open spaces to accommodate various work styles and tasks. Segregated spaces can facilitate focused work while communal areas can foster collaboration.

2. **Acoustic Considerations:** The data underscores the importance of sound management. Deploying sound-absorbing materials in personal work areas and introducing ambient noise in shared spaces might enhance overall workspace quality.

3. **Biophilic Design Elements:** Incorporating natural elements within the workspace could enhance well-being. This could include maximizing exposure to natural light and using plant life and natural materials as design elements.

4. **Spatial Dynamics and Light:** The results suggest that spaciousness and natural light contribute to a productive workspace. Areas should be arranged strategically to avoid congestion and optimize usage.

5. **Ergonomics:** Investment in adjustable, ergonomic furniture that supports diverse postures and promotes mobility could prove beneficial.

6. **Aesthetic Considerations:** The study supports the notion that color and artistic elements can impact mood and productivity. Balancing calming color schemes with vibrant accents, coupled with visually appealing art and furniture, could stimulate creativity.

7. **Health and Recreational Provisions:** The availability of health-oriented amenities and spaces for relaxation can contribute to overall workplace satisfaction.

In applying these strategies, a user-centered design approach is recommended. Understanding the preferences and needs of workspace users is essential to create an environment that truly fosters well-being and productivity. This underscores the need for practitioners to involve users in design decisions through interviews and discussions, thus ensuring a human-centric design approach.



## Conclusion:

Now is the time for us all to act and prioritize wellbeing in our own work environments. The journey into integrating wellbeing principles in workspace design has shown that prioritizing employee wellbeing and fostering a state of flow are imperative for creating thriving work environments. By incorporating the four principles of wellbeing - To Flow, To Be Healthy, To Connect, and To Be Sensitive to the Environment - we have discovered their transformative power in enhancing productivity, creativity, flow, and overall wellbeing.

To create workspaces that promote flow and wellbeing, we must assess our current environments, identify areas for improvement, and implement changes such as incorporating natural elements, optimizing noise control, creating a mix of spaces for quiet work and connection, and consider a multi-leveled design approach.

Prioritizing employee wellbeing is no longer an option but a necessity in today's work landscape. By embracing the principles of holistic wellbeing and making intentional improvements, we can shape the future of workspaces to foster thriving individuals and organizations.

If we wish for our teams to be happy to return to the office space, now is the time to act and create work cultures that value the health, happiness, and productivity of employees. Let us embark on this transformative journey together, where individuals can thrive, creativity can flourish, and success can be redefined in the context of holistic wellbeing. Our work environments matter.

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