



# Integrating stress management in office design

Office design and components that make up the physical environment we work in can contribute to workplace stress. RFP discovers the best way to use workplace design to combat stress in the office.

Fatigue, headaches and irritability are some of the symptoms associated with work-related stress, which can result in poor job performance, accidents whilst on the job and even violence. It is a serious issue that cannot be ignored and must be addressed. But what causes office stress? Is it the high-pitched voice of our nearby colleague whose phone conversation seems interminable, or is it something more serious than that?

From RFP's findings, work related stress is a very complex issue which can result from a series of factors, both internal and external. Internal factors relate specifically to the individual and include the way an employee manages his/her time, taking on too great a workload and even personal or family-related problems. External factors refer to the physical work environment and include poor office lighting, noisy and crowded offices, and overbearing colour schemes used in the office design.

So who should be held responsible for integrating stress management in the office design? Designers can only advise on what is best for creating a more relaxing office environment, but it is often up to the company to decide how much capital should be allocated towards creating a better work environment for its employees.



Courtesy of Durlum Asia

Financial costs are the major obstacle when it comes to better office design. Lynne Poelmann, Managing Director, Poelmann Chan Group, says "high office rentals and landlords reinstatement requirements are the two main financial issues that companies take into account when designing their premises. Considering that most employees have long office hours, companies, have a moral duty to make their employees' office life more enjoyable".

## and there was light

Poor office lighting is a stress-inducing factor. According to the Hong Kong Labour Department, there is good lighting and bad lighting. In their 2003 Office Environment Series OE 2/2003 "Lighting in Offices", they highlight that "good lighting helps us to see and to recognize hazards, reducing visual strain and discomfort" while "bad lighting affects workers' performance and health as poor visibility increases the chances of errors being made." Different lighting requirements might be appropriate for different work activities, job functions and individual requirements. According to the 2003 Labour Department Guide, the standard of service luminance for general office work should be 500 Lux (Lux or LX is a unit of measurement for the intensity of light).

From a Feng Shui perspective, choosing the "right" light is extremely important when considering an individual's well-being. Jill Lander, a Feng Shui consultant says

Designers can only advise on what is best for creating a more relaxing office environment, but it is often up to the company to decide how much capital should be allocated towards creating a better work environment for its employees.



Indirect Lighting  
Courtesy of Durlum Asia

Lux requirements for office areas

Task Position or Area	Optimum Average Illumination in Lux	Notes
General Offices	500	
Computer Work Stations	500	Local lighting maybe required for reading a document
Drawing Work Stations	750	Local lighting is appropriate
Other Areas, eg. File Storage and Receptions, Telephone Operators	300	

For more information please visit the government's Labour Department website: <http://www.labour.gov.hk/eng/public/oh/OHB50.pdf>

"lighting has a great impact on the well being and productivity of any office space. For example, when we are exposed to areas which are either too harsh or too dimly lit, lack of creativity may arise and we could be prone to headaches and confusion". Lander comments that although fluorescent lighting is a cost effective and practical way of lighting, it can be difficult to work in. She recommends remedying the situation by removing one out of three bulbs to control the exposure and re-balance the energy. Also, to increase positivity, up-lighting in office corners not only "opens-up" the area but it lifts spirits and promotes creativity. This is something the company in tandem with the office designers should consider as "lighting can affect our health particularly the liver, kidneys and adrenals either making our internal systems become sluggish or overwork the system, which can result in a considerable "imbalance" in our energy field". She also speculates that headaches could be a result of negative lighting.

Eric Kwok, Technical Engineer, Durlum Asia, says that corporate clients could be constrained by their short lease agreements and may not invest in good lighting. However, when budget permits, he recommends using natural daylight systems or indirect lighting systems,

which provide relief to the eye. He further states that both natural daylight systems and indirect lighting systems not only reduce electrical energy consumption but they create a more pleasant office environment by providing glare free and natural lighting.

**some companies do care**

Claire Nelson, Project Manager, MB Project Management says that she once dealt with a client who was committed to providing its employees with almost whatever they wanted, within certain boundaries, to keep them content, able to focus and work productively. One recent example she came across was a high-tech company that provided ping-pong tables within its facilities, where workers could take their minds off work-related stress during their lunch break or after long office hours. Not only it was a "de-stressing solution" but it provided an area where people could socialise in a fun and pro active way.

These days, there is a business trend to create an area that no longer can be called simply a pantry or kitchenette, it is more of a social area with more space and a variety of seating options. Michael Lam, Designer, Artlink Design Associates, says that the

Different lighting requirements might be appropriate for different work activities, job functions and individual requirements.



“break out area” has a different design from the rest of the office, it is more colourful and assumes a more relaxing mood “as designers want to push for the idea that you are not in your office any longer.” This trend is due to a change in attitude, continues Lam, as people work longer hours and they are more prone to stress.

**relax and enjoy**

Other ways to create a de-stressing environment include using plants and soothing colours. Lam says that some of his clients, especially banks, demand a design that incorporates the company’s colours, but usually these colours are in the tones of red and blue. He recommends the use of earthy colours, which he views as more appropriate and soothing in an office environment. When designing the office of a prestigious bank, he used earthy tones of green and brown which according to Lam “had a more natural look, not too vibrant but sophisticated.” He says that a lot of companies insist on using the “reds and the blues” but this bank wanted something different, an environment that was more relaxing for its employees.

Not only designers, but also Feng Shui experts like Lander recommend the use of green in whatever form, be it plants or just tones of this colour. Lander highlights “green energy in whatever form has a direct impact on any given space and as human beings we respond to it in a very natural manner. Greenery improves our overall well being as the chi (energy) from flora and fauna helps provide us with not only a natural

form of improved oxygen intake as plants are a natural filter in the environment.” She says that plants and other forms of greenery can be ideally placed within the East and Southeast sectors of any given space as these directions relate to the element of wood producing growth for any business or individual.

Picture 1: Reckitt open pantry  
Picture 2 : Toshiba cafe  
Picture 3 : Toshiba open office

Courtesy of Artlink Design Associates



Courtesy of Poelmann Chan Group

Poelmann on the other hand says that sometimes it is very difficult to maintain greenery in the typical Hong Kong office, as air conditioners are turned off during weekends. If this is the case she recommends the use of pictures as a last resort. For example when the Poelmann Group designed a call centre, they used a picture of a tree image on glazing to provide visual relief to shift workers in the centre.

**“it is important for employees, and people in general, to know what their triggers to de-stress are.”**

### a sound piece of advice...

Lynda Aurora an Executive Coach who offers professional coaching for business, career and lifestyle says that companies have a duty to their employees but it is up to the employees at the end of the day to find what suits them best, "it is important for employees, and people in general, to know what their triggers to de-stress are." Plug-in those Ipod relaxing tunes when you have a hard and tedious job to do might be one solution. Aurora's experience has taught her that "Not only it will take that person into a resourceful state but he or she will finish the job in no time compared to when you push yourself to do it, taking you three times longer to finish that assignment." That way you will be ready for the next task to be done.



Stress management is ultimately the responsibility of the employee but interior designers, office administrators and facility managers can make a very positive difference to the lives of employees through being aware that the physical design of the office can contribute, both positively and negatively to employee satisfaction. **RFP**

Other triggers for de-stress as recommended by Aurora:

- Have a photograph, a piece of pottery, a gift from somebody, a nice saying that has meaning to you or similar at your desk. That way you will be taken back to that spot or the memory of something relaxing and nice
- Don't stick around to impress your boss. If you can do your work within your office hours you will set a positive example to your colleagues
- Find out what works for you. When you need a break discuss with your boss, it is very important for employees to communicate with the boss and let him/her know what their work style is
- Communication is key. Instead of being unhappy figure out what's best for you. Work out something!
- Have something to look forward to after work. It could be a movie, an exercise class or even dinner with your family
- As you move into family life or whatever you do that evening put closure to your working day.



## MOVING OFFICE?

Call us at

**(852) 2636-8388**

- OFFICE MOVE MANAGEMENT
- EQUIPMENT & FURNITURE STORAGE
- ASSET & INVENTORY MANAGEMENT
- CUSTOMIZED ONLINE TRACKING SYSTEM
- FINE ART RELOCATIONS

Or visit our website for details  
<http://hk.crownrelo.com/officerelocations/>

