

Beyond energy savings

Studies show workers feel healthier, more productive in 'greener' workspaces

By MaryBeth Matzek

Gary Kusinerz has seen the benefits of building “green” firsthand. Yes, there are lower utility costs, but there’s also something else: improved worker satisfaction and a lower turnover rate.

“We researched linkages between green design and employee productivity as well as patient design through the Center of Health Design and really saw that the green design creates an environment of less stress, which translates to healthier, more productive employees,” says Kusinerz, vice president of performance excellence for Affinity Health System.

When the Menasha-based Affinity replaced its Little Chute clinic a few years ago with one that is LEED certified, Kusinerz did a little study of his own, comparing employee turnover and staff and patient satisfaction between the two facilities. Looking at data from 2002 to 2005 when Affinity was in the older clinic and data from 2006 to 2009 in the new facility, Kusinerz says employee and patient satisfaction increased while there was a 60 percent improvement rate in employee turnover.

“That lower turnover rate means it costs less time and money to hire and train new staff,” he says.

What Kusinerz has noticed is backed up by a recent survey that found employees in LEED certified buildings are more productive and record fewer sick days.

An experiment published in *Applied Ergonomics* identified a link between improving lighting design and a 27 percent reduction in the number of headaches, which accounted for

0.7 percent – or \$35 annually – of individual employee’s overall health insurance cost.

“The addition of windows and skylights in a building – which bring in more natural light – has also shown to improve employee mood,” says Nick Mueller, a LEED AP project manager with The Boldt Co. “I just look at the sites we recently built – for example the new ThedaCare Physicians clinic in Darboy – and how natural light is becoming a bigger part of the design. It’s something employees, and in ThedaCare’s case, patients, really appreciate and notice.”

Many companies know their employees are their most important asset and want to take steps to keep them happier and healthier, says Theresa Lehman, director of sustainability for the Miron Co. “They want their employees’ productivity to be top notch and they want them to be healthier so they miss fewer days and there is a lower insurance cost,” she says. “Businesses understand their employees’ health is tied in to their surroundings and it’s all linked together.”

Daylighting – using natural light to help illuminate a space – is used extensively in green building projects. While a company may first look at the prospect of lower utility bills since less artificial lighting is needed, Lehman says other benefits quickly appear. For example, Miron expanded its Town of Menasha headquarters last year and remodeled some of the current office space. During the remodeling, the top one-third of cubicles were either removed or replaced with glass so that every employee can now catch a glimpse of the outside from their desk.

“It’s been amazing to see what has happened. There is greater teamwork and camaraderie. We all feel more connected,” says Lehman. “People also feel more calm and relaxed when they can see outside and catch a glimpse of nature and daylight, even during the winter when we’re essentially inside the entire time the sun is out.”

Tom Boldt, president of the Boldt Co., says people can walk into a LEED-certified building, such as Lawrence University’s Warch Center, and immediately see and feel the benefits of going “green.”

“There’s such a warm, inviting atmosphere. There’s more natural light, better air quality, soothing colors. ... It’s just more uplifting,” he says. “More people are building green than ever before and if we can show there are also health benefits to it that will increase awareness even more. Green building is good for the business, since there are lower utility costs; good for the planet; and good for the people who work there since they are happier and healthier.”

Boldt and Mueller both pointed to a 1999 study by the Heschong Mahone Group that found students with the most daylighting in their classrooms progressed 20 percent faster on math tests and 26 percent faster on reading tests in one year than those students in classrooms with less daylighting.

“These students are doing better in their studies because of the exposure to natural light – what does that say to you about how someone performs in the workplace if it’s full of natural light vs. a bunch of fluorescents?” Boldt says. “I definitely believe workers in a naturally-lit office are going to be more productive.” **1**