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The workplace oasis

Boost productivity while reducing stress with interior plants

By Mary Jane Gilhooley

Office anxiety levels are high as our current economy and security uncertainties place added stress on American employees.

According to research conducted by marketing research firms Integra Realty Resources, New York, NY, and Opinion Research Corp. Intl., Princeton, NJ, one out of eight employees calls in sick due to workplace stress.

No longer just a pretty face, plants are hard at work "de-stressing" American offices. Current research shows that plants decrease stress while enhancing productivity by as much as 12 percent. Whether it is a single plant on each desk or a lush common-area atrium, the calming psychological aspect of interior plants has never been so acutely necessary in the workplace environment.

Productivity research

The study *Impacts of Plants on People*, by Dr. Virginia Lohr, professor and horticulturalist, Washington State University, Pullman, WA, took place in a simulated office setting where a computer program induced stress and tested productivity by producing time-measured readings of participants' reactions to 100 different symbols. The researchers also measured blood pressure, emotional states and pulse rates during the experiment. The presence or absence of plants was the only variable in this experiment. When plants were present, Lohr positioned them so that a cluster was in the peripheral view of each subject sitting at a computer terminal, without interfering with the subject's activity. The results proved that participants who worked in the presence of plants were less stressed and as much as 12 percent more productive than those who worked in an environment without plants.

The outcome, which indicated an influence of

plants on decreasing blood pressure, is consistent with research conducted by Dr. Roger S. Ulrich, professor and environmental psychologist, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX; and Helen Russell, scientist, University of Surrey, West Sussex, England. After exploring human interactions with nature, they discovered that visual exposure to plant settings produced significant recovery from stress within five minutes.

Cleaning the air

Many traditional performance-based incentives implemented to enhance employee productivity impose added stress on employees to outperform one another. Therefore, plants' capability of raising productivity while lowering stress is extremely valuable. To attract and retain top employees, the workplace must include aspects of what inspires employees during their "off" time. Employee services providers can purchase plants as employee recognition gifts and educate employees about their health benefits in the home and office. Gallup polls indicate that two-thirds of the American workforce cite gardening as their favorite hobby. Perhaps this "green thumb" passion explains why humanizing the workplace with plants is a highly effective method of promoting employee satisfaction.

PLANT FACTS

Further research proves the bottom-line benefits of interior plants:

Lower operations and maintenance costs.

Plant transpiration releases moisture, creating a humidity level matching the recommended human comfort range of 30-60 percent. A study by the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, Herndon, VA, found that proper selection and placement of plant materials lowers heating and cooling costs by as much as 20 percent.

Create a great place to work. Studies out of Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England, found that indoor plants positively enhance

perception and contribute to employees' well being. The same set of studies concluded that people perceive a building with interior landscaping as more upscale, more welcoming and more relaxed.

Clean the air. Sealed energy-efficient buildings have higher concentrations of toxic chemicals. According to Dr. Billy C. Wolverton, environmental researcher, John C. Stennis Space Center, MS, plants clean contaminated office air by absorbing pollutants into their leaves. He suggests that every employee have a plant on his or her desk.

Reduce office noise. Strategically-placed plants quiet an office. A small indoor hedge placed around a workspace reduces noise by five decibels. According to the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, landscape professionals are replacing cubicles with "tree walls" and other innovative plant groupings to reduce the "decibel distraction factor."

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