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5 Simple Scientific Ways to Be More Productive

Brittney Helmrich, Business News Daily Staff Writer | May 01, 2015

A business is nothing without productive employees, but sometimes stress and other factors can make workers feel too sluggish to perform at their peak. The good news is, science can help you.

As it turns out, small details like the color of an office's décor or where employees sit can make all the difference in the world when it comes to improving performance. Even changing the way you drink your coffee can have a bigger impact on you than you realize. Here are five simple, proven ways to increase productivity in the workplace.

1. Let in natural light

One way employers can increase productivity in the workplace is to make sure their employees are getting plenty of exposure to natural light throughout the day. Research from the Interdepartmental Neuroscience program at Chicago's Northwestern University shows that employees who worked in offices with windows were exposed to 173 percent more white light than those who worked in windowless offices, according to Psychology Today.

The study also found that employees working in windowed offices slept an average of 46 minutes more per night, experienced better sleep quality and efficiency, and reported higher quality of life scores than those who did not. Employees working in windowless offices reported more sleep disturbances and daytime dysfunction. This is because the lack of natural light can disrupt they body's circadian rhythms and even cause seasonal affective disorder.

If your office or cubicle doesn't have a window nearby, you can purchase light boxes or therapy lamps that mimic natural outdoor light.

2. Decorate with the right colors

To keep inspiration and productivity high, make sure your office walls aren't stark white. A University of Texas study that looked at the impact of color on productivity found that white walls are bad for productivity and quality of work.

The study tested three groups of people by having them work in three different colored rooms — red, aqua and white. Subjects made more errors in the white room than in the others, Fast Company reported.

"White doesn't help us be productive, and most work environments are white, off-white or gray," said researcher Nancy Kwallek, noting that shades of blue or blue-green seem to be the best choices for an office color scheme.

Another study by the University of British Columbia found that red can increase performance in employees with detail-oriented assignments, while blue is calming and promotes creativity and communication. Green is also great for inspiring creativity and innovation, however, yellow, can cause anxiety and frustration, and gray can lead to energy loss and depression. [10 Inspiring Must-Follow Home Office Pinterest Boards]

3. Try taking 'coffee naps'

When you're feeling sluggish at work, you likely either turn to a cup of coffee or find yourself longing for an afternoon nap as you trudge through the rest of the day. But while coffee or naps alone may not help much, several studies show that combining the two may be exactly what you need to boost your productivity.

Drinking a cup of coffee and then taking a 20-minute nap immediately after, or taking a "coffee nap" is helpful for several reasons, according to Vox. Caffeine works by blocking adenosine (high levels of adenosine make you feel tired) in the brain to keep you awake — but it

can't block adenosine from all of your brain's receptors. That's where the nap comes in, as sleep also naturally clears adenosine from the brain. Napping for 15 to 20 minutes ensures that you'll get a little rest without falling into a deep sleep, and you'll wake up just in time for the caffeine to start kicking in (with less adenosine in the way.)

A study from the Sleep Research Laboratory at Loughborough University in England found that the combination of caffeine and a short nap was more effective in combatting drowsiness and driving impairments than caffeine or naps alone, Vox reported. And a study from Hiroshima University found that the combination was the most effective for increasing performance, with the effects lasting for about an hour upon waking up. So, employers, you may want to invest in a nap room!

4.   Try new seating arrangements

Switching up where your employees sit can be another way to boost creativity and increase productivity in the office. Christian Catalini, assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, told the Wall Street Journal that grouping workers together by department can foster focus and efficiency, but mixing them up can also lead to innovation.

And Sigal Barsade, a University of Pennsylvania management professor, said that workers' dispositions can actually be contagious, so grouping people based on their temperament can really have an impact on a company's work environment.

"People literally catch emotions from one another like a virus," Barsade said, adding that if you want to cheer up a stressed-out employee, grouping that worker with cheerful, energetic employees is the best strategy.

The Wall Street Journal also reported on several companies that have experimented with different seating arrangements and have seen interesting results. Representatives from HubSpot found that grouping their executives together made employees feel like they were too far removed from the company, for example. And Kayak.com's co-founder Paul English found that placing new hires in specific areas based on their personalities and work habits could really change the dynamic of different groups in the office.

5.   Take breaks together

Everyone needs a break or two during the work day, but as it turns out, taking a break with your co-workers, as opposed to spending your break time alone, can have a huge impact on your performance.

Giving employees the opportunity to take breaks together can improve productivity and decrease stress, according to a study conducted by Sociometric Solutions, a Massachusetts-based management services business.

The study, which tracked employees at a Bank of America call center for three months, found a 15 to 20 percent bump in productivity, a decrease in turnover (from 40 to 12 percent) and a 19 percent drop in stress levels among employees who were allowed to take breaks together. These communal breaks gave employees the opportunity to let off steam and share tips about customer service, Phys.org reported.

Ben Waber, the co-founder and president of Sociometric Solutions, told Phys.org that changes like this can produce, on average, a 20 percent rise in employee satisfaction and productivity, as well as a similar decrease in turnover.