

Living yoga for the mind

January 17 2020, by Reshma Lakha-Singh



Plants in the office. Credit: Lauren Mulligan | www.wits.ac.za/curiosity/

Plants in the office are not there just to look pretty. They can lead to increased productivity, as well as improved mental health for workers.

We all know that taking a walk in the garden or going for a run in the park after work can do miracles for getting rid of the stress of a hard day in the office.

Greenery and plants have been recognised to have a calming impact on us. For example, Apple Inc.'s four storey circular building in Cupertino,

California, nicknamed the "spaceship" is filled with drought-resistant trees and indigenous plants. Microsoft employees at the Redmont Campus in Seattle make use of treehouse boardrooms and Amazon has a look-alike rainforest office space that houses 40 000 plants in downtown Seattle.

By recreating "natural" spaces, these [multinational corporations](#) hope to encourage and enable creativity, mindfulness and innovation amongst their employees through a link to nature.

Headspace

"There are obviously many physical benefits to having plants in the workspace, but the reality is that in order to truly feel the real CO₂ and O₂ transference, you have to have a jungle in your office," says Professor Andrew Thatcher, Chair of Industrial and Organisational Psychology and a specialist in green ergonomics at Wits.

"However, the psychological benefits based on Attention Restoration Theory (ART) hypothesised by University of Michigan Professors Rachel Kaplan and Steven Kaplan, indicate that nature is not only pleasing to the eye but can also help concentration and renew mental energy. It provides an escape from our normal indoor sterile environments."

Interested in the study of the reciprocal relationship benefits between human and nature, Thatcher investigated the [psychological benefits](#) of plants in the office after seeing a similar study conducted in the northern hemisphere, in countries with severe winter conditions.

"We wanted to replicate the study in a country with warmer temperatures that enable plants to survive all seasons," says Thatcher.

He placed groups of participants in three rooms. The first room had plants, room two had pictures of plants, and the third room was bare. All participants were given tasks to complete. The results indicated that performance was best in the room with plants, thereafter the room with pictures of [plants](#) and the worst result was the sterile environment.

"Another case study done internationally placed office workers into three groups. One group did yoga in a closed room, another walked the city, whilst the third walked around in a park. The park had the best restoration effect and the yoga studio had the worst. The point was not doing yoga, but getting out into nature," says Thatcher.

He adds that in our constructed environments our attentional capacity becomes shortened the longer we spend in those environments.

"The type of work we do is highly cognitive and very stressful. Our escapes are talking to others but very often we talk about work. We don't get an opportunity to recoup our attentional resources, therefore you need a way of topping up those attentional resources. Plants enable us to do this," says Thatcher.

"Many of us spend so much time interacting with technology, cooped up in closed offices. Our jobs require us to solve problems, multi-task and pay attention to detail. Our daily lives are filled with ambient noises such as alarms, ringing phones, television and sirens—the list goes on. So, plant up your office space, it may just be the yoga that your mind needs."

Provided by Wits University

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