

Helping Tenants Achieve Office Wellness

The WELL certification system could be a “game changer” in terms of office fit out, says Péter Takács, a partner at specialist tenant representative firm VLK Cresa.

BBJ ROBIN MARSHALL

Takács says WELL, a relative newcomer on the certification block, is important because, while the older, better-known BREEAM and LEED systems deal with the building, WELL is “all about the work space a client is creating within the building, and how well that office serves the purpose of affecting the health of workers”.

And while BREEAM and LEED are the sole responsibility of the building developer, WELL, from the New York-based International WELL Building Institute - represents a more collaborative approach between tenant and landlord, Takács says.

The benefits to the tenant are obvious: a work space that helps keeps staff healthy and productive makes them more effective, happier to come to work and less likely to job hop. For the landlord, and most especially for a landlord who may be looking at the need to renovate and upgrade an older building, working towards WELL certification will help keep the tenant happy, and happy tenants tend to be tenants who stay.

“If we go to a landlord and say ‘We are representing a large company and they really like your building but they want to achieve WELL certification’, that certainly has an impact on the landlord. If you have a building that is 10-, 15- or 20-years old, the mechanical background is going to need refreshing in any case.”

Attract and Retain

Takács believes WELL certification can be a game changer because, as awareness of it grows, “it will enable employers to attract and retain high-quality employees”, while driving improved employee performance and productivity, and reducing absenteeism. Promoting improved health for employees will help companies boost their brand, and supporting tenants in doing that will help landlords achieve differentiation on the market place.

Beyond the mutually beneficial cooperation, there is one other benefit for both tenants and landlords, Takács says. “We think WELL is the first certificate where you can see a return on investment, where you can make a business case out of it.”



Emese Kovács



Péter Takács

The challenge with other certificates is that it is hard to see a tangible benefit from, for example, harvesting rainwater to irrigate a communal garden. It is a nice idea, and may well contribute to office workers feeling good about working in such a place, but it is virtually impossible to pin down a cost benefit.

With WELL, tenants know how much it will cost to achieve certification, as long as the building itself is capable of providing

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the technical background required. And that can be measured against staff retention and the associated costs in head hunting and training required every time someone needs replacing.

By way of example, Takács says the cost of getting WELL accreditation for a 500-1,000 sqm office (say 50-100 working places) is USD 11,000-12,000

for the certificate itself, with the advisory fee on top making it in the region of USD 15,000-20,000 all told.

The Budapest Nine

For all that older buildings can, in most cases, be brought up-to-date to support WELL certification (or to get BREEAM or LEED in-use certification, for that matter), it is obviously easier when starting from scratch. According to Emese Kovács, of the MN6 Energy Agency, there are nine office buildings in Budapest that have WELL pre-certification: Advance 1; Advance 2; Agora Tower; Agora Hub; Budapest One; Corvin 5 - Corvin Technology & Science Park; Nordic Light Offices Trio; Skandinavian Gardens; and Europa Design Office & Showroom (a project MN6 is working directly on). Eight of these projects are new buildings, in core-and-shell phase, while the ninth involves the interior of a refurbished building originally built in the 1930s.

MN6 and VLK Cresa have been partners for a couple of years, and were initially introduced to one another on the recommendation of a mutual client. Takács says Cresa initially used MN6 to conduct energy audits to increase transparency around the service charges and other non-rent costs of landlords. But Takács says the agency is also something of a pioneer when it comes to certification, and that on the back of this partnership they are “winning more business” through offering cost savings and alternative plans.

For her part, Kovács says industry professionals are well aware of WELL by now. That’s not generally the case for tenants, although the concept of healthy workspaces is gaining ground.

“Tenants in office buildings are often faced with problems with the indoor air quality or poor thermal comfort, we have to solve problems caused by the high sound levels

of mechanical equipment or bad acoustic planning in office spaces,” she points out.

“Some have irritated eyes, or allergies because of insufficient air filtration, bad maintenance of ventilation systems or extremely low humidity in the office. So, yes, they are aware of the importance of wellbeing in the office, but they are not quite sure of the solutions and their opportunities as a tenant in a building. When we talk about the WELL certification, they are happy to hear that this can be a solution for their problems. It is possible to create healthy spaces, leveraging design strategies, operational protocols, personnel policies and performance thresholds, all in one system,” she says.

An update of the WELL ratings (WELL v2) was introduced this summer. “Well v2 is based on the ‘essential elements of what a healthy building must be and introducing new options for what a healthy building could be,’” Kovács explains. “The changes are based on the previous experiences and lessons learned from WELL v1. We can call it an evolution. The aim of WELL v2 is to better accommodate diverse project types and geographies and in response to new evidence and ever-evolving public health imperatives.”

Kovács makes one final important point. WELL, she says, is both science-based and compatible with other systems. “As the performance of buildings, like the indoor air quality, and the maintenance protocols must be measured and reported, the system is evidence based and controlled, so the operation must be taken more seriously. Healthy building certification systems complement - and in some cases overlap - with green-building rating systems such as LEED and BREEAM.

As Takács puts it, “There’s more to this than simply installing table tennis tables and cool carpet.”