



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Fitwel, a Health Promoting Building Certification – Part 1 of 2

By CED Program Interns & Students

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Rating systems have helped make buildings more energy efficient over the last two

decades, but they overlooked something important: the well-being of the people inside those buildings. 'Health and wellness' is an emerging concept that strives to change that, by redirecting the focus to building occupants. It is gaining more traction and this post will explore:

- the background and scale of this emerging trend
- Fitwel – a new certification system that focuses on health and wellness in buildings
- examples of healthy building features recognized by Fitwel

Interest in health and wellness in office buildings is growing

When asked about building certification programs, you probably first think of the industry standard: LEED. With 90,100+ certified commercial projects in 164 countries, LEED sets the bar when it comes to building rating systems.

Where LEED has focused on energy efficiency and the health of its buildings, however, health and wellness advocates argue that LEED has overlooked the health of its building's occupants. This is important. Because, according to the EPA, the average American spends about 93% of their time indoors – or roughly 22.5 hours every day. Spending so much time indoors is bad for us. It leads to inactivity and limited contact with nature, which in turn worsens our mood, self-esteem, and productivity, and increases health-related costs.

In fact, inactivity has replaced smoking as the leading cause of preventable death in the world.

Employers are beginning to understand the financial costs of holding their employees up in stuffy offices, and they are starting to ask for healthier buildings. With 120 million American employees spending at least eight hours a day in office buildings, the opportunity for change is significant. Industry experts predict 'health and wellness' will be the next trillion-dollar industry.

Fitwel: a rating system that measures how healthy a building is for the people who work in it

Enter Fitwel, a new program that just launched in early 2017. Named one of the 2017 Top 10 Most Innovative Companies for Social Good by *Fact Company*, Fitwel markets itself as a "cost effective, high impact health promoting building certification." It applies to new and existing office buildings, and to tenants and owners (a tenant can certify their floor of a building that is not certified). Like its peer rating systems, Fitwel hands out plaques with varying certification levels (it awards 1, 2, or 3-star designations).



Fitwel offers an affordable option to the market that may help it gain widespread adoption. At the most, Fitwel registration and certification costs \$6,500 per building. These costs tend to be lower than for LEED, and much lower than for WELL Certification – another new health and wellness rating system.

Fitwel was developed by experts in public health, facility management, and design; piloted nationwide by the General Services Administration (GSA) prior to its launch; and promotes only strategies that are backed by scientific evidence. Its scorecard criteria are supported by 3,000+ research studies and evaluates seven health impact categories:

What does a 'healthy' building look like?

Fitwel looks at both the design and the operations of a building. This is important, because operations are usually easier to adjust. This is especially true for those trying to certify an existing building (which should outnumber new construction certifications) where it is difficult and expensive to make design changes.

To give you a better idea of healthy building features recognized by Fitwel, this section provides just a few examples (a later blog post will explore additional ones):

1. Smoke-free policy and signage

Permanent signage at all building entrances publicizing a smoke-free building plus a smoke-free policy indoors contribute to reduced smoking among employees and reduced second-hand smoke exposure. This small change has a big impact: employees who worked in places that implemented smoke-free policies and signage decreased daily smoking by 3 cigarettes per smoker and were nearly twice as likely to quit smoking.

2. Walkable location

Buildings in more walkable locations (measured by a building's Walk Score) create opportunities for regular physical activity compared with drive-only locations. It also instills feelings of well-being and promotes occupant safety.

3. Accessible outdoor amenity space

Outdoor benches, tables, paths, or small gardens – which are accessible from the building entrance – may improve health by increasing levels of physical activity, exposing occupants to daylight, reducing stress levels and absenteeism.

4. Context-appropriate lighting

Lighting in all pathways and parking areas is a simple way to increase visibility, add to the improved perception of safety, and reduce opportunities for crime.

Interested in learning more?

Visit [here](#) to learn more about Fitwel and [here](#) if you are interested in certifying buildings.

Visit [here](#) to get a better idea of how Fitwel compares to other rating systems, including WELL and LEED.

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