

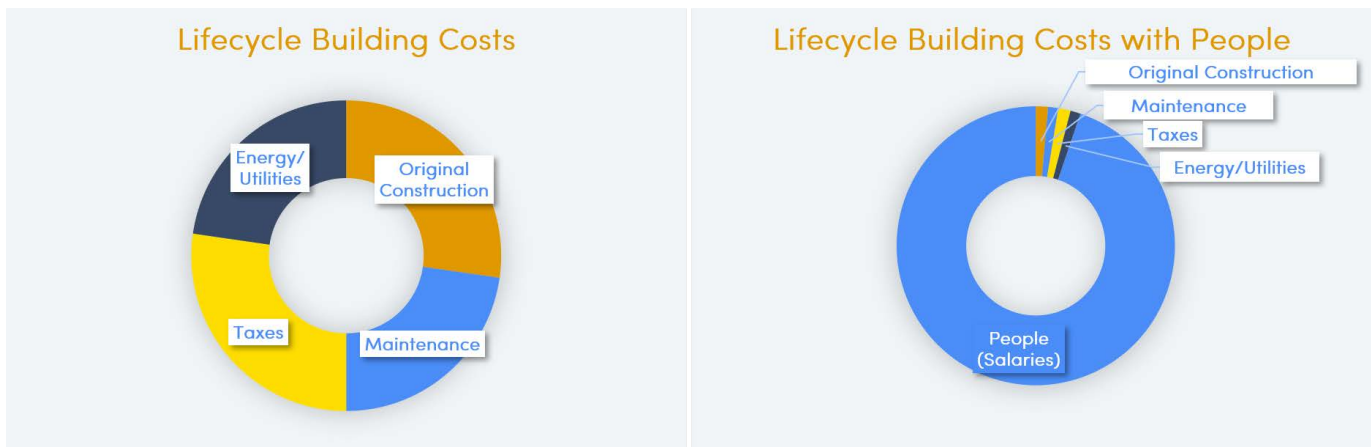
Comfort is the Most Direct Path to Return on Payroll

Shannon Smith
PointGuard, CEO

Comfortable people are more productive and there is no bigger building expense than unproductive occupants. It has been studied time and again that both excessively high and low temperatures can affect productivity. New research has shown that cold temperatures can affect our attitudes towards others. As this article explains, “the same area of the brain that lights up when we sense temperature—the insular cortex—is also active when we feel trust and empathy toward another person.”

If you just look at building costs, energy jumps out as one of the biggest segments. Therefore, most building owners focus on this part; it seems to be the most important metric.

But if you look more holistically, you start to get an understanding of just how important productivity is to cost. In the lifetime of a building much, much more will be spent on the people in that building – in the output that they produce – than on the building itself.



If you look at the importance of comfort to occupant productivity, it seems obvious that most buildings should optimize for it. However, as any seasoned facilities manager knows, optimizing something as subjective as comfort in something as complicated as a large building is no easy task.



Even the definition of what is comfortable is constantly changing. The American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers, or ASHRAE, publishes guidelines on in-building comfort that have become the industry standard. Their guidelines for comfort levels have changed over time and involve a complicated equation that includes humidity, metabolic rate, and how many layers of clothing occupants are wearing. The calculation is so complex that researchers at UC Berkeley have even created an online “Thermal Comfort Tool” to help solve the equation.

A new layer of complications has been added to the concept of thermal comfort recently, as studies have shown that women, who often have a lower metabolic rate than men, are more comfortable in offices that are warmer. This has gone as far as an online outcry about how the use of AC in offices can be seen as sexist, even sparking a popular new term, “air conditioning patriarchy.”

Obviously maximizing something as subjective as comfort is a complicated task – even the idea of comfort isn’t the same for everyone. But, that doesn’t mean that facility teams should throw up their hands and be content with ‘good enough’. Sometimes the best way to improve a process is to reduce it to its most basic elements. This is the case for at least making sure the mechanical system you invested in is doing its job.

We believe that comfort, and therefore productivity should be the main consideration when it comes to a building’s performance. When you look at how much professional offices, especially those with high-skilled workers, pay in salaries, any uptick in productivity level is orders of magnitude more valuable than any savings that can be made by cutting operating costs. Plus, as optimal comfort is achieved more efficiently, energy savings inevitably follow. As the facility management industry advances, we should make sure to keep in mind the human element inherent in all buildings.

After all, buildings are built for people and energy savings comes along for the ride. Yet, a building that is delivering mechanical comfort is often much more efficient than one that does not. It all begins with focusing first on what you can control. And the result is both higher return on payroll for building occupants and a higher return on investment for building owners.

