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SPECIAL REPORT

Breathing Well in the Workplace

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With flu season in full swing and flu vaccine scarce, property managers have one less tool to keep their people healthy.

But air quality is something that can be controlled and plays a significant role in the health of workers, and the safety and economic viability of a property.

Some of the signs air quality in a building may be tainted include:

- Health complaints;
- Excessive interior dirt or dust;
- Debris in the air supply;
- Chemical, stuffy or musty smells;
- Humidity levels above 60% or below 40%.

Nearly every commercial building has the potential for indoor air quality (IAQ) concerns.

Fortunately, serious issues like mold or chemical contamination can be remedied.

The importance of these issues cannot be over-stated. IAQ issues can have significant financial consequences including:

- Excessive maintenance calls;
- Deterioration of furnishings and equipment;
- Lower worker productivity or departure of employees;

- Strained relationships with tenants, possibly leading to the loss of a tenant or litigation;
- Negative publicity that could put properties at a competitive disadvantage.

Maintenance issues are often the reason for poor IAQ.

Often in older buildings, equipment is not maintained or operated as intended. Operating instructions are lost, maintenance schedules forgotten and training neglected.

At one Metroplex school, for example, an issue started with a plumbing repair. In order to fix the problem, all water systems were shut off. During this time, someone went into a classroom and turned (and left) on a sink faucet. Over the weekend, the water was turned back on and the classroom and halls flooded due to a clogged sink.

An architect recommended a complete tear down of the classroom and halls.

Using a moisture meter, however, it was scientifically determined where the water had penetrated into the walls and recommended that only the damaged areas be replaced, averting future problems with mold.

Improper placement

Another offender of IAQ is air intake location. Air contamination can be a result of improper placement of materials around the intake.

Take, for example, a large industrial building whose air comes from the area surrounding the loading dock. Instead of fresh outdoor air, the tenants are breathing exhaust from trucks idling at the loading dock. Sometimes even nature can interfere—animal nests or landscaping can restrict air intake and create problems.

Other factors that may impact a building's IAQ include:

- Tenant turnover: An increase in employee count can impact air quality by raising the temperature, humidity of carbon dioxide levels within the space.
- Space build-out: Imagine a restaurant moving into a space neighboring a women's clothing store. If air intake isn't managed in the clothing store, the results could be very unhappy tenants.
- Installing new materials: New carpeting, paint or furniture often emit chemicals into the air. Without proper notification, tenants may blame contaminated air on other factors, creating an envi-

ronment of distrust.

What can be done to remedy air-quality concerns? The first step is often open communication. Most air-quality problems are not difficult to correct and can be solved with an in-house maintenance staff. Gathering information about the problem opens lines of communication that help address current problems, and potentially prevent issues in the future.

If there is a reason to believe that an IAQ problem could have serious health or financial implications, a team of industrial hygienists and scientist can assess the problem and recommend a solution for clearing up the air.

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