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Boise lab focuses on workplace windows

If only the architects of my building had discovered the concept of daylighting, I would be awash in natural light as I write this column.

But instead I sit under the unwavering fluorescent glare in a room devoid of any meaningful windows.

Thankfully, a new design lab has opened in Boise that may spare other employees from my fate. The Integrated Design Lab offers free advice to architects and engineers who are interested in incorporating environmentally friendly building practices into their commercial building designs.

The lab is being launched by BetterBricks, a non-profit initiative of the Northwest Energy Efficiency Alliance.

The lab also is receiving funding from the University of Idaho, Idaho Power Co. and the Idaho Department of Water Resources Energy Division.

Kevin Van Den Wymelenberg, the lab's director, said this is the first lab of its kind in Boise that will allow commercial developers to see the benefits of energy efficiency in a building's design.

Similar design labs are open in Seattle and Portland, he said.

Van Den Wymelenberg said a main focus of the lab will be to demonstrate to builders how they can incorporate daylighting into the building design.

Daylighting is the process of using natural light, but not direct sunlight, to provide light inside a building. Daylighting requires the use of more glass in a building, which can drive up construction costs, but Van Den Wymelenberg said those costs can be recouped through energy savings.

"You might spend a little bit more on glass, but it could allow you to dim your interior lights by 30 to 40 percent and if you add glazing and shading to the glass you can downsize your HVAC (heating and cooling) system," Van Den Wymelenberg said.

In March, the lab held its first public seminar focused on building high performance schools, and Van Den Wymelenberg said the lab is already working with the Meridian and Nampa school districts on developing prototypes for new schools that would use daylighting.

If the Nampa elementary school prototype is accepted, Van Den Wymelenberg said the new school's electric lighting load would be reduced by 60 percent through the use of skylights in the gymnasium.

Daylighting not only helps with energy savings, it also leads to a better working and learning environment. Numerous studies have shown that bringing in natural light can increase sales at stores and reduce the number of sick days in office settings.

Schools have also reported that daylighting has improved student performance.

Van Den Wymelenberg said the decision to open a lab in Boise was driven in part by the area's strong commercial growth, but also by local architects' growing interest in learning how to design energy efficient buildings.

"We're seeing a lot of momentum here, and we're hoping to provide some extra help for people who want to do this," he said.

The lab can work with new projects and also help with renovations of existing buildings. For more information about the lab, call Van Den Wymelenberg at 342-6817 or 724-9456.

More information about daylighting can also be found at www.betterbricks.com.
Share your tips on helping the environment at work by contacting reporter Ken Dey at kdey@idahostatesman.com or 377-6428.

Environment at Home

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