

Designing Spaces That Work For a Multigenerational Workforce

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It seems that everyone is talking about generations these days – generation gaps, generational differences, maximizing your [business development, marketing strategies, talent pool] across the generations. It's fascinating, and analyzing the differences between the generations has relevant implications in almost every facet of our personal and professional lives. As a business leader, you're probably pondering things like engagement, innovation and brand loyalty, among others. Does your work environment factor into this list?

As Millennials continue to flood the workplace and organizations are competing for new talent, many leaders have focused on changes to the work environment that will attract and appeal to the new majority, sometimes with negative effects on the more established Gen X and Baby Boomers. And to complicate matters further, we're starting to see the first batch of Gen Z workers on the horizon, as the oldest enter college and internship/work study programs.



So how do we avoid swinging the pendulum too far? How can we create a work environment that appeals to, and engages, each of our diverse generations? Let's pause to understand some context.

A GENERATIONAL SNAPSHOT

Baby Boomers are those born between 1946-65. They are hard workers often characterized by a sense of stability, formality and responsibility. They value quality and have a strong sense of loyalty. Many were affected by the recent economic downturn and as a result are delaying retirement until funds recover or savings are replenished.

Generation X, born 1966-77. They are the smallest cohort in the workplace today. This generation was the first to often see both parents in the workplace, which resulted in a strong sense of independence and self-reliance. They are results-oriented, and often motivated by compensation.

Millennials, or **Gen Y**, were born between 1978-95. This group was influenced by smaller family sizes, and grew up close and connected to their parents. In the workplace, this translates to a desire for connectivity with leadership and mentorship by more senior coworkers. Technology became pervasive as they grew up, creating a strong sense of comfort and reliance on technology, and a penchant for multi-tasking.

Generation Z, or **Generation 2020**, were born after 1995, and their impact on the work environment is still a bit of a mystery. While Millennials are comfortable with technology, Gen Z sees it as an extension of self. As a result, concerns are often expressed about gaps in this generation's interpersonal skills. A high rate of home schooling and one stay-at-home parent has led to a strong work ethic, along with the desire for structure, order and predictability.

MULTIPLE GENERATIONS @ WORK



TRADITIONALISTS Pre-1945	BOOMERS 1946-1965	GEN X 1966-1977	MILLENNIAL 1978-1995	GEN 2020 After 1995
Experienced: Great Depression, WWI and II, GI Bill Work is: An obligation Aspiration: Home ownership Changing Jobs: Stay for life Career Paths: Slow and steady	Experienced: Television, Moon Landing, Watergate, Vietnam War Work is: Expected Aspiration: Job security Changing Jobs: Loyal to employer; connecting to values Career Paths: Upward mobility	Experienced: MTV, Nintendo, PC's Work is: A difficult challenge Aspiration: Work-life balance; independence Changing Jobs: If necessary for compensation Career Paths: Need to know options now	Experienced: Natural disasters, diversity, mobile technology Work is: A means to an end Aspiration: Freedom and flexibility Changing Jobs: Is expected Career Paths: Switch frequently and fast	Experienced: Economic downturn, Global Warming Work is: Constantly evolving Aspiration: Structure and stability Changing Jobs: Constantly Career Paths: Career "multitaskers"

COMPLEXITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Needless to say, these varying influences and preferences also lead to differing views on important organizational topics such as leadership, mentoring and work/life balance. It's easy to fall into the trap of tailoring the work environment to fit one group, especially when the focus in everything we read seems to be on Millennials and their tendency to change jobs to find what they are looking for. So how do we strike that balance? While the differences seem significant, we also see a surprising amount of overlap.

Meaningful Work/Contribution

Boomers and Millennials often seek meaning in their work. Transparency and visibility to company goals and initiatives help employees understand how their work helps forward the mission of the organization, and increases engagement across multiple generations.

Mentorship and Personal Connections

Facilitating mentorship and meaningful connections between employees can also help to bridge the information gap between more seasoned employees and new talent. Spaces that are laid out to encourage informal connections bring people together and enhance the type of social learning that builds culture and transfers tribal knowledge to the next generation.

Work/Life Balance and Integration

While Gen X typically values a clear separation or balance between work life and personal life, Millennials are often more comfortable with blurred boundaries and being able to flow freely between work and personal activities. Workplaces with flexible, multi-use spaces allow the younger generations to navigate these transitions and build the social bonds that they desire and that ultimately lay the foundation for healthy and productive work relationships.

Workplace Clarity

Preferences around workplace planning can vary from generation to generation. While Generation X uses spaces with practical application and Millennials are comfortable with ambiguity around space, we see indicators that Generation Z will find more success in the workplace when the intended use of space is obvious. Having clarity around the intent of spaces and how to use the tools and amenities will help to set a common understanding across all generations, easing anxiety and lessening conflict that could arise from differing expectations.

Ultimately we must recognize that the vast majority of knowledge workers support a variety of tasks throughout any given day. Providing a range of spaces – informal to formal, large to small, and with varying degrees of focus – allows employees to choose a space to fit the type of work that's required. When these spaces are appropriately zoned and employees understand their intent, we allow not only those from different generations, but those with different workstyles, to work in ways that best support their needs.