Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

IN THE OFFICES OF TODAY – AND EVEN MORE SO IN THE offices of tomorrow – there are multiple generations working side by side. Each of these groups can have dramatically different expectations for the workplace: what they want from employers, how they want to structure their days, how they view job loyalty and employee hierarchy, and even the kinds of furnishings and amenities they expect in the work environment and in the office at large. At the same time it's important to note that each workplace is unique and may feel the impact of supporting an increasingly diverse workforce in different ways. In other words, what works extremely well for one organization may not necessarily work for another.

For each generation of employees, their perspective of work has been influenced by their greater life experiences, and by watching how the generation that came before them worked. People in their 50s and 60s weathered the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the fight for civil rights and women's liberation. Younger workers grew up after the fall of communism, with both parents working full-time, in blended families, with multiculturalism, SUVs, IMing, blogs, and pod casts.

Stereotypically, many Baby Boomer workers expect hard work, loyalty and playing by the rules to result in promotions, pensions, and a life of leisure sometime down the road. Those in their 20s and 30s may think that talent trumps experience, hierarchy is irrelevant, and there are no rules other than making a path that's uniquely your own. While those who've been in the workforce for decades often seek offices that reflect what they've accomplished, and those just starting out tend to measure their success with a yardstick that has nothing to do with private elevators or wood-paneled offices.

For facilities managers, commercial real estate and senior level executives, as well as architects, and interior designers, the central challenge will be how to create workplaces that make each age group feel valued and rewarded, and encourage them to reach their highest levels of performance.

The Lettered Generations
Changes in the economy and in demographic trends are converging to create one of most highly diverse workforces, ever. Not only are minority groups increasing in population numbers and representation at all levels of

Percent Growth Of U.S. Workforce By Age: 2000-2010

Baby Boomers

Gen X

| | 16-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ |
| 15% | 8% | -10% | 21% | 52% | 30% |
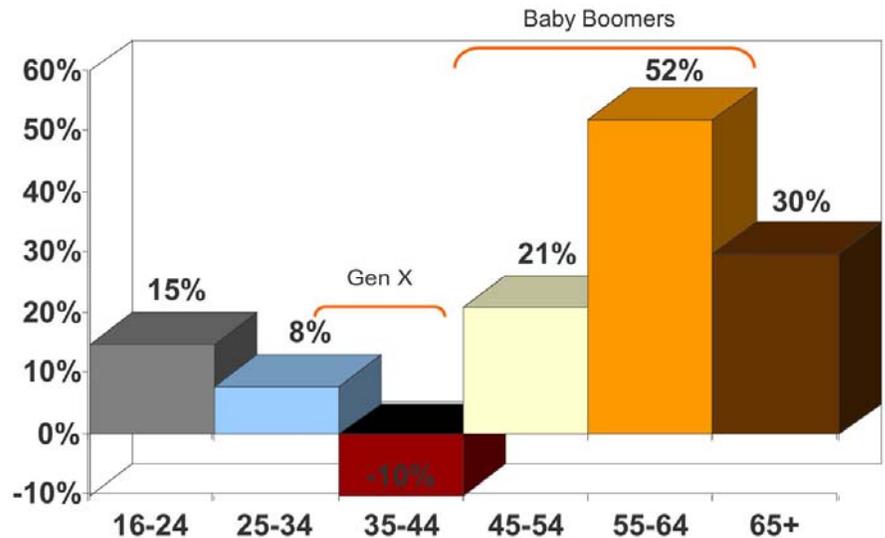
Source: US Dept of Labor Statistics

the organization, but more women are in the workforce than before, and longer, healthier lives mean people want to stay working longer. These trends create an employee pool that includes people of all ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds, who have very different ideas about what they do for work and what work does for them.

Baby Boomers, those born 1946 - 1964[1], still predominate in the workforce of today and will continue to do so in the near future. Those over 65 are finding they can and want to work longer. Economic necessity, better health, and fewer younger workers to replace them are all conspiring to keep people in the workforce, on their terms, for more years. In fact, the annual growth rate of the 55-and-older

group is projected to be 4.1 percent over the period 2004 - 2014, four times the rate of growth of the overall labor force.[2] These age groups have tended to see success at work as synonymous with success in life. Long hours, progressing up the corporate ladder, being loyal to your employer, all resulted in visible, measurable rewards from the employer: a bigger, more private office, dedicated administrative help, and increased compensation. Entitlements that confer a degree of status, such as preferred parking spaces, exterior windows, and materials and furnishings that speak to tradition and prestige. In turn, achievement at work funded rewards at home in the form of luxury cars, large lots in the suburbs, and postcard-worthy vacations.
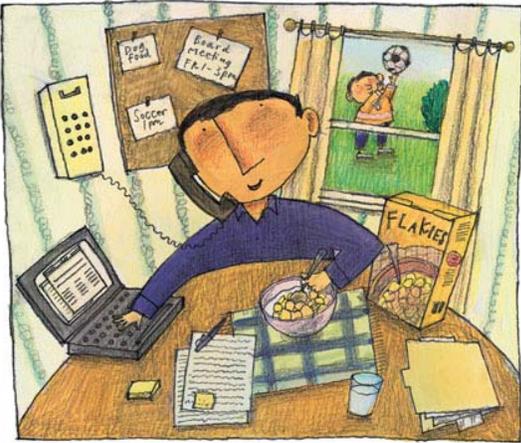
By contrast, the younger generations of X and Y are turning away from the idea that your job title is synonymous with who you are, and are often looking for a different, more nuanced approach to work, where the lines are more blurred, professional life is integrated with private life, and both support goals that are tangible, personal, and individualistic.

Generation X, in general terms, includes people currently in their 30s. They tend to shy away from the values and ideals of their parents, and embrace so-called "lifestyle" brands that express what they perceive as a more individualized, meaningful sense of self. One stereotype of this generation is a self-centered, latte drinking, snowboarding, SUV driving, cell-phone addicted individual. But the reality is this generation also values advances in technology, education, family, cultural diversity, and the pursuit of self-improvement. At work, they want flexible hours that allow them to care for family and devote time to exercise and education, interesting projects that value ideas and creativity over task-mastery, independence and collaboration, and the ability to express themselves in their work and work environment.

Generation Y, the oldest of which began entering the workforce as college grads in 2001, brings several of these trends to the next level. These individuals have never known a world without technology, see celebrity as a logical path to success, and have little faith in the status quo, public figures, and institutions from government and

Wall Street to private corporations. They also are optimistic, value entrepreneurship and free agency over loyalty and longevity, embrace diversity as the norm, see themselves and everyone else as fundamentally equal, and want to work for organizations that are fun, friendly, and concerned about social and environmental impacts as well as the financial bottom line.

Important Differences

Each of the generations bring different values and expectations into the workplace, so it's not surprising that when it comes to work, that the different generations may find importance in different things:

- Large offices, status cars, ample paychecks versus collaborative space, the latest technology, flexible hours, payment for talent and results, not just long hours
- I work hard, I win versus a balance between personal rewards, group benefit, environmental awareness, globalization, and social impact
- Separation between work and private life versus the merging of what you do and how you live
- The status indicators of leather upholstery, and wood case goods versus the open attitude of light-scale mobile furniture, access to natural light, customization, and WIFI access at home and in the office
- Value of face-to-face communication versus e-mail and instant messaging

Baby Boomers tend to place higher importance on workstation size, lighting, temperature and sufficient storage

while younger counterparts want more flexibility and autonomy for where they work and on-site amenities and space dedicated to group activities, both for work and socializing.[3] According to SHRM's latest Workplace Forecast the increased demand for work/life balance is one of the top 10 trends (ranked #4) predicted to have the greatest influence on the work place in the next decade.[4]

New Ways of Working

In light of several shifts impacting how and where work occurs - namely the rise of knowledge work, the prevalence and mobility of communication technology, and the attention to attracting, retaining and rewarding the workforce of tomorrow - office spaces increasingly must be many things to many people and offer many ways to work effectively.

Finding Privacy

Traditional private offices in many industries are going the way of the typing pool. While certain functions, such as human resources, may still require space that protects discussion of sensitive issues, the combination of new ways of working and rising costs of real estate continues to make more compact offices and open planning more attractive. Many organizations have already embraced this approach to workspace planning. For example, rather than doing everything in individual offices, people are able to move to spaces that reflect the nature of the work that needs to be done. Often the requirement for space that allows quiet or confidential work is met by areas that are shared, such as a small con-

"By increasing the flexibility of the workspace as well as expectations for face-time at the office, organizations will increase the efficiency of space utilization as well as employee time."

ference room. Or, someone may simply plug in their laptop at their dining room table and work in the privacy of their own home for a few hours before heading into the office. Companies utilizing these strategies often believe that by increasing the flexibility of the workspace as well as expectations for face-time at the office, they will increase the efficiency of space utilization as well as employee time.

Strategies of Place

As laptops, cell phones, and PDAs make work more mobile, people are becoming accustomed to getting the job done in settings as diverse as the cramped seat in an airplane or the comfort of their own living room. And with the availability of technology and information, more people are working increasing numbers of hours from home offices and other alternative sites. Many workplaces have embraced this trend by providing a variety of settings that reflect employee styles as well as functional requirements. A conference room outfitted with a fireplace, soft seating, and moveable whiteboards encourages creative brainstorming sessions. Strategically placed, standing height worksurfaces allow impromptu sharing of plans, agendas, and schedules. Multi-function rooms supplied with comfortable folding chairs and versatile tables, along with a coffee bar and well-stocked mini fridge, can accommodate a training session in the morning and a client presentation in the afternoon. Meanwhile, back in the open plan, every person has a compact, well designed, home base or touchdown location with a docking
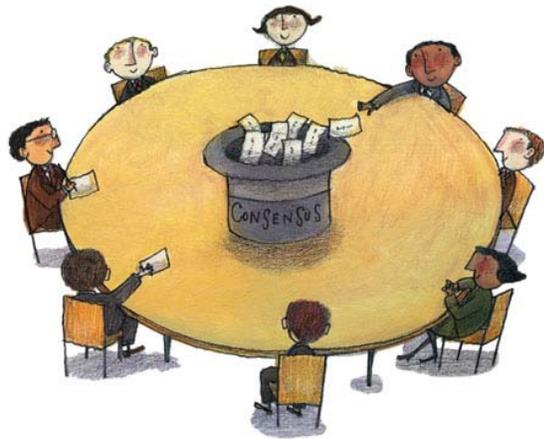
Allsteel®

station for their laptop, places to store essential information, and lots of outlets to charge up all their on-the-go electronic devices.

Facilitate Collaboration

Some workers don't overtly reject hierarchy; they simply don't see it. This is part of the reason many are quite comfortable working in teams made up of people from all over the organization. To get the most from this collegial way of working, it's important that offices make it easy for groups to gather in both spontaneous and formal ways. To support this way of working, these spaces can come in various sizes, styles, and configurations, including out in the open rather than confined by walls. Workstation clusters can be organized in organic shapes with desking configured so people can concentrate on tasks at their computer screen, and then, for example, simply roll their chair to a half-round area at desk's end to confer with another team member. While this free flow of people and ideas may seem a bit unstructured to some, especially those accustomed to dedicated space and areas where they can work in solitude, these workers should, over time, be able to make the necessary adjustments and enjoy a more collaborative way of working.
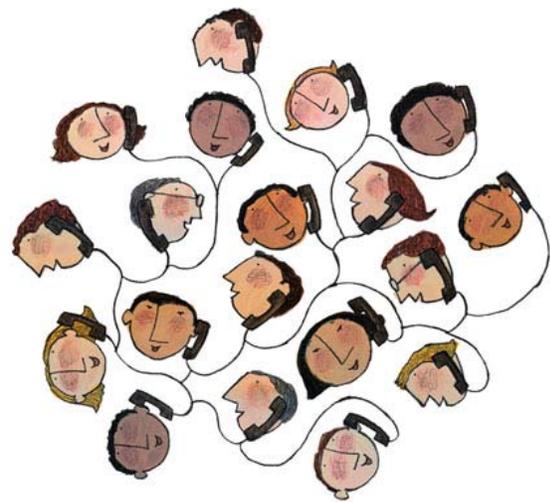
Levels of Customization

The younger generations are marked by a simultaneous desire to fit in and express their individuality. A couple examples include the popularity of social networking websites MySpace or YouTube, and the iPod that can be outfitted with a personalized song list.

"…it's important that offices make it easy for groups to gather in both spontaneous and formal ways."

To meet this trend head-on, office environments including amenities and furnishings are being designed to allow some degree of customization in order to increase employee comfort and productivity. Panel and tile systems use different colors, interesting textures, and unique materials to designate functional areas. Modular storage systems offer more variety in individual pieces, as well as the ability to easily configure them to fit individual needs and preferences. Worksurfaces can be raised and lowered with the touch of a button. Chairs come with passive, self-adjusting ergonomics that adapt to seated posture, or with straightforward, easy-to-adjust controls that make it simple to adjust support and position several times a day to fit the task at hand. Employees also want to be able to express themselves in more personal ways, from having shelves to display personal items, to a spot for rolling out their yoga mat, or a place to store the bicycle they use for their morning commute.

A Different Expectation in Amenities

Twenty- and thirty-somethings have never known a world without technology, where they – and not a secretary or administrative assistant – are in total control of managing their communication, time, and agenda. They are plugged-in in a variety of ways, and expect to be in constant communication across a variety of platforms, with instant access to a wide array of information and opinions from around the office and the world. This phenomenon contributes to their being blind to titles and structure and valu-

ing education and knowledge. They prefer meaningful projects along with the flexibility to pursue interests both in – and outside – the context of a job. They want to be valued for doing the work, however it gets done, not just for putting in long hours at a desk.

While money is important, having the latest technology, especially if the technology allows them to work where and when they want, can be of even greater value and status. Because this generation has grown up with design attention given to even the most mundane object purchased at a discount retailer they expect their office and furnishings, to not only be functional, but to also look good. This may mean interesting textures, colors, furnishings; excellent ergonomics integrated into stylish seating silhouettes; access to plenty of natural light and attractive views; attention to environmental, global, and social impacts; working spaces that are more flowing, organic, open, and less tied to the organizational chart; or possibly even better on-site amenities - from designer coffee to a gym with a mini-climbing wall for head-clearing athletic sessions at any time of the day or night.

Potential Implications
Recruiting and Retention
Population trends suggest that companies may soon be facing a shortage of talented workers, as there are not enough people to replace the retiring baby boomers. Workers are increasingly aware that their education, skills, and creativity may put them in high demand in the very near future. Yet the very nature of self-selecting the

right environment is an individual decision and may mean that many organizations will not need to complete an exhaustive transformation to find and secure the necessary talent. When assessing where workers want to work, they will be looking not only for meaningful, interesting assignments, but also for environments that reflect both their personal values and sense of style. While some workers prefer to be rewarded through the traditional means of compensation, job titles, and the benefits of private offices, some are looking more for alignment with a company that allows them to have the life and impact, not just the job, they want. Organizations that are able to accurately assess and communicate who they are and what they have to offer will likely experience higher levels of success when it comes to recruiting and retaining workers than those organizations who are not able to do this well.

One way to impact retention and encourage creativity and productivity from workers is to create an office space that makes them feel valued, inspired, and part of an affinity group. In effect, who works in the office and how the office works will become as much a part of corporate brand building and competitiveness as marketing and advertising.

Also, retaining the valuable experiences and tacit knowledge workers possess should be an important goal for organizations. The oldest of the Baby Boomers will begin to turn 65 in 2011 and will officially be eligible for retirement. Many large U.S. employ-

"…retaining the valuable experiences and tacit knowledge should be an important goal for organizations."

Allsteel®

ers have begun estimating that a significant proportion of their workforce is eligible to retire at any time now. Boeing, an employer of 150,000, is preparing for two-thirds of its workers to retire in the next ten years.[5] Organizations that do not plan for this impending exodus will likely find themselves starved for valuable skilled workers. Providing spaces, whether in a formal classroom or an informal workstation conversation, will be one way to transfer the knowledge that may not be documented. Planning spaces so that experienced and younger workers are not isolated from one another should also be considered.

Individual Preferences

Employees often desire individual work spaces customized to their tastes and needs, so modular pieces that can easily be personalized as well as configured and re-configured become a priority in many organizations. Appearances can be critical, which may lead to an emphasis on interesting fabrics, natural textures, and playful or bold color choices. Individual task seating should be supportive and adjustable for each individual, but also have a distinct look and quality construction that speaks to the heightened understanding of design attributes. Because younger workers, partly due to the internet, tend to be cast as highly conscious of global impacts, and desire to make a difference in society, they often want to surround themselves with products that are re-

cycled and recyclable. To some, the quality of their work environment is an implicit reflection of their perceived value to the organization.

An Aging Workforce

It is well known that as we age our vision and hearing are impacted negatively. Therefore issues such as adequate lighting and maintaining as well as thermal comfort are likely to become even more pronounced concerns in the workplace as well as maintaining speech and visual privacy to support concentration. Thinking through the placement of high noise level areas to individual work areas, and providing spaces that allow for work that requires quiet concentration will be necessary. Establishing appropriate office behavior protocols with regard to technology use, cell phones, pagers, conference calls, etc. will also prove useful. Being too hot or too cold is the number one office complaint today, and this is likely to be even more of an issue for workers in years to come. Proper lighting is crucial for all workers, however due to changes in they eye that begin at about age 50, we may all eventually need considerably higher levels of light at later ages to maintain adequate illumination than we do when younger.[6] Providing for more control over the lighted environment with increased lighting options suited to the task, for instance reading printed documents or working from a computer screen, will help alleviate potential sources of eyestrain.

If you were making the decisions on the workplace environment, which would be important?

- GenX office workers desire more flexibility and autonomy for _where_ they work than Baby Boomers.
- GenX office workers also value onsite facilities or amenities and space dedicated to group activities rather than individual activities than Baby Boomers.
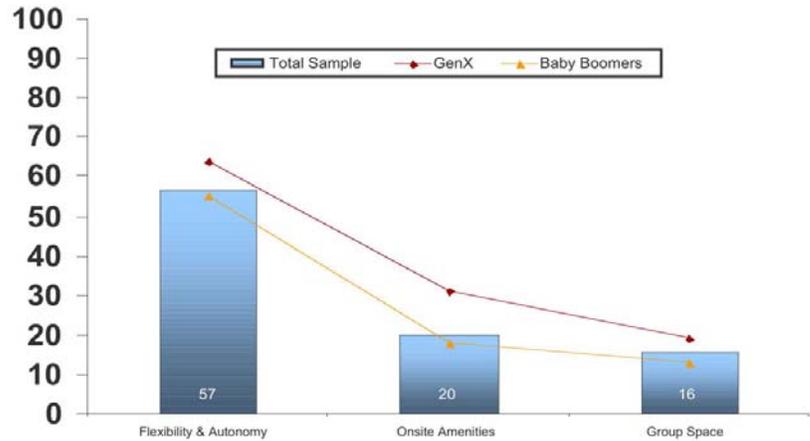
Future organizational success hinges on several equally important variables. Older workers will redefine retirement, and their experience, knowledge, and institutional wisdom can benefit companies and coworkers for many years. Younger workers ability to use their vitality, new ideas, and team-orientation to move companies into the future while feeling welcomed, valued and mentored by older co-workers is very valuable. It will continue to be important to use real estate space efficiently by reducing costs and maximizing versatility with work environments that allow the broadest variety of people to work in the broadest variety of ways. Support for these workplace variables can deliver significant positive impacts to the organization and allow the workspace itself to become a critical expression of the organization's brand, values and culture.

Clearly, one of the greatest challenges facing organizations today is finding ways to use the physical work environment and office furniture to address the competing demands of increasing real estate costs and a changing, more diverse workforce that is coming to the job with different expectations, needs, and values.

For additional copies please visit allsteeloffice.com

Allsteel®

References

[1] Wikipedia, Generation Y, available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Y

[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Projections to 2014: retiring boomers, available from http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art3exc.htm

[3] Allsteel Office Worker Survey, 2004.

[4] Society for Human Resource Management, *SHRM Workplace Forecast* (Alexandria, VA, 2006), 10

[5] Jana J. Madsen, "Boeing Delivers the Future of Work Now," *Buildings*, November 2006, 36

[6] American Society of Interior Designers, *Preparing For An Aging Workforce* (Washington D.C.:2006)