

When Cultures Collide: Managing Generations in the Workforce for Greater Company Benefit

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Every day, in corporations around the globe, no less than four generations interact on a daily basis: Silents (1925-1943), Boomers (1946-1964), Gen Xers (1964-1980) and Millenials (1980-1994). Each of these generations work differently than the one before them. Some of the reasons for this include the evolution of technology that becomes ingrained and second nature to the young, differences in the way people as a generational culture think about their work, and even the process of work itself. Managing the diverse needs of these groups has perhaps never before been as complex as now...nor as critical, considering the potential that generational conflict can affect the bottom line of the company. Because of this, understanding how to manage and mitigate generational differences is a topic that is swiftly gaining recognition as one to be noted, discussed and, most importantly, understood.

To further our awareness of generational impacts on the workforce, Hixson Architecture, Engineering and Interiors recently brought together noted research representatives from four major systems furniture manufacturers to share opinions and insights and respond to questions from an audience comprised of representatives of major companies. These representatives explained that unique, generational attitudes and exposures to the world around us can potentially cause an unseen clash among co-workers, and create ramifications on productivity:

- **Silents** - lived through WWII and tend to be practical, dedicated, and respectful. They paid cash for everything. Duty before pleasure is their motto. While they are stable, loyal and thorough and like to share their knowledge, they do not like change and are uncomfortable with conflict. They represent 15% of the workplace today.
- **Boomers** – all 80 million of them alive today – grew up as the “Me” generation: Because there were so many of them, they had to stand up to be noticed. While they are optimistic, idealistic, and loyal, they are also workaholics. They seek stellar careers, not lifetime careers.
- **Gen Xers**, who represented 33% of workforce as of 2004, will change jobs five times before age 40. Self-reliant, independent and strong, many grew up as latchkey children since more dual-income or divorced families were part of their upbringing. Gen Xers value themselves and their time and seek to gain a balance between their careers and their home lives.
- **Millenials** - are confident, dedicated to equality in the workplace, collaborative, comfortable in teams, and very globally oriented. Digitally native, and multi-taskers, they prefer to have a mentor in the workplace, rather than being sent out alone to figure things out. Nomadic in nature, 45% of this generation will change jobs every three to five years.

Retaining Knowledge

According to Tracy Wymer of Knoll International, on 10/19/07, the first Baby Boomer filed for Social Security benefits. This is only the beginning of a tidal wave: Half of the current workforce will be eligible for retirement by 2010, creating critical voids in the workplace.



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For corporations, this means we need to start thinking now about the people that will replace the Boomers – who they are, how to attract the best and brightest, as well as what they will be looking for in a company. While the Silent Generation grew up, lived and worked in the same city or town in which they were born, Gen-Xers and the Millennials are very world-savvy: They have traveled and have been exposed to a world without boundaries. They want to choose a “cool” city, and then find a job. Corporations need to note this, turning it into an opportunity, and creating not only attractive reasons for these generations to choose their company, but to create a community in which they will stay, make friends...and bring their friends with them.

Creating this community means accommodating the lifestyle of the younger worker. This may mean providing a work environment that offers, or is close to, amenities such as day care centers, fitness centers, sleeping rooms, concierge services, dry cleaning and car wash services, outdoor fitness areas, take-home meals and great technology. Food Service areas should not only be communal, but they also provide healthy, trendy food selections that look more like restaurants than cafeterias. These spaces do not have to be just for eating, but could be used for teaming, conferencing, and gathering to multi-task and get work done. Not only are these amenities important to attract people into a company, they are necessary for the everyday comfort of the “time-poor” employee. After all, the less time spent out of the office chasing errands, the more productive the performance of the worker.

Managing Differing Needs

While preparing for the next generation, we also need to support the Boomers as they age and stay in the workforce. According to a recent publication by McKinsey Quarterly entitled “Serving Aging Baby Boomers,” by 2015, the U.S. will have more than 45 million households with people from 51-70 years old, compared with 25 million for the previous generation. More than one-third of the labor force will be in this demographic: 60% of Boomers will need to work just to maintain 80% of their current consumption and more than 40% are projected to still be working at age 65. If we couple the fact that Boomers consider their work as a source of self-fulfillment and mental stimulation, with the smaller population of Gen-Xers, and the mentoring needs of the Millennials, this phenomenon can prove a positive force in our corporate facilities – we just need to prepare for it. Boomers, as they grow toward retirement, still want to, or may need to, work, but they, too, may be asking for more flexibility in their time at the office. To meet the needs of an aging workforce, McKinsey suggests “companies might have work centers with seating, lighting, computers, and telecom equipment geared to the physical needs of older workers; considerable flexibility about working hours, including the option to work from home.”

Going Green

Because the Millennials and Gen-Xers are keyed into the world of “green”, where sustainable environments are not just a possibility but a reality, sustainability can be a viable reason to join a company. Corporations that are not only aware of LEED, or sustainable environmental initiatives, but those that are committed to the environment are getting to the top of the list of names for potential candidates for employment. Young workers looking for employment will be saying “go green...or no go!” Having good environmental principles, or having a LEED-certified building will be a prerequisite to attract these workers because they want to make a difference in the world and work for a company that agrees with these practices. When thinking of a site for a new building, think of the site on a public transportation route in the middle of a community that offers a myriad of services that are within walking distance. Placing bike racks on the premises will make it easier to secure bicycles, and shows an encouragement to physical fitness. Daylighting in the environment will be a welcome and inviting signal to workers that this is a place that cares about people enough to give them access to the outdoors.



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Incorporating Flexibility through Technology

Corporations that are trying to attract the new workforce may have to create a more flexible environment. Technology, which the younger generation uses as an extension of self, can support and uphold this strategy. The ability of the worker to tap into their place of work from anywhere is not new, but it is now becoming more mainstream. This can extend to the conference room as well, where video conferencing can become a more important feature than it has been embraced thus far. While there has been a negative response the last few years from the unnatural look of the people during a video conference, new technology is also on the horizon to fix the problem. For example, HP Halo has introduced a product that appears more real – even with tables, chairs and an environment that is mirrored on the other side of the screen that make it feel as though the people you are conferencing with are in the same room with you.

Building Teamwork

Some Millennials have just come from the college environment, where they were used to carrying their work on their backs, plugging in anywhere, and seeking quiet only when they need it to get more concentrated work done. In addition, the younger generations have been on the soccer fields since they were in pre-school, making teamwork natural to them. Environments with flexible, mobile spaces, and which invite frequent, casual meetings can support these needs.

Another important note about the younger generation is that it multi-tasks like no other before them, to the point that quiet may be an affect that is disconcerting and boring. Bettye Russell of Herman Miller cited the new environments that have been created for the zoos in our country. They have become habitats, not cages. We need to think of our workspace the same way – creating habitats conducive to the work that needs to get completed: These may not be stagnant cubicles set on a grid, but rich work areas with variety...true habitats that strengthen and foster relationships.

Going Back to Kindergarten

In the end, designing offices to meet multi-generational needs may require looking at how our lives have been lived. In kindergarten, we were told where to go and what to do at each moment. As we grew, more freedom of time and decisions were given to us, so that by college, we chose when to go to class, when to do our homework, where to do it, etc. Then we get a job and go right back to kindergarten: “Be here at 8. Don’t leave before 5. Do your work in this spot.”

While such a model may have worked in years past, it would be folly to think that it will continue to be viable. Instead, companies will need to review their facilities and operations to ensure they address the needs of the older generations while planning for both the younger generations in the workforce today and those that will be coming up soon. From staff mentoring to mobility issues, amenities to teaming spaces, the changes that are made to a facility to meet specific generational needs will be driven in part by managerial concerns as well as the nature of the organization itself. Forward-thinking companies will be the ones that take the time and effort to implement facility changes that address physical, emotional and lifestyle needs of its multi-generational staff and create strong, loyal bonds with its workforce.

