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THEREGISTRY

BAY AREA REAL ESTATE

THE



OAKLAND'S KAISER
CENTER TRANSCENDS TIME

| PG 6

THE WELL BUILDING STANDARD
COMES INTO ITS OWN

| PG 22

COMMERCIAL
& RESIDENTIAL
REAL ESTATE

BAY AREA DEVELOPMENT

SILICON VALLEY'S 57MM SQUARE FOOT
DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

| PG 46

A NEW STOREFRONT—
E-COMMERCE MAKES
AN IMPACT ON PHYSICAL
RETAIL

| PG 11

THE GREAT SILICON
VALLEY SHOWDOWN—
SAN JOSE SUES
SANTA CLARA

| PG 14

INDUSTRIALIZING THE
CENTRAL VALLEY

| PG 18

GENERATIONAL GAP—
FINDING A COMMON
WORKPLACE SOLUTION
FOR MODERN COMPANIES

| PG 30

FINDING A COMMON GROUND

Multiple generations in the workplace affect workplace design

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GLOBALFOUNDRIES Headquarters Executive Briefing Center breakout area

PHOTOGRAPHY courtesy of a3 Workplace Strategies



For the first time, there are five generations in the workplace: the “traditional” generation (born pre-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Y (1981-1995), and Generation Z (after 1995). The convergence of multi-generations, combined with dramatic technological changes, economic pressures, and attraction and retention goals, have created significant new challenges to workplace design that companies need to address.

In the past, we have seen three or four generations at a time but not vast differences in work behavior. While the multi-generation workplace is in part a managerial dilemma, supporting the unique attributes/work styles of each generation has become a workplace design challenge. Today, architects and project managers must develop work environments that reflect the culture, brand, support hiring, enhance productivity and boost the bottom line in creative ways. The challenge is creating a healthy balance that addresses the commonalities of each generation and aligns with the goals and objectives of the organization.



Intermedia café area

As part of planning an alternative workplace strategy, the design team and the project manager, in addition to traditional programming, need to look at the demographics within today's workplace.

GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY

- The oldest generation was likely influenced by WWII. Many saw their parents struggle through the Depression, which yielded values formed by scarcity and sacrifice. That mindset often translated into a strong work ethic.

- Baby Boomers typically rejected and redefined traditional values. Many grew up the beneficiaries of their parents' hard work and optimism, expecting the world to improve with higher levels of income. As this generation entered the workforce, typewriters and carbon paper were commonplace, mail was the only method of shipping documents, and rotary phones were the main communication technology. Having to adapt to new technologies has been a necessity and challenge.

- Gen Xers were children when society was more focused on adults. Divorce rates were increasing, and they learned to adapt; they came of age with MTV and experienced the emergence of music videos, alternative rock and rap. Many were born just prior to the internet, but all became comfortable with the acceleration of communication through email, pagers and cell phones. Xers are typically autonomous; they value flexibility, equality and want a voice.

- Generation Y (Millennials) are associated with the traits of confidence and tolerance. Technology is a given in everyday life, and they are at ease with it. In March 2014, the Pew Research Center issued a report about how "Millennials in adulthood" are "detached from institutions and networked with friends." Some employers are concerned that Millennials have unrealistic expectations about the workplace. Some studies predict they will switch

jobs frequently, holding many more jobs than Gen Xers. But newer research shows that Millennials change jobs for the same reasons as other generations—more money and more innovative work. They look for versatility and flexibility in the workplace and strive for a strong work-life balance. Their career aspirations are similar to other generations, valuing financial security and a diverse workplace as much as their older colleagues.

- Generation Z doesn't know life without email, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, smart phones, YouTube and texting. In Japan this cohort is described as "neo-digital natives," a step beyond the previous cohort described as "digital natives." While digital natives primarily communicate by text or voice, neo-digital natives generally use video or movies. This accounts for the shift from PC's to mobile and text to video.

While workplaces have always had multiple generations working side by side, today something unique is happening. As Boomers work past traditional retirement age, and tech-savvy Millennials and Gen Z enter the workplace, stark differences in values, communication styles and work habits are becoming more pronounced. This challenges architects and project managers to create environments that push the comfort zone of each and tackle problems together to promote efficiency and productively. Project teams and management need to examine workplace options and communication typologies that accommodate all generations.

Generational stereotypes are hurdles to overcome. While Millennials may be considered tech-obsessed, entitled and over eager, Baby Boomers may be perceived as difficult to train and set in their ways.

Ideally, a successful workplace experience needs to support a melting pot of different generations, personalities, perspectives and talents coming together toward a common goal.

WHILE WORKPLACES HAVE ALWAYS HAD MULTIPLE GENERATIONS WORKING SIDE BY SIDE, TODAY SOMETHING UNIQUE IS HAPPENING.

DIVERSITY MEETS COMMONALITY

It's all about appreciating different styles while also reaching a common ground.


So, given the cultural challenges faced by a multi-generation workforce, how do we address an age-neutral workspace? While the answer is as unique as the corporate culture, there are commonalities in the typography of the workplace:

- In many ways, the workplace is analogous to the home environment, with a mix of private, social, transition and workshop spaces blended with indoor and outdoor environments.
- While workplace design used to be a straightforward path of programming and schematic design, it is now a process that includes marketing, branding, sociology, urban planning, architecture and cultural psychology. Creating a workplace that responds to the process requires an understanding of the organization, the demographics, product development and communication patterns.
- Transitional spaces set the tone for visitors and staff; meeting spaces facilitate interactions and meetings from formal to informal, casual to formal, scheduled to impromptu; social spaces should offer a variety of settings that support staff interaction. Casual, multi-function spaces can be the perfect setting for relaxation while supporting team tasks. Private spaces allow for focused, heads-down work that is an important part of everyone's day—whether dedicated or open, they support critical tasks in every organization.
- Gathering spaces can be casual to formal, fixed to flexible, individual to group, focused to exploratory. Each supports socialization, team bonding and productivity.
- Private spaces tend to be more formal than casual, at the mid-point of fixed and flexible/solo and collective, but all supporting focused work and interaction.
- Individual work areas set the tone for personal space. They are analogous to the bedroom or office at home. Today, a new compactness in these workplace settings allows for task-appropriate space, personalization and storage of personal “stuff.” This minimalism supports flexibility, cost reduction, communication and the need to have a “home base.” As project teams expand and contract, the space should support the needs of the team to gather in a neutral space that allows the team to meet, host and invite others to collaborate.
- Many corporate environments need labs, “garages,” or workshops. This supports organizations that need tech space for assembly or disassembly of equipment.



Intermedia open workstation area

In addition, designers must consider openness, transparency, day lighting and environmental comfort. They should strive to make each generation comfortable, productive and engaged. Creating solutions that support worker efficiency, provide amenities, and combat noise and distractions are basic functional challenges that designers face in every project. In striving to create a human-centered environment, organizations need to consider what resonates with each generation.

Yes, it's a new world with no “one size fits all” solution. But the project team that partners with management to address all these variables can develop a thriving, customized environment that meets individual and collective needs. The companies that go this route are succeeding because they have reached common ground. 

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