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THE MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKFORCE AND ITS IMPACT ON WORKPLACE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This white paper offers an overview and assessment of the expanding multigenerational workforce in the U.S. and the broad social and demographic trends it triggers in the workplace both today, and in the future. The focus is on workplace issues, design trends and challenges, technical innovations, and the impact of design on multigenerational workers, highlighting critical factors impacting the design of today's work environments:

- The presence of four generations of employees working alongside one another
- Changing demographics, gender, and diversity in the workplace
- Design trends and principles as they relate to challenges and issues in the design of the workplace.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Whether you are counting the days to retirement, or a recent college graduate just joining the workforce, you will undoubtedly have a very specific opinion on what comprises the optimal workplace environment. Naturally, because of their wildly different life experiences, the opinions of these two extreme demographics are not typically in sync. Companies today are struggling with finding a proper balance in accommodating a workforce that has become decidedly multigenerational.

Currently, the average work environment is employing individuals who span in age from their early 20s all the way up to their 60s. It is not uncommon to find a younger staff member paired with someone who is 30+ years their senior. The obvious benefits of partnering seasoned professionals with emerging talent have always been acknowledged. But today, the cross pollination of knowledge is not simply spilling downhill; it is flowing laterally, with younger employees bringing a parallel level of expertise to the work process.

What senior staff possess in business acumen and experience, they often lack in technical deftness. Junior workers come into the workplace fully versed on the latest trends in technology and how to best leverage it for greatest efficiency and impact, but do not often possess the practical business knowledge on to use it strategically.

The challenge now for designers is creating a dynamic, highly efficient work environment that supports such dramatic age diversity.

2. GENERATIONS

As a primer, the basic age demographic categories in the workforce now are:

World War II (traditionalists/silent generation)...................... **61 and older**
Baby Boomers **43-61**
Generation X **27-42**
Generation Y/Millennials... **26 and younger**

Each generational category has its own specific "tick" based upon the cultural events that shaped their childhoods. It is safe to presume, for example, that those who were born post-depression 1940s and 50s have a decidedly different outlook on life than those who were raised in the 1990s. Those who experienced life through the lens of the Cold War have a very different understanding of the world than those who were born in the 9/11 era.

Much research has been done on the sociological differences between these age groups and as you might expect, not all researchers agree on all the specific nuances of each generation. Those who have studied the various ages however, conclude that, due to historical events, advancements in technology, and shifts in social norms, each group has their own distinctive characteristics.

The chart below represents a compendium of descriptive traits commonly used in reference to the various generations.

|	World War II	Baby Boom	Gen X	Millennial
Innovation is	Electric typewriter	Desktop PC	Laptop	Hand held PDA
What's important	Being respected	Being needed	Being trusted	Being included
Acknowledgement is	Pat on the back	Salary	Freedom	Immediate gratification
Communication is	Direct, in person	Telephone	Email	Text, social media
Career is	A responsibility	A challenge	A contract	A process
Management style is	Seniority based	Performance based	Democratic	Most talented person leads task at hand
Perception of work is	Work/home separate but equal	Work is most important	Work to live better	Home is most important
Work ideology is	Company first, respect authority	Work to perfection, quality is the goal	Question authority, streamline tasks, be efficient	Multi task, anticipate need, take ownership, make decisions

Chart above[1]

The **World War II** generation came into the workforce at a time when technology was in its infancy. The most dramatic innovation shaping their environment was the roll out of uniform fluorescent lighting. That single advancement triggered one very meaningful and dramatic design change to the office of that time: placing offices at the window. Many joining the workforce at that period in history were veterans. Offices, specifically those at the window wall, represented status, importance, and rank. The

corporate office became an extension of the military, and everyone knew their place in the "rank and file."

Baby Boomers inherited that hierarchal design paradigm, but military influence and the notion that "rank has its privileges" had been somewhat diminished. It was during their entry into the workplace that something equally dramatic was developed: the cubicle. When workstations were introduced, designers scurried to respond, creating thousands of "cube farms" across the nation. It was hailed as the perfect solution to providing privacy and a sense of "place" to all those workers who were not afforded offices. The once open office plan was now reinterpreted. Everyone had walls, but a sense of hierarchy and chain of command remained. The "haves" were afforded drywall and window views. The "have-nots" were suited with half height fabric wrapped acoustic panels.

By the time **Generation X** entered the workforce, the ghosts of Vietnam had all but evaporated along with that sense of the "chain of command" ideology in the work environment. Computer technology began to play a dramatic role in corporate America; for the first time in history, everyone had a computer on his or her desk. Suddenly, technological agility began to serve as a powerful leveling device between senior and junior employees. Equally important, personal computers now had the capability of talking to one another through the magic of "networking." It was during this period that the emphasis on hierarchy shifted, and there was a decided effort to design workspaces better reflecting a company's prowess with technology instead. In other words, it was no longer important to have a work environment that reinforced rank, but rather one that promoted how sophisticated a company was with its use of technology. This shift began to introduce a wider interpretation of office design. Offices became more modest and uniform in size and appointment, and cubicles were designed not for privacy, but in response to and in celebration of technology.

Generation Y is the first generation to populate the workforce fully oriented on computer technology. Millennials were raised with computers as a learning and playing tool and had assimilated to it in a manner that no demographic had done previously. Additionally, this age group had not really been impacted by a veteran military experience whatsoever, and had no real sense of deference to the offices-and-cubes hierarchy in the workplace. Gen Y had been raised under the ideological notion that teamwork accomplishes everything and that each individual contribution mattered. Once again, technology played a dominant role in the reinterpretation of the workplace. The integration of hand-held computers, cellular telephones, PDAs, and smart phones had advanced to such a degree that for the first time in history, people could accomplish their work from the palm of their hand – anywhere, anytime. Today, workers do not need to be tethered to the lifeline of their office data connection. It is no longer necessary to "report in and be accounted for" each day, to get a job done.
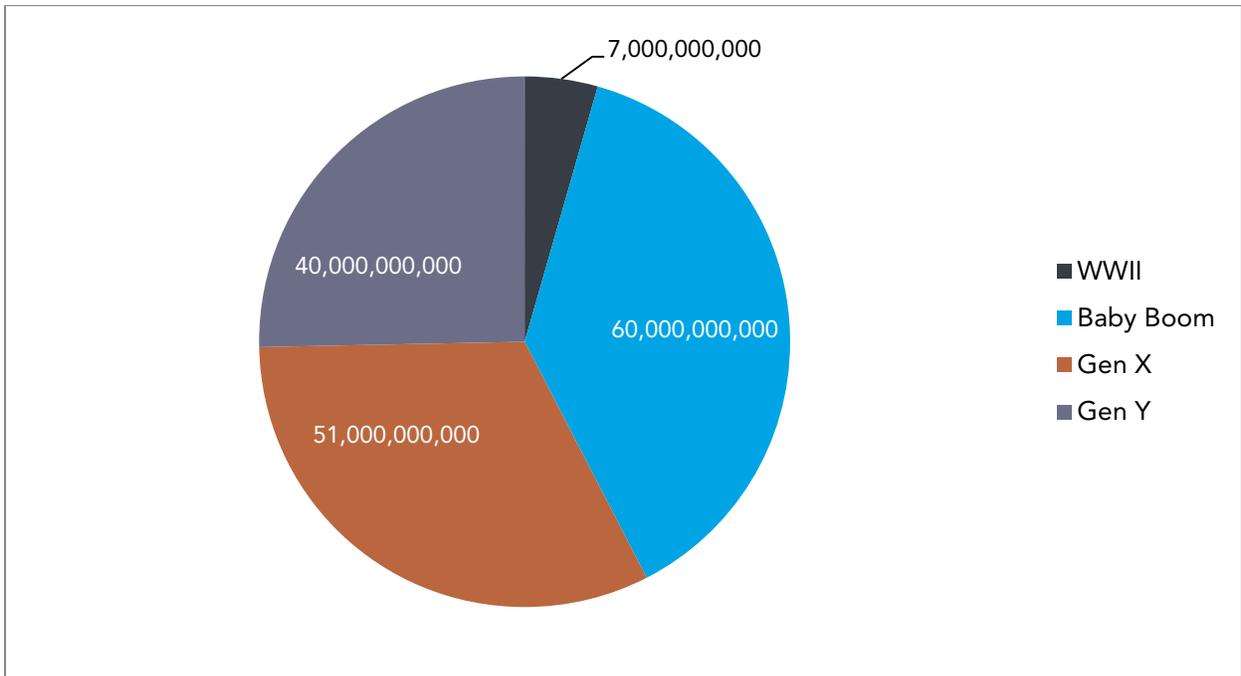
Demographic breakdown of generations (by number of employees) in the workforce in 2011[2]

GREYING OF THE WORKFORCE

Projected percentage change in labor force by age, 2006-2016
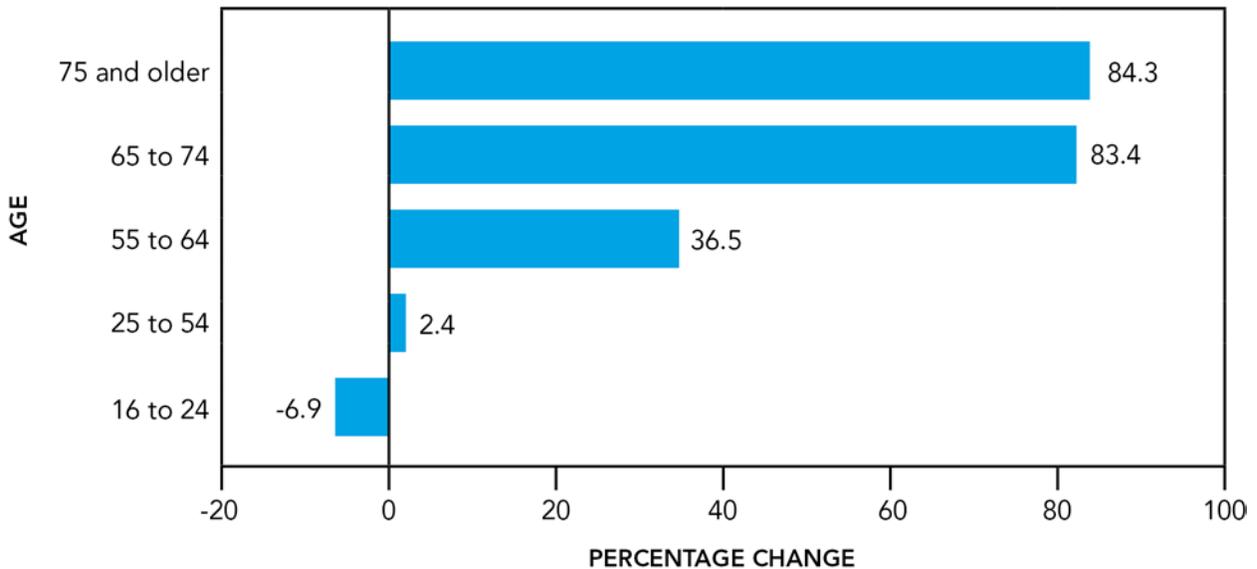
Reference: Board of Labor Statistics [3]

Due to the 2008 downturn in the economy, there has been a significant delay in the average retirement age. Many are choosing to remain in the workforce well beyond age 65, a trend unilaterally supporting the dramatic decrease in population of Millennials entering the workforce. It is safe to presume that in the next five years, the majority of the workforce will be heavily populated by delayed retirement World War II and Baby Boomer employees.

The composition of the workforce is transforming itself, especially in the U.S., something that will work to the benefit of everyone in terms of giving people the chance to re-invent themselves individually. In 1980, 51% of the workforce was under the age of 35.[4] In 2000, 50% of the workforce was between the age of 35 and 54. In 2011, half of all U.S. workers were over the age of 45. Moving into the future, it's predicted there will be fewer younger adults working. The potential exists for a shortage of younger workers and a need for older workers. Labor-force participation by people over the age of 55 is going to need to increase by 25% in order for the U.S. simply to maintain current levels of productivity.

3. CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

The gender composition of the workplace has shifted dramatically throughout the years. The World War II generation represented a predominantly male workforce. The Baby Boom generation was the first to experience a dramatic increase in female workers. Often linked to the introduction of the birth control pill, the "Quiet Revolution" empowered more women to expand from a traditional housewife/mother role and pursue professional careers. During that period, the percentage of women in the workplace rose from 10% to 25%.[5] The Gen X and Gen Y groups saw steady increases in both the number of women in the workforce and also those in leadership positions. Today, the female gender percentage in the workforce is 46%. While the impact of this steady growth cannot yet be measured accurately, it also cannot be neglected as a defining factor in the evolution of the workplace.

THE MULTI-CULTURAL WORKFORCE

As the census demographics change, so too does the workforce. In 1950, Caucasians dominated the workforce at 73%. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, that number is projected to decrease to 53% by 2050.[6] When tied back to birth rate statistics, the fastest growing demographic to join the U.S. workforce will be discovered within Hispanic populations. As companies begin to expand their global presence, it is also safe to assume that a wider cross section of minority workers will be critical within the workplace.

When considering the rapidly evolving complexion of gender, race, and age diversity in the workforce, it is critical to align a workplace design strategy with principles that can accommodate a multitude of distinctly different requirements.

How do these cultural distinctions impact the manner in which we design offices today?

4. TRENDS IMPACTING THE WORKPLACE

The following chart represents workplace trends that have been mapped by Margulies Perruzzi Architects (MPA), a Boston-based architecture and interior design firm that has been in business for more than 26 years serving Boston, its suburbs, and New England. It is notable that many of these workplace trends have risen considerably in the past five years. As workplace experts, MPA has experienced a dramatically liberal shift in the manner in which companies are approaching their organizations. For example, ten years ago it was extremely uncommon for clients to consider an office-free environment in the workplace. Today 20% of companies are moving in this direction. The rise in the percentage of companies who are actively reducing the number of staff who are assigned offices (53%) suggests, however, that the determination of who sits in an office – and perhaps more importantly, why – has been strongly reconsidered by many companies.

This data was gathered from a variety of traditional, progressive, and innovative clients, and represents a median average of their workplace planning decisions. It is important to note that more traditional clients in accounting and law disciplines represented a more conservative approach to adopting these trends. Progressive and innovative clients in technology and consulting, inversely, represented more willingness to adopt new concepts in workplace strategy.

Workplace Trends
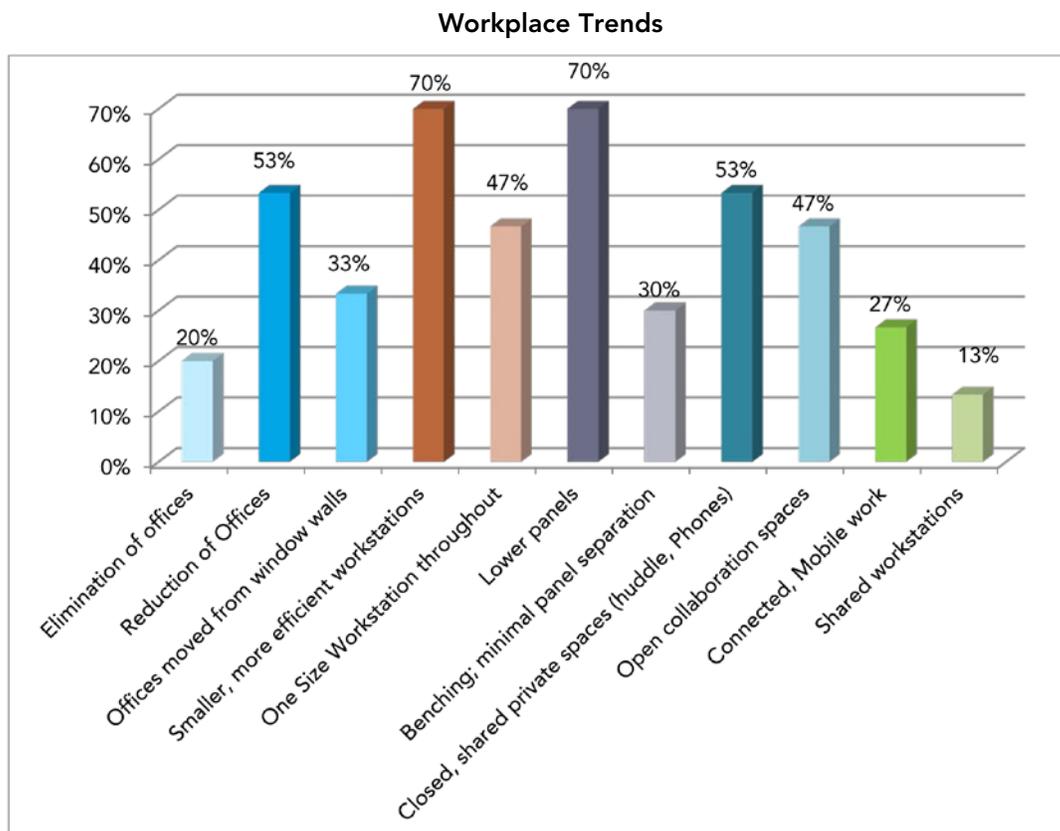
2014 Data provided by Margulies Perruzzi Architects

ARE PRIVATE OFFICES ON THE EXTINCTION LIST?

Every work environment requires some degree of structure. The business leaders of yesterday and tomorrow both deserve some modicum of respect for their experience and position. Today, there may be less design emphasis placed upon status, but there is still a clear requirement to identify who the boss is. Even in the most democratic, egalitarian work environment, there must be some defined indicator of who is held most responsible for the success of the business. The trappings of a private office will undoubtedly remain for many years to come as the definitive corporate badge of honor in many organizations.

Many business leaders will also argue that the tasks or functions accomplished within a closed private office require a greater degree of privacy. It is a commonly expressed qualifier that to manage high level functions, enclosure is essential to preserving confidentiality. This argument is often presented by professionals who are handling sensitive HR, financial or legal issues. Those who would argue against the office tradition point to alternative ways of providing short term private spaces (huddle rooms, phone rooms, enclosed work settings etc.) as a way to support these demands. In design today, there is no clear "must do" with regard to who requires a private office however and a careful study of the culture must be done before making a recommendation to consider it. But a growing number of industries are also abandoning that paradigm and instead actively implementing innovative, alternative ways to signify importance and standing.

The notion of extracting executives of a *Fortune 500* companies out of their "C Suites" and placing them in cubicles may not be a universal trend adopted anytime soon, but in many smaller, more dynamic companies it is not as uncommon a choice. In those companies, senior leadership is perceived as part of the "team" and their direct access to the day to day business is seen as optimal, even critical to the overall success. Designers must still address their workspaces in a manner that both gives them privacy for more high level strategic planning, and signifies to staff and clients alike that they are in charge and important. It is not essential that these leaders be in an office to lead, but the demands of their position and the perceived leader status must be respected within the design.

There are many industries who, due to the nature of their business, have stated that to maintain optimum efficiency, or confidentiality, they require private offices for their senior professionals. In law firms, for example, they point to the mandate for attorney-client privilege as a clear need for providing private offices. In that profession a significant degree of the individual lawyer's performance is tied to having privacy in their work environment.

Location, location, location. Regardless of whether or not the leadership team is afforded offices, it can be assumed that they will want to provide their direct input on where they are situated within the overall environment. Some management teams will prefer to be sequestered, or disconnected from the

work force. Their leadership style is such that a high level of confidential, strategic activity occurs each day. Other leaders will want to be more integrated in their company and find that their accessibility enables them to be better prepared as leaders. Whether you are building drywall offices or not, it is important to take into the consideration where and how the management team area is designed. It is safe to assume that without hard walls around the leader of the company, a designer must be very creative with ways in which to afford them adequate privacy, prominence and presence.

CAN WE FINALLY BID ADIEU TO THE CUBE?

The Baby Boomer generation experienced their entire professional careers in cubicles. For all their shortcomings, cubicles provided this generation with a sense of place in their 40 hour work week experience – and they liked it. Workers dutifully decorated and personalized their rectangles. While the overall office environment may have appeared monotonous and inhuman, the workstation interiors became havens of individuality. In the 1999 movie "Office Space", the central character takes a cordless drill to his cubicle to dismantle its panels so that he can actively look out a nearby window. This symbolic cinematic gesture prompted everyone who saw the film to subconsciously rethink the value of being surrounded by fabric wrapped panels.

Today, there is a fastidious effort being actively promoted by the furniture industry to begin phasing out the very product they have been touting as revolutionary since the early 1960s: "the cube". Combined with a growing European "return to open plan" design influence, the cube has begun to dramatically shift how Americans perceive the value of sitting in a box. When one considers that the early standard for a corporate office environment was a completely wide open plan, as experienced in Frank Lloyd Wright's famed Johnson Wax installation, it would seem as though we are now coming around full circle.

The challenge facing designers aspiring to migrate a work environment away from cubicles is that 30% of today's workforce is Baby Boomers, the majority of which are in a management role. Many were removed from offices and placed in cubicles, a gesture that clearly chipped away at their professional self-esteem. As a demographic, they are already feeling displaced and dishonored. Any effort to further flatten the workplace hierarchy is likely to be perceived as unacceptable to the very audience who is typically in direct control of how their company's spaces are designed.

A designer has a responsibility to influence positive change. The suggestion that a company should migrate away from a cube farm into a more open, panel free environment should be delivered gently. While this choice may seem obvious for some businesses, it is not readily embraced by others. Again, culture and demographics come into play when considering this concept. Designers should carefully study their clients' needs before introducing ideas that may seem too far "outside the box." Some businesses aggressively embrace change because they are heavily invested in firms' futures. Other

companies are more conservative and will not readily consider change simply for the sake of change. In their minds, it is not broken and does not need to be fixed.

SUSTAINABILITY

One thing spanning all generations today is a genuine concern for the environment. Regardless of age, everyone understands and appreciates the importance of going green. It has become so prevalent in the subconscious of today's society that almost everyone now understands the significance of an environmentally-conscious building; it is critical that designers keep this goal in mind when designing spaces. While sustainability can be integrated into any design, certain design principles (such as preserving access to natural lighting at the building perimeter) now have a legitimate environmental argument. For example, it is much easier to recommend that offices be eliminated, or at least removed from the exterior window wall, if you can illustrate that by doing so, you have created a more open, egalitarian environment where everyone is afforded access to natural light and views. This suggestive logic appeals to all age groups, regardless of hierarchy.

Designers must acknowledge that their decisions and choices will be received differently by each generation. Baby Boomers, for example, lived through the mid-century and may no longer be as enchanted by design trends that represent their past. Gen Y, however, may view these design choices as "new" and thankfully, more exciting than styles of the 1980s or 90s. As they say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but designers must have a careful understanding of who their beholders are when introducing a design trend.

The following trends, which span across all these generations, will be received positively BY ALL:

- **Increased individual control**: Regardless of what design methodology you use, the concept of giving individuals greater control of their personal work environment is highly valued. Furniture manufacturers are now introducing easily modified workstations allowing occupants to alter the size and shape of the space so that it suits the function and style of the worker. Also available are sophisticated software controls allowing occupants to physically change the volume of light, air, and sound masking directly from their desktop. By giving your workers some flexibility in modifying their environment to best suit their needs, you are empowering them to become more efficient on their own terms.

- **Global access to natural light and views**: Over the years, we have seen a dramatic shift in workstation heights. Where it was once considered paramount to give workers the highest degree of privacy possible, the trend now is to instead, provide seated-height privacy panels allowing those standing to have access to light and views available from exterior windows. As noted before, many companies have migrated away from the practice of placing enclosed offices on the perimeter specifically to create a more open, egalitarian environment for all workers. In most workplace design strategies today, if high wall spaces are placed on a window

wall, they are constructed with a significant amount of glass and translucency so that daylight can still be experienced.

- **Social space:** In the 1940s most corporate workplaces included lounges and game rooms. Over the years, social functions were gradually stripped away as frivolous. Today however, the pendulum has swung back full circle. Organizations are beginning to realize the value of socializing their workplace. There is a greater understanding that, if they want these generations to begin to relate better, they need to create a stage for it to happen. In addition to dedicated lounge spaces, and trendy cafés, foosball, ping pong, billiards, and video games are beginning to find their way back into the workplace; companies are beginning to experience an increase in their ability to recruit and retain talent because of it.

- **Concierge support:** At one time in the U.S., companies provided a full complement of support spaces for their workers. It was not uncommon to find amenities such as on-site company stores, nursing offices with pharmacies, dry cleaners, shoe repair, etc. This mindset was transferred from the military, where bases and ships were designed so that workers would have everything they would need. Similar to social spaces, these amenities were gradually phased out as unnecessary. Today, companies, especially those in suburban campus locations, are identifying that workers actually benefit from these resources because they reduce a considerable burden on their workers who would otherwise be spending productive time away from work to accomplish rudimentary tasks.

5. DESIGN PRINCIPLES

DESIGNING THE "AGE NEUTRAL" WORK ENVIRONMENT

In today's economic climate, competition for success is fierce, and business challenges are greater now than ever before. Employers are struggling with creating a work environment that both retains and attracts top talent in the marketplace. They recognize the necessity to have a workforce that is evenly populated with older, more seasoned business minds and younger, more technologically-sophisticated perspectives. Suddenly, it is no longer as simple as creating a workspace filled with offices, cubes and conference rooms. The **rules** have changed.

Executives are faced with some very big challenges with regard to navigating the future success of their companies. They understand that if they fail to embrace a new way of thinking in how their business is done now, they could potentially be putting their organizations at risk in the future. Leadership teams must make decisions that both support their experienced, skilled older workers, and create a business environment that aggressively draws in young talent.

But with such divergently different demographics, how does one create a space that each generation is both attracted to, and efficient within? What are the secrets to designing a workspace space where each generation thrives and feels valued?

1. **Abandon uniformity**. It was once appropriate to think about "universal design" when configuring a work environment. Today, it is essential that designers consider both the nature of the work, and its inhabitants. It is no longer appropriate to simply take an excel spreadsheet of departmental program needs and populate a plan based upon a generic target square footage per person.

2. **Design for flexibility**. Businesses are transforming their practices at a record speed. In the past, this simply meant management reorganizations. Today, there is a much more organic degree of realignment and transition. It has become commonplace for employers today to quickly develop teams for working on the development of new business initiatives. Those teams often require active cross generational collaboration supports ad hoc training. The most effective work environments are designed to easily and quickly accommodate a wide variety of requirements, such as spontaneous knowledge sharing and collaboration between team members (of all ages).

3. **Respect the past. Design for the future**. Today, designers must create spaces dynamic enough to satisfy the widest age group of workers in history. While it is important that spaces are shaped to accommodate both ends of the generational curve, they must be designed with an eye toward the future. Approximately 35% of the current workforce in America is made up of World War II and Baby Boomers. In less than 5 years, it is expected that the World War II generation will begin "retiring out" and within the next ten years, the largest percentage of Baby Boomers will also be exiting the workforce. Keep in mind that while you are designing for today's requirements, there will be significant changes in the character of the workforce coming very soon.

4. **Focus on culture, not trend**. Understanding the culture of the workforce for whom you are planning is imperative. Design is not a "one size fits all" practice. It is still unequivocally true, for example, that an accounting firm will have dramatically different workplace needs than that an advertising agency. Each industry obviously attracts different talent, and those professional pools have distinctly unique perspectives on how their work is best accomplished. Researchers and editors have different work patterns than marketing and HR professionals. It is important that before a designer introduces or encourages a dramatic design paradigm shift to a business, that they carefully understand the culture.

5. **Plan with technology**. Now more than ever, technology is shaping how business environments are developed. It is no longer appropriate to design a space, and then consult with an IT professional to best determining how the LAN closet and cabling are managed. With rapid, ongoing advancements in both hardware and software, it is critical that designers provide their clients with spaces that accommodate these changes. In the future, an even larger percentage of a company's workforce will work remotely due to further technological advances. It is necessary to factor in that evolution in planning processes.

6. **Remember ergonomics**. In designing a space, bear in mind that there are certain physiological issues accompanying the "graying workforce". Older workers have different needs relating to

their varying physical deteriorations. Diminished sight is a major factor when considering lighting choices; consider designing spaces with individually-adjustable lighting levels. Many older workers experience a natural degree of hearing loss and as a result, it is predictable that their voices may unconsciously rise. Sound masking may help create a muffled acoustic environment, but could also present a challenge to those who are also struggling with impaired hearing. Circulatory changes also come into play where response to temperature will vary dramatically between young and old. Spaces should be designed to consider the overall demographic, but be sensitive to the physical needs of all and have some measure of adaptability.

7. **Design for a healthy office.** Many companies are designing their spaces to promote healthy habits. As these design decisions are made (i.e. inter-connecting stairs, remote placement of amenities, healthy food programs, etc.), it is important to consider that what might be organic, fun exercise for some is challenging and cumbersome for others. It is wise to consider introducing age neutral, healthy initiatives encouraging a variety of activity levels. Something as simple as installing adjustable height work surfaces, for example, allows employees an ideal work posture. Following the basic principles of Universal Design for ADA compliance, designers should integrate health conscious strategies that can be used by workers of all ages and physical conditions.

6. THE FUTURE OF THE WORKPLACE

There are two primary factors affecting design today:
1. Providing a space that is supportive and efficient for a greying workforce
2. Creating space that will serve to recruit young talent at a time when the competition is at its peak

The first factor impacts the approach to the "current state," and responds to a population of workers who, in the near future, will begin to drop significantly from the workforce. The second factor responds to the demographic and workforce of the future. According to marketers' association Loyalty 360, by 2025, 75% of the workforce will be populated by Millennials.[7] Companies planning 10 year leases now need to embrace the reality that the decisions they make today will have a direct impact upon their ability to recruit to this younger generation.

Most clients are deploying new workplace strategies. In some cases these initiatives are in response to the changing demographic of their organizations. In other circumstances, the changes are in direct correlation to the emergence of new technologies. Companies that once defined themselves as conservative have migrated toward progressive in their workplace adaptations. Organizations who were already somewhat progressive are adopting more innovative workplace initiatives.

We, as designers, have experienced an increase in clients who are investigating mobile work strategies. Many companies have expanded their businesses globally and many of their interactions with foreign interests occur outside typical working hours. Companies understand the burden this puts on their staff and are expressing interest in creating a more flexible and dynamic work experience. Allowing their talent to work remotely creates an environment of trust and shifts the commitment from 9-5 clock punching to individual performance. In response, the workplace will begin to take on a different feel. If it is no longer necessary to have an office or a cube, but still very necessary that you meet and work with coworkers periodically, what is the optimal design to enable that to occur?

It should be noted that the Millennial generation, while the most technologically equipped to "work from anywhere," was raised with an emphasis on team; it is important that they feel included within a larger, organized structure. It should be acknowledged that this generation will likely seek and benefit greatly from an environment that will nurture and mentor them. The future of the workplace must respond to these two considerations: it must be agile enough to support a technologically-sophisticated demographic, but also, provide an environment that nurtures the professional growth of a younger generation.

7. SUMMARY

In thinking about the design of today's office, it is important to remember that most of what we typically associate with "office" today, represents a way of doing business that is over 50 years old. Leaders of today's companies must ask this simple question: will we continue to design workplaces to reflect the past – or the future?

When considering all demographic changes impacting the workforce, companies must be agile in their thinking with regard to their decisions about the work environment. Design choices that are made today will have a direct impact on a firm's ability to effectively recruit new staff tomorrow.

8. END NOTES

[1] Generational Charts
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