

Generation game

by Laura Staples

The global workplace is changing and with up to four generations working alongside one another, the OP industry must sit up and pay attention to keep up with the times

For the first time ever, four generations are working side by side in offices around the world. According to new research from office furniture manufacturer Steelcase, the OP industry should take advantage of this knowledge, and use the information as a tool to better understand its customers. In doing so, it will be better informed to design and develop products today that will be more successful tomorrow.

As many as four generations have been identified in today's working population by academics and sociologists alike. The four groups are the Millennials (those born between 1978 and 1999), Generation X (born 1965-1977), Boomers (born 1946-1964) and Traditionalists (born 1901-1945).

Differences in the way these generations work and communicate are having a marked effect on what is expected from the office environment, and integrating the generations presents challenges to employers.

Catherine Gall, the Paris-based director of WorkSpace Futures Research at Steelcase, says: "The main challenge is what sociologists call generational convergence. It is a proven fact in society that each generation is in conflict with the previous one and the following one. There's never a smooth and fluid relationship between two successive generations."

Gall's Toronto-based colleague Mandy Sutherland, applied research consultant at Steelcase, says: "Within my own company, senior members of staff, who are typically Boomers, are fascinated by the Millennials. Members of this young generation coming into the workplace are bringing energy

and fresh ideas and don't mind stretching the boundaries. But there are challenges in managing the Millennials. They're very different from their predecessors.

"The reality is that companies have to figure out a way to enable these generations

to work easily together because the impact of them not doing so is very significant. There are big financial implications involved with generations not converging effectively."

The office itself is a tool – a tool for companies to leverage the abilities, capabilities, knowledge and expertise of their staff. So office products themselves are merely enablers. Until the OP industry understands what its customers are trying to achieve in their offices – which is to understand how people perform, engage and work together – it won't be able to tell what kinds of products are needed.

But rather than establish a fixed idea of the identity of each of the four generations, it is more useful to find out the main issues that are important to both the young and old, so that truly generic products can be developed.

The changing workplace

The workforce is changing. Every year, more and more people are attending university and so a new generation of young and highly educated professionals is joining the workforce. Not only this, but as the older generations are becoming increasingly concerned about pension funds, and as the working age and life expectancy is rising, people are working for longer.

According to Herman Miller, the population of older workers will grow significantly over the next 50 years. The company points to research that reveals the 55-and-older age group, which made up 13 percent of the US labour force in 2000, will account for 19 percent by 2050. The company's *Work Force Diversity* report states: "As people are living longer and staying healthier, they are redefining retirement; 80 percent of them will continue to work past age 65." (See graph on page 28)

Dr Virginia Kupritz, associate professor at the University of Tennessee's School of Communication Studies, has spent years researching demographics and the changing nature of the workforce. She says: "The increasing age diversity in the workplace is a mega trend that has created a multi-

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Catherine Gall, director of WorkSpace Futures Research, Steelcase



generational workforce not only in age and physiological make-up, but also in work and life expectations.”

“Practitioners and academics alike are struggling to identify strategies that effectively manage this new workforce. Determining effective management strategies has challenged organisations in ways they have never been challenged before.”

Gall added: “I actually know of one insurance company that went as far as physically separating its older staff from the younger generation. They had them working on two separate floors.”

Teamwork

For Millennial and Generation X employees, work has become much more of a social activity and they have therefore adopted a far less rigid and more informal approach to the workplace. And because technology has enabled flexible working, the workplace has definitely changed.

The main two developments have undoubtedly been the explosion of teamwork and the prominence attached to obtaining the work/life balance. Teamwork has changed the work environment in a big way. For instance, when teamwork is assigned and groups form, the working pattern of the group of workers changes completely from that of the rest of the staff due to team meetings,

client meetings, international travel and so on. So networks evolve and the working environment changes.

Darren Cassidy, director and general manager of Xerox Office UK, says: “We are certainly aware that the workplace is changing, with trends that include collaborative and mobile working. For this reason Xerox has developed products such as DocuShare – a web-based document and content management system that allows collaborative working regardless of location – and Walk-up Printing Driver, which allows the mobile user to print to any Xerox Phaser printer from their laptop.”

He added: “Companies can use collaboration to get the most from their workforce. Group online games, discussion groups, communities of practice, etc. are all good vehicles for acquiring skills and sharing knowledge. The research shows that collaborative working is popular with Millennials in particular, and workers of all age groups should be encouraged to participate through age diversity training, goal setting, and rewards.”

In recognition of the shift towards flexible working and achieving the work/life





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balance, companies are increasingly coming round to the idea of ‘alternative officing’ to give workers more freedom. This ranges from creating team environments to facilitating home-based telecommuting. In team situations, many firms are giving

their knowledge workers an official sanction to experiment by providing them with extremely flexible furniture and extensive control over rearranging their spaces. And 45 percent of companies report providing non-dedicated workspace for workers who telecommute or visit on a periodic basis (International Facility Management Association, *Project Management Benchmarks*).

Targeting the mixed generations

Manufacturers must understand the concerns and attitudes of both the younger and older generations in the workplace if they are to successfully target mixed generational buyers.

Forrester Consulting research, commissioned by Xerox, reveals that employees belonging to younger generations are defined by a number of workplace characteristics: they are used to receiving information from multiple sources and processing it quickly; they find multitasking easy; are flexible in their approach; like collaborative work spaces; demand instant access to information, and like to work in non-hierarchical peer groups.

Russell Peacock, managing director at Xerox UK, says: “The Millennials cannot remember when the world wasn’t digitally connected. Conversing with peers in social computing networks, with the promise of instantaneous information sharing, comes as second nature to them. They like to express their opinions about the products they love or hate, which will have a massive impact on how brands and businesses are perceived and therefore on how we do business. To simply ignore peer-networks is to ignore the views of a growing proportion of the working population.”

Cassidy adds: “While more experienced employees tend to collaborate in face-to-face environments such as meetings, they are less likely to have the same level of comfort when it comes to working with the latest collaborative technologies.”

Steelcase has found that the older generations want technology-ready rooms in which they are not required to set equipment up. Because of this, Steelcase has been designing new whiteboards and trying to

make them as intuitive as possible so they are very easy to use. Sutherland says: “We’ve found if technology is not easy to use, it just won’t get used by the older generation.” But the younger generations expect to have technology everywhere because it is incorporated into modern living.

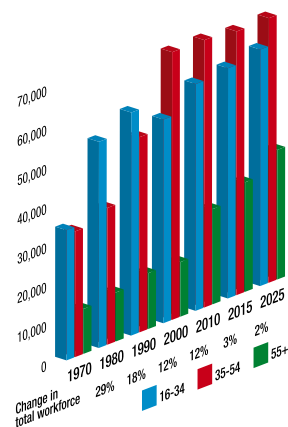
Kupritz adds: “I think the myth that the older generation is not up to speed with technology misses the mark. The issue is more complicated.

“Research tells us that the evolving communication channels used by organisations today are often dependent upon customer and workforce characteristics, diversity and expectations as well as globalisation of labour and customer markets, economies, and information – in addition to technology. Assumptions about how to use technology to communicate and transmit information should be challenged so that technology is value adding.”

Gall is also keen to point out that technology is not the only important area that the OP industry should be considering when addressing generational differences. Everyday issues are usually more important to office workers. For instance, research on the older generations by Steelcase suggests that the Boomer generation, in particular, are much more concerned with the need for quiet, territory and ownership. Gall says: “This issue of territory is significant to the older generations who like to know their position within a company and know their value.” As such they are more likely to prefer defined cubicle offices rather than an open-plan workspace, as per their younger peers.

This is in part a result of the traditional – sometimes referred to as military – leadership styles those older generations are used to, but which have since become outdated in managing the younger generations.

Shift in US workforce composition by age segment



Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics



Steelcase's vision of collision zones

For the older generations, the traditional way of handling leaders was to isolate them and have them separated from the rest of the staff. "It was more a case of having to get past the guard dog before you could get to its master," says Sutherland. But the younger generations coming into the workplace are used to a much more informal relationship with

authority figures. At university they can go up and talk directly with their lecturers, often having the opportunity to bounce ideas around with both their superiors and their peers. And this is what they have come to expect from their workplace as well.

Rigid and formal meeting rooms, for instance, are therefore not as practical to this generation as to their predecessors because they want easy access to leadership. They want visible, tangible access so they can have a clear understanding of what the company is working towards. And the people who are responsible for that vision are the management and leadership, so that ease of accessibility is vital. And it's not always planned. A lot of the time it is spontaneous. The circulation path in an office takes on new importance as an opportunity to connect with those people. Open-plan spaces with glass partition walls are becoming increasingly popular as they encourage interaction.

Sutherland adds: "Where you put amenities is critical. For example, photocopier space isn't just about a machine in a hallway, but as a place where people are going to go and bump into each other, organisations should make it easier for people to talk, share ideas and brainstorm. They should provide the tools that facilitate those general conversations that migrate into business discussions. They could easily install a whiteboard close by where new ideas can

be jotted down. Those kinds of spaces, what I call collision zones, are vitally important."

Companies are sitting up and taking notice of diversity within their organisations. Herman Miller has observed that valuing diversity has also begun to change the iconography

of status within the office environment. According to the furniture maker's Work Force Diversity report: "Certain furniture sends a specific message; for example, the big leather chair behind a large wood desk positioned to face the door and remind visitors of their subordinate status every time they enter the room. Thus, many managers and executives who want to send a message of co-operation and understanding are opting to meet their employees on a more equal footing – around a conference table or peninsula work surface."

User control

Further evidence of the acceptance of diversity within the workplace is the preference for personalisation. To all office workers, regardless of the generation they belong to, user control is very important – being able to adjust, modify or easily move your equipment is key. Being able to personalise your space is very important. "For the younger generations it's about telling the world a little bit about themselves, for the boomers, it's more about making their space comfortable, but also saying 'This is my space'," says Sutherland.

Gall also says that manufacturers and resellers need to be aware of the Millennials' concern with the environment. They have been brought up at a time when the environment is very high on the agenda and so when it comes to branding, this generation want to be associated with eco-friendly products. "This is a trend that's going to get bigger and bigger and ignoring this would be a big mistake" she says.

Until the office products industry understands how companies need their staff to perform, it will not truly know what products to provide. Manufacturers have to make the effort to go out and get to know their customers. Observation is a very powerful tool and one the industry must utilise. Staying up to date with all the latest industry trends is vital. The industry must keep abreast of what's happening in the workplace, what's happening in technology and what's changing in terms of business practice to understand corporate culture and strategy. They can then educate their clients about what kinds of products will help them realise their goals. By making that tangible connection between business needs and design, OP companies can make an explicit link between their products and what the leadership of an organisation really cares about. If they can do that, they'll be able to move new business concepts forward. The industry needs to understand how its products can influence work. That's what business leaders are interested in. ■



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Profiles

Millennial

Aaron Elliott, 23, project officer at a South East property management firm



1. What are the most important things to you about your office environment?

The most important part of the office environment to me is my colleagues. I have found that if you have a good working relationship with your colleagues you work smarter and harder. In my line of work it would be impossible to deliver successful projects without a good team ethic. This is without a doubt the most important part of my office environment.

2. Have you got any opinions on the following – light, noise, space, proximity to your immediate colleagues or boss?

Plenty of natural daylight makes the working environment more comfortable. I think a busy office with plenty of chatter is fine but shouting and noisy machines can distract me from my work. It's also important to have a space that you can call your own. If an office is too cramped everything can get on top of you, literally. I also think it is important to be in close proximity to both colleagues and your boss so you can build up good working relations with them.

3. Do you notice any differences about the way colleagues who belong to your generation work compared to how older colleagues do?

I find that colleagues from my generation work more quickly and are far more IT literate. I also find them more approachable. However, older colleagues tend to have more knowledge and expertise in my area of work

and can, at times, have a more practical approach to work.

4. Do you interact much with older colleagues?

I interact as fully as I can with all colleagues regardless of age and sex. I find that I have more in common with colleagues belonging to my own age group but that is inevitable – we have similar interests.

5. How important is it to your job to have places in the office that facilitate teamwork?

For us, it's vital to have available meeting rooms. Not only are team meetings held in them, but also project meetings, where solutions to difficult problems can be worked out. Without these areas, groups would be crammed round small desks making the office much noisier and more cramped.

Boomer

Alun Williams, 42, chief executive, Swansea Building Society



1. What are the most important aspects of your office environment?

A safe, clean and bright working environment is appealing to both customers and staff and without a doubt the most important aspect of any working environment.

2. What are the benefits of creating a pleasant workspace? Does the quality of the office environment directly impact on your business?

If you give staff quality accommodation with plenty of light and space, they will

be more productive and confident with customers when working. In a client-based industry, this benefits our business no end. One of the most important improvements to our working environment has been the installation of air-conditioning units in all working areas. This has improved the comfort of both clients, customers and staff.

3. Do you think that generational differences have any bearing on the way employees work?

At age 42, I would say that there is very little difference between the way in which colleagues of my own generation and our older counterparts work (several of my staff are over 60). However, I have noticed that there is an enormous difference in the way younger staff (those aged 18-30) work in terms of commitment and time-keeping.

4. Do you interact much with younger/older colleagues? If not how could this be improved?

I interact daily with both younger and older colleagues, including a board of six non-executive directors, who are aged between 44 and 66. As chief executive, it is my responsibility to ensure that staff interact effectively not only with each other but also with clients.

5. How important is it in your job that you have places in the office where you can get together with colleagues to bounce ideas around?

It's vital to have a meeting room of suitable size to accommodate staff and visitors in comfort. Staff are at their most productive in meetings – formulating ideas, delivering project plans, etc – and so providing a comfortable setting for this is crucial.

Traditionalist

Andrew Turness, 61, company director, Food Packaging Ltd



1. What are the most important aspects of your office environment?

I think it's important to strike the right balance between creating a friendly yet professional working environment – nothing too sterile but nothing too quirky. It's an office not a lounge at the end of the day.

2. What are the benefits of creating a pleasant workspace? Does the quality of the office environment directly impact your business?

Obviously, working in the food industry cleanliness and hygiene are paramount.

If, for some reason, our high standards in this area fell, there would of course be a knock-on effect on our business. That aside, creating a pleasant workspace can help to encourage and motivate staff. If the premises are clean and comfortable, staff are more likely to be happy.

3. Do you think generational differences have any bearing on the way employees work together?

Differerent age staff do things in very different ways. During my career I have observed that younger generations are usually quicker to learn than their older colleagues. It can be hard to teach old dogs new tricks. But older staff members are invaluable. They have a different attitude to working and the job experience they have usually acquired makes them experts.

4. Do you interact much with younger/older colleagues?

Earlier in my career it is fair to say that I had much more interaction with my staff, those belonging to both younger and older generations, than I do today. Although that kind of interaction isn't quite so necessary in my role now, I will always be an advocate of team building and social interaction in the workplace. Most people spend more time with their colleagues than they do their friends and families. Any business is only as strong as its staff and so the more interaction, the better.

5. How important is it to the company to have places in the office for teamwork?

It's important that management has the space to work as a team. It's often a case of five heads being better than one.