

How to develop a workplace strategy that supports a multigenerational workforce

For the first time in history, four generations are working side-by-side in the workplace—veterans, boomers, generation X and millennials—each with distinct needs and work styles. The mix of work styles and habits all impact key business practices and strategies. While often perceived as challenges, generational differences offer CRE executives one of their greatest opportunities to add value.

This paper addresses four steps that have emerged as the foundation for an effective workplace strategy: empowering employees through workplace, work habits and technology; understanding the attitudes and habits of different generations; a concrete implementation process; and a vision for the future.

1. Understand workplace, work practices and technology needs

Workplaces that support generational diversity empower their employees through workspace, work practices and technology. Therefore, collaboration among IT, HR and CRE departments is essential. While each generation has entirely different attitudes toward their workplace, work habits and technology, all three areas must work in concert to create a successful multi-generational strategy. Here is an overview of how to approach each component:

- **Workplace:** The workplace is morphing into a collection of resources instead of a status hierarchy. Fewer closed offices, more flexible furnishings and collaboration spaces are becoming the norm. This requires offering choices to suit the needs and preferences of the different generations. Settings appropriate for mixed uses, such as drop-in areas, huddle rooms, team rooms, conference rooms, and informal meeting areas, can satisfy multiple functions and diverse age groups. Also, consider third places as part of your workplace.

- **Work practices:** Each generation has different modes for getting work done, but unless they are clearly identified, misunderstandings can occur, impacting output and productivity. Work with business leadership and HR to develop and share protocols for collaboration, decision-making, meeting protocols, employee and manager accessibility, performance measurement and mentoring.
- **Technology:** Even technology preferences are generational. The younger generations prefer tools, such as instant messaging and texting, which offer more flexibility and mobility. Work with IT to define and provide technology tools and guidelines that identify tools appropriate for specific activities and environments.

2. Know your generations

The field of workplace intergenerational studies is a new frontier and not all answers are known. However, an understanding of the needs and wants of each generation will help you identify the elements that foster working together. Each age cohort has unique views, particularly in the areas of collaboration, the work environment, remote working and workplace design (Fig. 1).

Understand the generational mix at your workplace. Focus on work requirements, business goals, and work processes of employees. Use surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Tools, such as Jones Lang LaSalle's iPlan Capacity Planning Tool, incorporate qualitative and quantitative research assessments from a variety of sources, such as space utilization measurements, work style surveys and predefined benchmarks, into one analytical model that can be used in the development of a workplace plan.

	Generation: Work environment and mobility characteristics			
	Veterans (1922 – 1945)	Baby Boomers (1946 – 1964)	Generation X (1965 – 1980)	Millennial (1981 – 2000)
Collaboration	Work individually on specific tasks	Work together in face-to-face meetings	Get the work done in the quickest way possible	Get work completed via e-mail or voicemail
Work environment	Private office	Variety of meeting areas	Open Easy to access colleagues	Do I need to be in the office?
Remote working	How is that possible?	Occasionally, if necessary	Not really a big deal	The way of life
Workplace design	Mahogany furniture	Cubicles, conference rooms	Low cubicle walls Access to natural light	Freedom to roam around

Fig. 1

3. Follow best practice

To develop a workplace that works, it is important to follow a disciplined process. Here we summarize the key steps to take to ensure you develop an integrated and strategic solution.

Identify and communicate with key stakeholders

- Understand your corporate culture
- Identify your business goals and strategies
- Agree on desired processes and outcomes (i.e. to enhance revenue and decrease costs)
- Establish metrics
- Create a long-term view

Research work styles and patterns

- Link generational demographics to mobility, technology/tool use, values, expectations and engagement
- Conduct observation studies to identify generational collaboration patterns and process pain points
- Conduct focus groups to validate findings and expand potential arrangements

Align the workplace strategy

- Develop a strategy that encompasses distributed work, inter-organizational collaboration, cross-cultural collaboration, project team leadership, and technology for collaboration. Including these elements will ensure that the strategy meets all generations needs
- Provide a range of worksettings that support future business

strategies and processes

- Include a choice of settings that supports a range of work activities and styles (enclosed and open places for concentration, team work, distant collaboration, etc.). This will promote agility for future change and accommodate needs of the evolving generational workforce

Evolve along with your generations

- Prepare for shifts – the majority generation today may not be the majority in the next 10, 20, or 30 years
- Continue to seek input from each generation
- Engage in ongoing strategy refinement

4. Create a vision for the future

For a workplace design and strategy to be positioned well for the future, anticipate how the generational picture will look over time. Create a generation map of your organization and project its changes over the next five, ten, fifteen years. With this knowledge, you can anticipate demographic shifts and design a workplace that stays current. A workplace that encourages knowledge transfer and mentoring will help ensure an employment pool that supports your business goals.

Today's workplace can no longer be defined by a "one size fits all" solution. Organizations need to create a work environment where all the generations work successfully together. Workplace strategies reinforce an organization's core values and foster change by embracing generational diversity and providing opportunity.

To learn more

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