

Developing Inclusive Workspaces for Millennials, Boomers and Beyond

By Chantelle Cole, CREW Network Industry Research Committee

Millennials—50 percent of the current workforce¹—have become synonymous with the “workplace of the future.” Yet there are currently five generations² in the workplace and more people over the age of 65 in the world now than at any point in human history.³ As our healthy life expectancy grows, what does this mean for our workspaces?

“Start with a lens of inclusion,” suggests Lorene Casiez, Associate, Accessibility and Wellness Practice Lead at Human Space, and a Toronto CREW member. An inclusive workplace, by its very nature, is one that considers and embraces many factors including age, race, disabilities, gender and culture.

“There needs to be a genuine desire to do things differently from the outset, not after the fact,” continues Casiez. The current pandemic has catapulted issues that accessibility experts have long advocated for into necessities. Nice-to-haves today will become the hallmarks of a wellness-focused built environment tomorrow, including touchless faucets and doors, wider passageways and doorways, better light and air quality, and quiet, spacious spaces to work in.

“Every generation asks for space to focus, to collaborate, to socialize, and to learn—these are basic human needs,” says Annie Bergeron, a Principal and Design Director at Gensler’s Toronto office.

However, spaces need to be nuanced. Mandy Sutherland, Senior Consultant at Steelcase, reinforces this, outlining that good workplaces support a variety of work modes through a range of spaces. “People choose the most appropriate space for their tasks, preferences and situation,” she said. “And smart companies create these spaces to support generational preferences and personality types, among other factors.”

Benefits of an inclusive workplace

Inclusive workplace design fosters culture, mentoring and collaboration. “Younger generations provide a different vantage point, energy and curiosity that may inspire older generations to explore different approaches to problem-solving,” Sutherland said. “A thoughtfully designed workplace is the stage that supports these experiences.”

Careful configuration plays a crucial role in leveraging the benefits of differences. “A junior, a so-called ‘digital native’ seated next to and learning from a senior, a ‘digital immigrant’, means both are benefiting; one from years of experience, the other from reverse mentoring,” Bergeron said.



Research shows the direct correlation between engagement, performance and profit. Multi-generational workforces are inherently diverse. Companies benefit from recognizing the pivotal role that workspaces play in cultivating diversity—spurring innovation and performance—and ultimately creating value.

“Workspaces tell an explicit story of welcome or exclusion,” concludes Bergeron. Ambient belonging is reflected in areas ranging from the art on the walls and the snacks and beverages available, through to colors, recreation rooms and furniture styles⁴. Her advice—people need to “see themselves” in a workplace, to feel they belong.

Embracing diversity, equity and inclusion

The idea that the workplace of the future is for ‘Millennials only’ is limiting and limited. The nonverbal language of the environment is a strong indicator of whether a company embraces diversity, equity and inclusion. Employees need to “see” and hear from people they can relate to, in environments that create a sense of belonging. The real opportunity lies in listening to, understanding and responding to the nuances of diverse needs, to truly unlock the latent potential that multi-generational workforces of today and tomorrow present.

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(1) PWC’s 14th Annual Global CEO Survey

(2) Pew Research Center (2018)

(3) Dr. Fried, Dean of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health

(4) <https://medium.com/inclusion-insights/what-signals-is-your-office-sending-about-who-belongs-1bc21d59e735>