

## Designing for Diversity Avoid Stereotypes, Listen to Employees

By Bob Koehne

**W**hile many Indiana companies struggle to solve generational communication, leadership and learning issues, others are taking the lead by incorporating new philosophies in office design into their multi-generational strategies.

Generational experts, office managers and designers agree many of the issues generated by the convergence of the Traditional, Baby Boomer, Gen X and Millennial generations can be addressed through smart office design driven by the basic needs and expectations of the diverse workforce.

Claire Raines, a nationally known generational expert and author, says members of each generation need different tools and environments to accomplish their daily tasks and that all workers perform better in settings in which they feel supported and inspired.

“Supportive work environments are what it’s really all about,” Raines says. “I believe the environment we work in shapes our business results, behavior and attitudes.”

Raines claims the transitioning economy has played a critical role in the way offices are designed, shattering conventional workplace concepts.

“If we look at the way many companies have been historically structured, you’ll notice that buildings were designed to support the machinery and processes valued during the height of the manufacturing economy,” Raines explains. “As we transition into a knowledge-based economy, businesses are realizing that we need to create environments that support people and the way they want to work.”

### Retention tool

Companies are starting to view their offices as a tool in retaining their brain trust. And, they realize the need to design attractive and innovative workplaces to recruit younger generations. For many companies, it’s an investment in the present and the future.

Carol Payne, vice president of design and customer care for Business Furniture, recognizes this industry trend and says offering workplace options – including storage, technology, private spaces and community zones – has become a leading factor in office design.

“When attempting to balance generational preferences in the workplace, you need to create lots of options,” Payne claims. “Successful companies offer a variety of workplace options addressing the daily and motivational needs of all workers.”

While it may be easy to use generational stereotypes as the foundation of multi-generational workplace design, Payne believes greater success can be found by taking the time to listen to what employees expect and want.

“Bypass the stereotypes. Take the time to find out from your employees and prospects what they value and need and then make sound investments when designing your space,” Payne contends. “While you can’t give them everything, build the space around

what they need for communication, technology and efficiency so they can do their job the best they can. Let the space support – and work – for them.”



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### Interactive example

Interactive Intelligence, a global developer of Microsoft-based business communications solutions headquartered in Indianapolis, followed this advice and surveyed employee needs to determine what their new facility should provide.

Lynn Krajewski, office operations and facilities manager for Interactive Intelligence, says designers and planners used employee recommendations to create many features that not only satisfy workers, but also help them become more productive.

“We spent a lot of time back and forth on paper and with our team leaders asking: Are we capturing what you want? How should we do it differently?” Krajewski says.

Believing architecture, furniture and technology could be blended to create effective spaces for workers of all ages, Krajewski and her team of designers utilized employee feedback to create an innovative workplace offering a variety of amenities for its workers.

“When they come to the building, we want them to be happy and excited about the space,” Krajewski notes. “We didn’t want it to be all about the design, or one particular person’s ideas. We wanted it to represent our people, our culture and our business so that when they are in the space, they are happy, productive and proud.”

Containing a combination of private offices and public workplaces, the Interactive Intelligence headquarters offers workplace flexibility and addresses the preferences of a multi-generational workforce.

The building is also home to numerous features requested by the age-diverse staff. Cafés, an employee kitchen, workout facility, game rooms and a massage room were incorporated to motivate employees. A sleep room, offering temporary respite during a stressful day, and an inspirational color palette also encourage productivity.

While some of the features found at Interactive Intelligence may not be valuable to other Indiana companies, Raines says the employee-focused approach to tackling generational issues is revolutionary.

“Beginning to think of our employees almost as we think of customers can be very eye-opening,” Raines said. “Thinking about what brings this person to work every day and how can we continue to keep them coming back allows us to create an environment that will continue to work for them.”

### INFORMATION LINK

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