This “place” we call the workplace is ever evolving. And while it can take on many configurations, it is almost certainly the character and personality of an organization. In recent years, we’ve deftly managed to manage the interior environment, to create functional, formidable, and in many instances, iconic workplaces that are award-winning and brand-defining.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO INHABIT THOSE OFFICES?

IS WORK CHANGING OUR LIVES—OR IS LIFE CHANGING OUR WORK?

How important are data and demographics in the creation of a workplace (and a brand) that is diverse, relevant, civil, sustainable, and profitable? How do the connections between industries, ideas, behaviors, and contemporary culture affect how we work and why?

These are some of the questions thought leaders pondered at the 2019 Industry Roundtable, held in January at IIDA Headquarters in Chicago. A multidisciplinary roster of designers, manufacturers, and marketing executives looked at the future of work through the lenses of people, place, and practice. Highlights of the program included a demographics-focused panel presentation by a conscientious cohort of millennials, Oakton Community College’s Colette Hands, Ed.D, MHRM, PHR, offering concrete ways for designers to strategically partner with human resources executives, and Designworks’ Mike Milley covering provocative ground, itemizing the lateral influences and consumer expectations disrupting the automotive sphere.

Though covering broad terrain, the weekend’s conversation kept returning to a central theme: the notion that strategic and proactive collaboration and ideation across disciplines is essential to solving problems—and an approach designers can better leverage in their efforts to create forward-thinking, flexible, context-aware, and adaptive spaces.
Guest Speakers

Colette Hands, Ed.D, MHRM, PHR
Oakton Community College
Associate Vice President/Chief Human Resources Officer
Colette Hands is an accomplished senior-level higher education administrator with more than 20 years of experience in directing and executing organizational and workforce strategic planning, management of employee and labor relations, performance management, and training and development.

“We want to develop and design workplaces that are transparent. That means more open spaces, more collaborative and creative spaces, and fewer meetings behind closed doors. This promotes a culture of trust, safety, and equality.”

Tara Headley, Associate IDA
Hendrick, Inc.
Interior Designer
Born in Barbados and based in Atlanta, Tara Headley, the 2015 Student of the Year, is an award-winning interior designer currently specializing in corporate workplace environments. She strives to create unique experiences that will have a positive impact on her clients, and believes diversity is one of life’s greatest inspirations. For her, designing is a privilege and a means to change the way we see the world.

“We are millennials. We are shaking things up. We don’t have the same barriers to asking how things can be improved.”

Kyler Queen
BKV Group
Director of Marketing, Associate Partner
Combining his advertising and marketing background with a masters degree in interior design, Kyler Queen builds bridges between clients and BKV Group’s projects, people, and ideas. Queen oversees all internal and external marketing efforts firm-wide, leveraging the practice’s talent and comprehensive set of design services to win new business aimed at growing the BKV brand nationally and globally.

“Great design is virtually indistinguishable from magic.”

Chris Stewart
IDA Headquarters
Program Manager
A program manager on staff at IDA Headquarters, Chris Stewart is a political and nonprofit professional. For several years, Stewart worked in politics in his hometown of San Antonio, where he became chief of staff to Mayor Ron Nirenberg and helped found the civic engagement group MOVE Texas.

“Compassion is a defining aspect of our generation. We are down to the cause, juggling multiple jobs, and hustling. We are willing to put things on the line to make the life we want to live.”

Millennial AF (All Facts) Panelists

Lindsey Duval, Associate IIDA
HDR
Interior Design Coordinator
The 2017 Student of the Year, Lindsey Duval, is an interior design coordinator at HDR’s Chicago office, where she focuses on corporate and healthcare environments. She is dedicated to creating memorable, human-centered designs and is highly involved with IIDA and her local Illinois chapter.

“Clients are looking for design to solve more complex problems than ever before.”

Mike Milley
Designworks, A BMW Group Company
Director, Creative Consulting, Los Angeles Studio
In his role as director of the creative consulting department at the L.A. studio, Mike Milley leads a cross-disciplinary team that brings to life the future at the intersection of research, strategy, and innovation. Prior to joining Designworks, he was the founding global director of Samsung’s Lifestyle Research Lab, a forward-looking human-focused think tank.

“Our generation is the most exposed in terms of social media, which puts everything out there for cross examination.”

Colette Hands, Ed.D, MHRM, PHR
Oakton Community College
Associate Vice President/Chief Human Resources Officer
Colette Hands is an accomplished senior-level higher education administrator with more than 20 years of experience in directing and executing organizational and workforce strategic planning, management of employee and labor relations, performance management, and training and development.

“We want to develop and design workplaces that are transparent. That means more open spaces, more collaborative and creative spaces, and fewer meetings behind closed doors. This promotes a culture of trust, safety, and equality.”
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Other recent examples of businesses blurring outside of their own sectors include West Elm, a residentially focused retailer, expanding into contract design via Steelcase to launch a line of hotels that will help showcase and sell their furniture, and fashion conglomerate LVMH acquiring a majority stake in Cova, a 200-year old Milanese café, with the intention to open outposts near LVMH-owned retail destinations.

In the contract design industry, this trend of synergistic convergence and expansion is playing out in myriad ways. For example, Kelie Mayfield, IIDA, explains that her firm, MaRS, recently launched a procurement company and is also working on development projects. And Smita Sahoo, IIDA, has observed more construction companies buying firms “to help them develop modular design concepts.”

Many studios are morphing into creative one-stop shops, offering synchronized services—not only branding, graphics, product design, and workplace strategy, as might be expected, but also digital capabilities. The result? “Interiors firms are now competing with digital design agencies,” says Susana Covarrubias, IIDA, who credits this development to the rise of smart building technology.

The potential benefits of this strategy are many. Clients appreciate one-point-of-contact access to a soup-to-nuts menu of offerings. Firms like how it streamlines the process.

With an eye to future-proofing and staying a step ahead of disruption, many companies are proactively changing how they do business by cross-pollinating with complementary brands, strategically expanding into related sectors, and/or broadening their scope of services beyond the norm.

Accounting firms, for example, are buying ad agencies to form “creative consultancies” that employ thousands of writers and designers. Four such hybrids (IBM, Deloitte, Accenture, and PwC) penetrated Ad Age’s 2017 listing of the top 10 largest agencies.
MAKERS ON THE MAKE

Manufacturers are also broadening their purview in the interest of competitive advantage, from vertical integration to product category expansion. Contract companies are:

- Purchasing or partnering with residential brands
- Transitioning into workplace technology consultants
- Reaching out directly to consumers by opening online and/or bricks-and-mortar retail spaces
- Remaking their furniture showrooms as co-working spaces

Mergers and acquisitions are increasingly common for furniture and product makers. “Bigger manufacturers are buying smaller companies that do things they don’t do or buying brands they feel add an edge to their product offerings,” Jon Otis, IIDA, observes. To wit: “Fellowes, which has primarily been in the office supply business since opening in 1917, acquired ESI in order to broaden its scope,” explains the company’s Julia Ryan.

Not everyone lauds the all-things-to-all-people approach, however. “On one hand, having multiple product types to offer a customer is a valuable service,” says Roby Isaac. “On the other, I think customers feel most confident working with a manufacturer expert in one type of product—versus an average manufacturer of many seemingly disconnected things.” Time will certainly tell.

THE OUTSIDER EFFECT

Cross-industry convergence is not limited to design studios and contract manufacturers; related professions continue to encroach on our terrain by launching in-house design teams and product design/consultation services.

Many brokerage firms and furniture dealers offer space planning capabilities. Even ad/creative agencies are in on the game; a prime example is R/GA’s Connected Space division. These outsiders are generally cited as the chicken before the egg—the disruptors who set blur in motion.

Some industry members feel that practitioners are not blurring fast or often enough. “Sadly, firms don’t seem to be transitioning as easily, further eroding their influence in the design process,” says Jennifer Busch, Hon. IIDA. Neil Schneider, Assoc. IIDA, agrees: “We are partnering with others—from furniture and contractors dealers to AV and brand specialists—more frequently than before. Design firms have let go of power based on fee.”
WAVE OF THE FUTURE

PROACTIVE BLUR IS, BY ALL ACCOUNTS, THE BEST KIND.

Mike Milley notes that interdisciplinary, cross-sector studio Designworks was specifically set up to exploit synergies between industries: BMW Group bought the consultancy, which works in fields as diverse as workplace and sports apparel, in the early 1990s for this very reason.

Notably, BMW has recently repositioned itself from a car company and purveyor of the “ultimate driving machine” to what it’s calling a “premium mobility services” provider. “Internally, we are framing this transformation as a shift from selling steel to selling miles,” Milley explains. Parking and car-share services are now core offerings. BMW has even entered into a collaboration with the Los Angeles Department of Transportation to create “mobility hubs” that collate different modes of transport, from bike share to light rail.

Such public/private partnerships, and the creative catalysts they spark are the wave of the future. Angie Lee, IIDA, AIA, describes how the big disruptors of our time—the recession, AI, global warming—are creating “really big problems that require forward-thinking solutions, ones creative thought leaders are all going to need to partner on to solve.”

A NEW PRACTICE PARADIGM

ONE PROMISING BLURRED-BUSINESS MODEL THAT ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS PROPOSED WAS A MCKINSEY-ESQUE CONSULTANCY WHEREBY FIRMS FARMED OUT THEIR POOL OF DESIGNERS, EMBEDDING THEM IN CLIENTS’ OFFICES FOR PROJECT-LONG STINTS.

This agency model would combine the best of both worlds: insider knowledge and outside perspective. For most firms, the idea wouldn’t be such a huge logistical leap—designers frequently describe an “embedded” relationship with clients during the height of a project—but would be a shift in mindset, marketing, and staffing. Firms would need to hire differently, embracing a gig-like structure.

Contingent workers—who, according to a recent Freelancers Union/Upwork research study, are projected to make up more than 50% of the U.S. workforce by 2027—would likely appreciate the opportunities. Tapping into groups of freelance talent, says Jackie Dettmar, Ind. IIDA, “would offer opportunities for flexible workforces to bring together hard-to-find skills for more business fusions—the type of nontraditional partnerships that co-working spaces enable.”

“As designers, we have the ability to approach nearly any problem and FIND A SOLUTION.”

JON OTIS, IIDA
01A OBJECT AGENCY

“We are always looking for NEW WAYS TO COLLABORATE and bring ideas together for a much better end result.”

PATRICIA ROTONDO, IIDA
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SPACE IS FLEXING

FLEXIBILITY: OR, WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES

Flexibility can be a fairly benign and neutral-sounding term for what is, by all accounts, the defining trait of the workplace of the future. The future-minded office is expected to function as a modular kit-of-parts, to continually morph in accordance with imperatives we can’t yet anticipate. This is a very big ask for a fixed entity typically designed with permanence and durability in mind. “Given the influx of a new generation in the workplace—with new ways of working—the ability to create flexible, connected spaces will be critical,” Dettmar says. Practitioners are conceptualizing what next-level flexibility looks like.

Lightweight Living

Employees—particularly millennials—are staying at jobs for shorter periods of time, which is primarily a consequence of a volatile economy. As a result, they want the freedom to be able to move easily, relocating to another city in pursuit of a more-perfect gig. Younger staff are both more culturally primed for relocation and less likely to be in a life phase that would complicate mobility. And lightweight living trends account for the rising popularity of rentals versus homeownership, which, per Statista, is at a 25-year low of 62 percent! Perhaps the workplace version of lightweight living is liberation from fixed—place gadgets, cords, and abundant paperwork, a state that permits activity-based meandering.

Obsessiveness Anxiety

The consumers of today have become acclimatized to near-constant tech upgrades. This expectation bleeds into various arenas, including the automobile industry. “We’ve seen a huge spike in leasing versus buying,” says Milley. According to recent Edmunds data, leasing hit a record-high 31 percent of the U.S. market in 2018. “People don’t want to commit to a car with a seven-year-old technology.” Obsessiveness anxiety has also permeated the workplace, in which we now expect our tools, from computers and software to desks and chairs, to be endlessly upgradable.

Access Ownership

An extension of the above, the urge to own something outright has been supplanted by the even stronger desire for on-demand access. This consumer expectation is rooted in streaming services like the music platform Spotify, which enable listeners to hear whatever tune they want at the touch of a button, versus having to amass and rifle through an unwieldy CD library. For much the same reason, Home Depot now rents rarely used tools—saws and pressure washers being even more of a space suck than jewel-box cases. There are affordability to not owning.

Customized-For-Me Retail Experience

Thanks to the rise of multi-modal retail experiments, today’s consumers have the power to “design” their own shopping experience. You can order an item online and pick it up at the store, or buy in-store and have your purchase delivered to your home. “Even huge legacy retailers are starting to flex in this direction,” Milley notes. Conversely, some stores—especially bricks-and-mortar outposts of digital-native e-tailers—are beginning to function more like showrooms, equipped with display models but no real inventory. This allows customers to experience product firsthand and get advice from a salesperson, but not actually exit the venue with shopping bag in hand. As the workplace level, employees are starting to expect a similar standard of customization and choice. “My work, my way,” Milley calls it.

Frictionless Convenience

Consider Amazon Go, where customers can completely opt out of interaction if they so choose. Walk into a shop with smartphone in hand, launch the app, and leave with your merchandise without so much as handing over a credit card or handing with a sales clerk. The desire for such a frictionless experience is infiltrating many other areas of our lives.

No-Wrong-Path Navigation

Not so long ago, most of us were thrilled and relieved to have access to a technology that could help us avoid getting lost after missing a highway exit. Today, we yearn to recalibrate and break free from the tyranny of GPS. What’s missing from location-services technology is the chance to experience spontaneity, surprise, and serendipity during our journey. There are other ways to get from point A to B besides the fastest route—the most scenic, for instance. With emergent technology like MindRider—per the company’s description a “head-based wearable that tracks, in real time, how your rides, movement, and location engage your mind”—we’ll soon be able to choose: take the more efficient but stressful route or the happy path.

Pop-Ups Are Still Popping

What began as an opportunistic strategy to capitalize on a recessionary glut of empty storefronts is now a canny, creativity-fostering business strategy. Super short-term spaces allow brands to experiment in a low-risk, low-commitment manner. A retailer can prototype a new shopping concept; a popular restaurant can pilot a novel menu idea that may not fly in the mother ship. So what if we extended this model to the workplace—even to the very practice of design? Milley proposed the notion of the design pop-up team: an agency-like structure from which “we can click and pick a development team for the mother ship.”

But First, Why Is Flexibility the Concept du Jour?

“At spaces become more open, untethered, and nontraditional, and as tools become more seamless, flexibility has become a new design imperative,” Milley explains. More than just a need, he continues, it’s an expectation.
How to Flex

End users expect spaces and products to be more adaptive—more modular, integrated, and responsive—so that they can regain control versus being dictated to. We can get ahead of flexibility by embedding it in our design practices and by creating spatial experiences that deliver on the crossover consumer expectations.

THE WORKPLACE OF THE FUTURE WILL BE:

AI-ENABLED
Sensors in our surroundings will not only collect such information about the end user but also analyze that information to offer personalized insights and actionable, in-the-moment recommendations.

DIGITALLY ENABLED
Exceedingly robust infrastructure will support openness and change so we can stay connected even as we move through space that is reconfiguring itself around us.

DYNAMIC AND CONTEXT-AWARE
Spaces will automatically respond to the user based on inputs like changes in heart rate or body temperature, even assessing emotional distress.

FOCUS-CONDUCIVE
As more workspaces become open-plan, companies will offer a broader range of spaces for heads-down work, from semiprivate options to fully enclosed ones.

MODULAR AND ADAPTIVE
Design solutions will flex in accordance with changing needs and spaces will be optimized for change and add-ons.

UNCONSTRAINED
Multi-use will triumph purpose-built.

UNDETECTABLY SENSING
Such tools will be invisible and seamless.

UNTETHERED
Employees will be empowered to define their own boundaries.

An operative element of the above is the capacity for emotive discernment. “An environment that subtly senses the end user’s changing needs and flexes in real time based on their emotional state is, to me, very future feeling,” Milley concludes. It’s a state industry leaders are already working toward, according to Anjell Karibian: “The furniture industry has expanded into the knowledge of psychological behavior and emotive science as it responds to human cognition and interactivity.”

Mobility 2.0:
The automobile as office mobile


But what about the interstitial mode: working while in transit? The next frontier of mobile working is specifying product or redlining drawings while navigating the city streets in a Level 5 autonomous car (expected to be road ready, if not regulatorily approved, by 2021).

Tomorrow’s automobile will no longer be primarily a vehicle to get from point A to point B, but a destination in and of itself—one in which you can socialize or be productive without so much as keeping your eye on the road.

At last year’s CES show, BMW unveiled a prototype car that took formal and material cues from interior and furniture design via reindeer moss, residentially inflected textiles, and seats that supported a broader-than-before range of postures, from pivoting to leaning. “Being able to interact with people in the back seat begs a different type of furniture,” Milley explains. The office-on-wheels also begs contemplation of the “always-on” mentality many of us chafe against. “There’s an alleged freedom that’s also a trap: If I can work in the car, does it mean I’m ‘at work’ whenever I’m in my car?” wonders Milley. And, by extension, does not having a nine-to-five work schedule equal being available to work 24/7? These questions require a new approach to boundaries, not to mention guidance from the human resources department. This reality is a major driver of workplace wellness initiatives. “There’s a new understanding that the always-on component of blurred boundaries can lead to burnout and the decline of psychological capital—defined as hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience,” Meg Bruce Conway explains.

Julia Ryan  ESI
Flexibility wasn’t the only buzzword thrown around.

This year, roundtable participants engaged in a spirited wordplay exercise, proferring and parsing terms they consider culturally relevant to tomorrow’s workplace design.

Topping many thought leaders’ lists were high-minded characteristics such as inclusivity, respect, civility, and empathy—indicative of the industry’s value-driven mindset and sense of responsibility.

"Designers are not simply creating spaces; they are shaping the future of humanity through the built environment."
The workplace is flexing. Place is flexing. Collaborative and adaptable environments are taking center stage. Designers and their clients are reimagining the workplace to reflect a shift in how we work, live, and interact. This transformation is not just about creating functional spaces but also about fostering well-being, diversity, and engagement. Here are some of the key concepts and colloquialisms that are shaping the future of the workplace:

**Community**
Humans are hard-wired for social connection; community is as essential to our survival as food and shelter, and designers are ultimately "in the business of creating community," Cheryl S. Durst, Hon. FIIDA, notes. "But we don’t know it in the future, our primary sense of community will come from the workplace, the home office, or third place." Mark Shannon, Ind. IIDA, points out.

**Control**
A close cousin of choice, control is the holy grail that we often leverage technology to help us achieve. "Having the ability to control and customize the work environment to one’s individual needs is something all employees are looking for," says Lindsey Duval, Assoc. IIDA. "This can translate to having control in the physical workplace, having the ability to work outside the office, or having the ability to manage your work/life balance."

**Cultural literacy**
In our line of business, a nuanced understanding of—or ability to learn about—and individual and populations from different backgrounds is mandatory. "In a diverifying world, it’s important to recognize that we don’t all think, act, react, and process information the same way," says Durst.

**Data analytics**
Big data is still big news—especially now that we’re figuring out how to analyze and act on it. "Sensor-enabled data-gathering services and analytics are traversing the industries of consulting, workplace design, and contract furniture manufacturing," says Adrian Parra, Ind. IIDA.

**Disruption**
Our industry is ripe for disruption; the next five years will prove crucial in who will endure," says Michelle Boolton, Assoc. IIDA. "We have to modernize the workplace, but not just for our own benefit. We have to think about the environment for people, the planet, and the planet's future.

**Diversity**
The workplace is becoming more diverse, and diversity and inclusion will be at the forefront of our industry for the next several years. "Diversity and inclusion will become a way of life, and this means being an honest and deeper concern with our past," says Sarah S. Durst, Hon. FIIDA, notes. "But we don't know if, in the future, our primary sense of community will come from the workplace, the home office, or third place."

**Brand**
"The workplace has done a 180-degree turn, customized to the DNA of the company," says Covanta. "Branding is powerful because it can balance a company's desire for a collaborative environment while maintaining the independence of individual departments," adds Jennifer Ruckel. "This is very relevant today in open office plans." All that being said, there’s debate about the longevity of the super-customized approach. "Will companies continue to invest in uniquely branded environments?" asks Sacha Wagner, FIIDA, AIA, wonders, "or will real-estate become more of an in-demand commodity service?"

**Choice**
Workplace happiness and engagement are dependent on choice. "This is a big topic—and having freedom in how/where you work and do your job is key," says Adam Allmay, Ind. IIDA. "The converse is always true, he adds: ‘Not having options can really inhibit your work.'"

**Co-working**
Talk of WeWork as real-estate procurement disrupter is inevitable at any gathering of industry thought leaders. The consensus here was that co-working spaces are best thought of as “stepping stones” for younger companies.

**Collaborative**
Working together is key to innovation, enabling productive cross-pollination and heightened creativity. Within the contemporary office space, collaboration zones are often those lavished with the most design attention. "Designing for collaboration means strategically planning workspaces to promote synergies between teams, connecting diverse skill sets, and introducing collaboration spaces where this connectivity can further develop," says Ruckel.

**Authenticity**
Honesty and authenticity are qualities we crave—in our spaces, our interpersonal communications, and our leaders. Mayfield correlates the term to “craftsmanship,” while John Stephens, Ind. IIDA, draws parallels to politics, a blustery arena in which one’s authenticity “is often illusory.”

**Activity-based**
This planning methodology has become the de facto approach for many designers and their clients, particularly companies with a strong tech bent. "Before,Needle-based workspaces were more of an amenity or support tool now it is completely engaged at the whole-office scale,” says Christine Dumich.

**Adaptable**
Roundtable participants used this word in relation to spatial flexibility, product density (“adaptable to many environments”), and to the workforce itself. "Adaptability is the best trait we—as designers and employees—have to help the workplace itself adapt," said one.

**Advocacy and Activism**
These twin concepts were often name-checked when discussing millennials—including the phenomenon of young professionals choosing to design simply for wellness’ sake and not for a collaborative environment while maintaining the independence of individual departments,” adds Jennifer Ruckel. "This is very relevant today in open office plans." All that being said, there’s debate about the longevity of the super-customized approach. "Will companies continue to invest in uniquely branded environments?" asks Sacha Wagner, FIIDA, AIA, wonders, "or will real-estate become more of an in-demand commodity service?"

**Accountability**
Courtesy of data analytics and post-occupancy evaluations, designers are increasingly answerable for the success of spaces they are crafting. Employees who populate those workplaces are being held to higher standards, too. "We need to be accountable for your actions and for your work," says Marlene L. Liriano, FIIDA.

**Privacy**
"The realization that as many as one-third of all people require private time away from people is a more recent understanding of the workplace," says Otis. How to help employees find quiet, contemplative time in today’s collaborative, always-busy work environments is on everyone’s minds.

**Sustainability**
Some argued that the broader umbrella of wellness, in all its iterations, has sublistened sustainability, but environmental consciousness remains an imperative. "How that we will have 8 years and six months left, sustainability keeps us up at night," says Lee. "Going after metrics with LEED to me doesn’t feel immediate enough."

**Tech-free**
The backlash has begun. Or at least some modicum of balance. “It's hard to imagine a workplace without technology from our generation,” Bruce Conway says. And yet, there’s a trend for quiet rooms and other media-free zones in the workplace, plus a vogue for private clubs that disallow Instagram posting and telephone/media use.

**Experiential**
"Designers are not just creating things or environments but experiences," says Durst. "Clients have become more aware of the spatial experience and are expecting a space that pushes boundaries," adds Duval.

**Wellness**
Five years ago speaking about wellness would have led many to think solely about LEED: today, many firms are choosing to design simply for wellness’ sake and not specifically to receive a certification," says Ruckel. Wellness measures should address body, mind, and soul. "As our daily lives get more complex and our physical, digital, and virtual identities more intertwined, mental wellness will become incredibly important," adds Beltran.

**Balance**
A sense of equifasc and equilibrium undergirds wellness. "We need to shift the needle in favor of better balance between the two," says Duval. "There’s value placed on having a broader life now," says Chu. "I love and am passionate about work but I also need to step out. That balance is important—for me and for my work.”

**Brand**
"The workplace has done a 180-degree turn, customized to the DNA of the company," says Covanta. "Branding is powerful because it can balance a company's desire for a collaborative environment while maintaining the independence of individual departments," adds Jennifer Ruckel. "This is very relevant today in open office plans." All that being said, there’s debate about the longevity of the super-customized approach. "Will companies continue to invest in uniquely branded environments?" asks Sacha Wagner, FIIDA, AIA, wonders, "or will real-estate become more of an in-demand commodity service?"
"There’s no middle ground:

THE MULTI-GEN WORKFORCE IS PLAYING OUT LIKE A BAD MOVIE," HANDS OBSERVES. "ON A DAILY BASIS, WE HAVE TO MAKE THIS DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY FUNCTION." SOME TIPS ON HOW TO DO IT:

- **Move younger employees into leadership roles in a timely fashion; otherwise, they will go elsewhere.**
- **Incentivize older employees to step aside while still making important contributions.** "We want to create opportunities for senior designers—while making way for the next generation," Wagner says. For instance, give them opportunities to mentor and pass on institutional memory.
- **Figure out a way to off-board older employees gracefully and with dignity.** "We’ve talked about a potential classification of principal that is not about actively designing but is more of an honorary role," says Wagner.
- **Update leadership models—and your succession plan.** "If we base succession plans on outdated leadership models, then we don’t have a succession plan," says Gabrielle Bullock, IIDA, FAIA, NOMA.
- **Proactively build an inclusive multi-generational culture.** Hands explains, "We need to look at diversity through lots of lenses. We talk a lot about how we execute our policies but are our contracts excluding people from being successful in our organization?"

"The multi-generational mix remains a hard-to-navigate issue at most industry leaders’ organizations—as in the world. With the oldest Gen Zers starting to enter the workforce and the youngest members of the Silent Generation (now in their late seventies) delaying retirement, it is not uncommon to have five generations commingling in the office. And each age bracket has its own set of assumptions, expectations, and needs—not to mention relationships to tech. “There are intrinsic differences between generations that technology has impinged on us,” says Parra.

**GENERATIONS BY THE NUMBERS**

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<thead>
<tr>
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**THE NUMBERS**

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Almost 90 million (and growing) Generation Z: 1997–now (ages 22 and under)

**CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS ARE DRIVING CHANGE**

The multi-generational mix remains a hard-to-navigate issue at most industry leaders’ organizations—as in the world. With the oldest Gen Zers starting to enter the workforce and the youngest members of the Silent Generation (now in their late seventies) delaying retirement, it is not uncommon to have five generations commingling in the office. And each age bracket has its own set of assumptions, expectations, and needs—not to mention relationships to tech. “There are intrinsic differences between generations that technology has impinged on us,” says Parra.

**COMPLICATING MATTERS, THE RECESSION CAUSED A TALENT GAP AT THE MID-LEVEL; GEN XERS LEFT THE FIELD AND MANY NEVER RETURNED, WHICH ALSO MEANS FEWER PEACEKEEPERS BETWEEN GEN Y AND BOOMERS.**

Mike Johnson II, IIDA, AIA
Perkins+Will
Beltran believes that Gen Y has modeled good behavior when it comes to work/life balance. “From boomers, we learned commitment; from millennials, we learned the importance of holism and taking time to recharge—something Gen Xers have struggled with.” John Newland, Ind. IIDA, appreciates how 20 and 30-somethings have ushered in a more egalitarian vibe. “Boomers felt like we couldn’t go to the table. I thank the millennials for having the courage to do so.” We can also applaud this cohort for many cultural changes in the workplace that we’ve all been able to capitalize on: flatter org charts, more license to question policy, and wellness rooms. Although we still tend to talk about millennials—and all generational groups, really—in fairly clichéd terms, generalizations are unhelpful at best and damaging at worst: often-inaccurate labels that tend to keep people from getting to know each other as individuals. “Millennials can’t all be lumped in the same category,” says Headley. “Beyond just being born a certain year, I have external influences and my own unique life experiences. That’s the detriment of this ‘generation’ lens. We are so much more than the year we were born in.” That cuts both ways notes Bullock: “I didn’t choose to be a baby boomer, and I don’t identify as such. Yes, we are to some extent defined by our era, but we need to get away from labels and understand why people are the way we are.”

Once we do get to know each other, we are likely to discover more commonalities than differences. Says Newland, “We boomers faced similar crises—the AIDS crisis, the Vietnam War—that the millennials now face and also had a very activist mindset.” And although young boomers didn’t have game rooms, “we did set up Ping-Pong tables on the flat files.” Headley offers the ultimate reality check to anyone who complains millennials are glued to their smartphones: “If you had an iPhone when you were in your twenties, you would have used it just as much as we do.”

The panelists were happy to dispel a few myths and misconceptions:

**MILLENNIALS ARE NOT LAZY.** “I don’t think that’s the reality,” says Chris Stewart. “We are down for the cause, juggling multiple jobs and hustling.”

**MILLENNIALS ARE NOT DISLOYAL, THEY’RE OPPORTUNISTIC:** “If another job comes up that we can’t pass up, we are not afraid to take it,” says Stewart. “But if an employer shows me commitment, I return the favor.” Also, don’t assume that a 26-year-old with a resume full of 8-month gigs is a dilettante or fickle: It could simply reflect the reality of today’s economy.

**MILLENNIALS ARE NO MORE SELF-INVOLVED THAN YOUNG ADULTS THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY.** “I’m pretty sure I was the same way at a certain age,” says Gen Xer Teresa Humphrey, Ind. IIDA. “We all had a time period where it was about I.”

**BUT AT LEAST ONE MILLENNIAL CLICHÉ HOLDS TRUE:** THEY ARE UNABASHEDLY CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO.

“We don’t assume that just because something has worked a certain way it’s always going to be that way,” says Headley. “We don’t have the same barriers to asking how things can be improved.” Stewart concurs: “We have respect for hierarchies insofar as things aren’t arbitrary. We have less fear of speaking up if something’s not right.”
Managing Millennials

Millennials are climbing the ranks, with some already in leadership roles at their organizations. HOW CAN FIRMS KEEP THEM ENGAGED?

Give them opportunities to pursue their values

Millennials live by their values and are often involved in activism or advocacy. “Compassion as an action verb is important to us,” Stewart says. “Also solidarity: we show up for our values.” Sometimes that means asking to leave work early to volunteer for a cause or attend a rally; let them. After all, they are saving the world.

Support their use of vacation time

Millennials prioritize work/life balance, a big component of which is pausing to refresh and shore up one’s psychological capital. “I am passionate about work and my life. I don’t want to wait until retirement to enjoy life, or to think of a vacation as a ‘reward’ for burning myself out,” says Headley.

Up-skill them

Millennials appreciate education opportunities. “Some 94 percent of millennials value ongoing skill development,” says Shannon. “A workplace that’s also a learning environment is a top factor when considering a job.” Support their efforts, whether monetarily or via schedule flexibility, and then leverage the new skills and knowledge they bring back to your organization. Many managers fear investing in a young, promising staffer only to have them leave the company soon after. But they are less likely to leave in the first place if you encourage their self-enrichment and expand their horizons.

Enlist them to teach you new technology

Yes, it’s annoying that the most junior member of your organization is much tech-savvier than you are—but why not take advantage? They will likely jump at the chance to demystify the latest software. “We can serve as tech translators in an organization, bridging the gap between analog, which we learned growing up, and digital, which ‘grew up’ with us,” says Stewart.

Help them understand their personal multitasking limit

There’s a reason the iPhone came along and merged life and work into one interface: “Our generation wanted a simultaneous life/work convergence,” says Kyler Queen. “But it’s important for managers to keep their finger on the pulse of what works for each individual. Multitasking does not work for all of us,” observes Queen. Observe and advise accordingly.

Talk to them on equal footing

“We appreciate authority and experience and we want our elders to pass on their knowledge,” says Headley. But check your ego and don’t be uppity or condescending. “Bring yourself down to my level and talk to me as an equal so I feel included in the conversation.” Far from undermining your authority, it’s actually a sign of power.

Find out what they need

Proactively ask millennials what their career and life goals are, and what you can do to accommodate them, “versus waiting for them to come to you,” says Queen.

Rethink your review process

Millennials desire continual feedback and development, a preference that’s inspired many organizations to overhaul their review systems. Consider a quarterly schedule and an employee-versus-manager-driven protocol, and rebrand these tête-à-têtes as “career development” conversations versus an “evaluation” per se. “More frequent reviews allow you to address both issues and rewards immediately,” says Hands. Problems won’t be allowed to fester, employees can more easily course correct, and if the fit isn’t right, a pink slip won’t come as a shock. “The results of a review should never be a surprise,” says Jeff Fenwick, Ind IIDA.

WHAT’S NEXT?
The millennial takeover! A shift is coming in the way we work.”

TARA HEADLEY
ASSOC. IIDA
HENDRICK, INC.
COLETTE HANDS RECOMMENDS A HELPFUL EXERCISE THAT INDIVIDUALS OR COMPANIES CAN DO PERIODICALLY AS A SELF-CHECK-IN FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT. ASK YOURSELF:

What are my strengths?
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What are my weaknesses?
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What are the opportunities?
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What are the threats?
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What should I start doing?
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