DESIGN THEN, DESIGN NOW, DESIGN NEXT
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Eileen Jones, IIDA, SEGD, AIGA, LEED AP
As principal and global practice leader at Perkins+Will, Eileen provides branded environments services to global leaders in healthcare, education, corporate, and civic industries. She leads strategic research, community cultural interpretation, brand positioning, and design development efforts. Eileen is frequently recognized for brand design excellence, garnering multiple awards with her project teams, and she speaks regularly in educational and professional venues, advancing the ideas of branded environments and the innovative stories they tell.

Julie B. Cummings, Jim Young, Jim Ware, Ph.D.
Julie is the co-founder of Realcomm Conference Group, which produces Realcomm, IIIDcon, and CoRE Tech, the world’s leading conferences on technology, automated business solutions, intelligent buildings, and energy efficiency for the commercial and corporate real estate industry. As CEO, he leads the organization and interacts on a daily basis with global companies on some of the most advanced and progressive next generation real estate projects under development.

Jim is a professional speaker, a workplace futurist, and a meeting design strategist. A former Harvard Business School professor, he has focused his career on understanding what organizations must do to thrive in a rapidly changing world and enabling them to succeed. Jim is the founder and executive director of The Future of Work...unlimited, a research and advisory firm; the global research director for Occupiers Journal (publisher of Workplace Journal), and a partner in the London-based FutureWork Forum.

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The International Interior Design Association (IIDA) is the Commercial Interior Design Association with global reach. We support design professionals, industry affiliates, educators, students, firms, and their clients through our network of 15,000+ members across 58 countries.

We advocate for advancement in education, design excellence, legislation, leadership, accreditation, and community outreach to increase the value and understanding of interior design as a profession that enhances business value and positively impacts the health and well-being of people’s lives every day.

For more information, please visit iida.org.
The 2017 IIDA industry roundtable, held on a seasonably cold January weekend in Chicago, marked the annual event’s 20th anniversary. To highlight the landmark occasion, IIDA enlisted four visionary speakers—including, for the first time, a human resources executive—to look backward and forward: to reflect on the past two decades of commercial interior design and to propose where the industry might be headed. Thought leaders contemplated what work, workers, and workplaces might be like in the near future. What resulted was a far-ranging and galvanizing dialogue among attendees that connected the dots between many previous roundtable topics: economic volatility, the rise of socially mediated millennials, diversity, evolving hiring practices, and more. And the conversation promises to continue. The event culminated with a challenge by workplace futurist Jim Ware, who encouraged industry leaders to ponder a few tough questions—and let their answers guide the future of the profession:

• How and when will the commercial interior design industry experience disruption?
• How can we be more intentional about creating the future?
• How can we ensure that human knowledge of design practices is retained? What design processes should (and shouldn’t) we automate?
• How should we be protecting our data?
We need to be proactive and thoughtful about the future, he explained, to be more intentional and to take advantage of the opportunities we’re presented with. We need to not only embrace disruption but be the disruptors, to make bold and brave decisions and push back.

OVERVIEW

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Where do you see the interior design profession in 5 or 10 years?

“SPACE WILL HAVE TO PERFORM AT A HIGHER LEVEL FOR EFFICIENCY, BUT ALSO FOR SELF CONTROL.”
—Hunter Kaiser, IIDA

“I believe that the profession will continue to thrive creatively.”
—Robby Isaac

“More competitors from outside the design industry will be trying to get into workplace: real estate CEOs, consulting firms, architects, etc.”
—Primo Orpilla, FIIDA

“I see virtual reality being used by more companies in our industry. With such big investments in our work environments, it makes sense to be able to allow people to visualize the space in advance.”
—Melissa Sopwith, Ind. IIDA

“IN 10 YEARS, I HOPE TO SEE A PROFESSION THAT IS MUCH MORE ALIGNED WITH THE REAL ESTATE AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT COMMUNITIES. WITH ALL THREE COLLABORATING TOWARDS THE BEST AND MOST PROFITABLE OUTCOME FOR CLIENTS, WHICH INCLUDES THOUGHTFUL AND RELEVANT DESIGN SOLUTIONS.”
—Jennifer Busch, Hon. IIDA

“I see an opportunity for a different relationship between interior designers and the organizations that need them—not always project focused but more integral to ongoing business needs. Workplace environments are getting much more iterative. Businesses can’t let their physical surroundings be a barrier to the high-paced change that the new economy will require.”
—Doug Shapiro, Ind. IIDA

“THE TOOLS FOR VIRTUAL COLLABORATION WILL BE MUCH MORE ROBUST AND WIDELY AVAILABLE AND, AS A RESULT, A VERY SMALL PERCENTAGE OF COMMERCIAL PROJECTS WILL BE DEVELOPED BY TEAMS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE WORKING IN THE SAME SPACE, OFFICE, FIRM, OR COUNTRY.”
—Jorge Braga, FIIDA

“INTERIOR DESIGN [AND ITS IMPACT ON DETERMINING STAFFING AND WORK STRATEGIES WILL BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT TO END-USE CLIENTS IN OTHER VERTICAL MARKETS—ESPECIALLY HEALTHCARE, WHERE THE WORK ENVIRONMENT IS SEEN AS A CONTRIBUTOR TO BETTER PATIENT CARE.]”
—Jeff Fenwick, Ind. IIDA

“THE ROLE AND SERVICE WILL BE SEEN AS MORE VALUABLE TO ORGANIZATIONS AS THE IMPACT OF DESIGN AND THE PHYSICAL SPACE ON ACHIEVING MISSIONS WILL BE MORE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD.”
—John Stephens, Ind. IIDA

“It is more difficult to get into workplace: real estate CEOs, consulting firms, architects, etc. The profession will be dealing with a more severe shortage of mid to senior level designers. The pool of talent at this level continues to be a struggle to find, and if found, recruit away.”
—Stacy Walker, Ind. IIDA

“IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS, THE INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSION WILL HAVE EVOLVED TO PRACTITIONERS BECOMING EXPERT PROBLEM SOLVERS, CONNECTING EXPERTS IN TECHNOLOGY, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND ACTIVISTS IN SOCIAL CHANGE.”
—Jon Strassner, Ind. IIDA

WHERE DO YOU SEE THE INTERIOR DESIGN PROFESSION IN 5 OR 10 YEARS?

“At present, I think the profession will continue to thrive creatively.”
—Robby Isaac

“With further technology enhancements, I can see the profession becoming increasingly digital, moving to a consultative service of menu items made available to a broader range of customers/consumers.”
—Tom Peterson

“Leaders in technology, sought out by other professions because of our thought process.”
—Marlene Liriano, IIDA

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THE FUTURE IS A DESIGN PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED

The weekend’s conversation kicked off with a rewind to 1997, the year the roundtable debuted. Many of the characteristics that define the current-day workplace took root at that time. “Twenty years ago, commercial interior design was experiencing a transformative shift,” said moderator Cheryl S. Durst. “We began asking how people work instead of where they should sit. We started to think beyond the job title and consider how people relate to one another in the workplace. We saw that work and life were overlapping in new ways. And, we recognized that good design is the solution for optimizing work and productivity in this new era.”

After rehashing some of the cultural and technological highlights of the ’90s (and Titanic and Harry Potter), talk quickly turned to the immediate future. What lies ahead—and to what extent can we predict and prepare for it—were the questions everyone sought an answer to. After all, the future does not yet exist. “It’s not a matter of discovering the future,” said Ware. “It’s a matter of inventing it.” Interior designers can and should play a major role in that effort. Given our unique skill set, knowledge base, humanist approach, and aptitude for critical thinking, the industry has an opportunity and a moral obligation to help solve the many global crises we face, from climate change to food scarcity. “We need to take a moon shot at what we want the world to be,” said Eileen Jones. She set the bar high: “What if every design and act of construction made the world a better place? What happens when we think about systems, work, infrastructure and community the same way we’re starting to think about buildings? Who says we can’t create a planet restored through the positive actions we take every day?”

Twenty years ago, the word “sustainability” was not yet widespread, and the movement’s primary focus was on the use of eco-friendly materials, waste reduction, and establishing an organic, nature-informed aesthetic. In two short decades our standards for sustainability in the built environment have blossomed into a multivalent preoccupation with the health and wellness of the ecosystem and society. “Sustainability is woven into our expressions,” said Jones.

We won’t have 20 more years to solve climate change. “We are eroding a lot of what we have known in the past as stable environments,” Jones warned. It’s time to bring design thinking to bear on solving civilization’s most pressing problems.

“IT’S NOT A MATTER OF DISCOVERING THE FUTURE. IT’S A MATTER OF INVENTING IT.”
—JIM WARE
Some of the innovations Young believes may impact some futurist perspective. Even checking out the DARPA Twitter feed can provide attending CES and other electronics trade shows, So how can industry members best educate themselves equipment, new ways of working, how the corporate those spaces come online, and beyond. For a workplace, take years to complete. Given the length of time required 03 THE FUTURE IS NOW. GET ACQUAINTED WITH IT

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“A Guardian survey indicates that 30 percent of shopping happens at night—and 60 percent between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. That means most people are shopping at work! So do you fight that, or embrace it?” Young recommends the latter. “You can cut deals with retailers and create portals inside the office.”

“You are designing for five to 10 years out, and this stuff is going to happen in the next few years. You have to be willing to admit to yourself that, holy cow! This crazy stuff is here!” —Jim Young

Designers are hired to build the future; an office slated for habitation in six months, a new corporate campus that will take years to complete. Given the length of time required to plan and construct a space from the ground up, designers must anticipate what the world will be like when those spaces come online, and beyond. For a workplace, that means accounting for emerging technologies and equipment, new ways of working, how the corporate culture and labor force might evolve, and more. Clients need and expect us to stay two steps ahead of the curve.

So how can industry members best educate themselves about what’s ahead? Jim Young proposed a few options: going to conferences such as Realcomm and SHRM, attending CES and other electronics trade shows, inviting tech companies to our offices to present leading-edge prototypes, and scrutinizing media coverage devoted to scientific and technological advancements. Even checking out the DARPA Twitter feed can provide some futurist perspective.

Some of the innovations Young believes may impact the future of interior design and that he expects industry leaders to keep abreast of:

3D PRINTING

The adoption of 3D printing has already shaken up traditional manufacturing and supply chains. The technology can be used to fabricate consumer goods and structures alike. “With 3D printing, a 40-story building can go up in 15 days,” said Young. The technology promises to speed up construction, enable greater customization and on-site adjustments, and will likely transform labor. There have already been landmark developments in the workplace arena: The world’s first 3D-printed office, designed by Gensler, was completed in Dubai last year.

AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

A number of Young’s clients are already accom-

modating the driverless car trend by eliminating or scaling back on-site parking and rethinking the curbside-to-front entry arrival sequence. “I’m not sure how far off the future [the broad adoption of self-driving cars] is,” said Young, “but it’s likely unavoidable.” Indeed, in February Uber brokered a partnership with Daimler to build a specialized fleet of self-driving vehicles, on alliance that could rapidly advance access to the technology.

VIRTUAL CONCIERGE SERVICES

This already ubiquitous technology is starting to infiltrate work environments, though it’s been slow to catch on. Jones also foresees broad applicability: “What if you were greeted [at the office every day] by a digital personal assistant? How would your workplace change to accommodate this technology?”

WEARABLES

Nanotechnology and wearables will change how and when patients interface with doctors, as well as the social benefits of a face-to-face visit and the boon of real-time data gathering. “Wearables can do the information gathering, allowing doctors to spend more time actually speaking to patients,” said Durst. “The social piece of medicine remains critical.” And irreplaceable.

VIRTUAL AND AUGMENTED REALITY

A combination of the two technologies is transforming how design concepts and schemes are presented to clients—to say nothing of the initial real estate hunt. Young noted that CIBRE contracted with Google Earth to create immersive environments that obviate the need for office-hunters to tour every space they’re considering, saving time by having down the list. Durst noted that IIDA found its new headquarters this way: “I used VR glasses to eliminate about 10 spaces.”

TELEPRESENCE

This genre of immersive virtual-reality-based technologies, with the aid of robots, helps create the feeling of being elsewhere—allowing people to attend off-site meetings and such “in person.” It’s like Skype or videoconferencing on speed. “Is the technology ready for widespread adoption?” No, said Young. “But should you be partnering with these companies so that, when it is ready, you can share with your most innovative clients? Yes.” Offices could incorporate telemedicine portals, for instance, or enable virtual attendance at conferences. The technology’s most notorious progenitor is ex-U.S. vice president for digital, Edward Snowden, who makes frequent “appearances” in the U.S. via bot. Durst foresees a future where shopping portals are an amenity incorpo-

rated into the workplace. “A Guardian survey indicates that 30 percent of shopping happens at night—and 60 percent between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. That means most people are shopping at work! So do you fight that, or embrace it?” Young recommends the latter. “You can cut deals with retailers and create portals inside the office.”

THE DIASPORA OF RETAIL

Online and virtual shopping are already affecting high-end brick-and-mortar retail, which is in danger of extinction. “Kids these days”—who will be our clients in the not-too-distant future—“want to sit on their couch and try on clothes,” said Young. “Combine virtual shopping and 3D printing, and you’re gonna go zero inventory.”
Another way industry leaders can keep abreast of emerging technologies and innovations is by traveling to cities such as Shanghai, Mumbai, and Dubai. “They take the idea of yes to another level,” Young said. “To understand best practices, we must look globally and align ourselves with what’s going on in the world.” “Traveling to places like Seoul, where they are already living the digital lifestyle, is the best way to believe it’s going to happen here.” (Closer to home, try Toronto: “In my opinion, the most innovative city in North America,” Young said.)

Why isn’t the U.S. in a leadership role when it comes to adopting emerging technologies—many of which we invented? Why aren’t we more innovative in practice? “Because we don’t have to be,” Young explained. “Necessity is the mother of invention. In Costa Rica, in the middle of nowhere, you find solar-powered LED-lit houses that are off the grid. Because they have to be. It takes people from other parts of the world to take our technology and really use it, and make it bigger.”

Although designers can encourage clients to embrace leading-edge innovation, the majority are risk averse and want to see proof of concept; they don’t want to be guinea pigs.

And will the recent immigration ban, still in flux at press time, keep even more innovation outside our country’s borders? It is quite likely, according to Silicon Valley companies who are pushing back forcefully against President Donald Trump’s agenda.
flat for thousands of years, population growth since 1800 has been a straight upward shot, from 1 to 7 billion,” said Young. “We need 10 planets to live the westernized lifestyle we’ve accustomed to and that the rest of the world wants; we will not be able to have buildings that sit empty.” He points to hotels, which at any hour of the day are perhaps 30 percent occupied, and office buildings that sit empty all night. These spaces will have to be much better utilized to support our planet’s people. “I always ask clients, ‘Do you really need new space? How well are you using your existing space?’” said Young.

Energy use is another ongoing concern. Even though buildings are unoccupied for large chunks of the day, they still have to be heated and cooled 24/7. Young has observed a stubborn resistance on the part of U.S. hotel operators even to use occupancy sensors in guest suites. “[Forcing the issue with your clients] would make energy efficiency a change management problem rather than a spatial problem.” He also advises that designers push the envelope on how electricity is delivered to a space. Low-voltage infrastructure and lighting and the next generation of high-efficiency solar energy could help us unplug from the grid, or even give us energy that could help us unplug from the grid, or even give us energy that can be used on demand.

Real estate needs are also shifting in lockstep with supply chains. “In every historical age, we created real estate to meet particular needs: farms and barns during the agrarian age, factories during the industrial era.” Young explained. “In the information age, we have bricks-and-mortar real estate being replaced by digital alternatives: from Blockbuster to Netflix, malls to Amazon. And their supply chains are being threatened, too, which will impact the kind of spaces we need to build.” Read: less on-site inventory and a larger distributed network of warehouses.

Over the last 36 months, new technologies have redefined the workplace. Young asserted: “REAL-ESTATE TECH COMPANIES HAVE INVESTED BILLIONS IN DEVELOPING NEW WAYS TO TRANSACT, DESIGN, AND BUILD OFFICES—I.E., TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DISMANTLE EVERYTHING THAT YOU’VE SPENT YOUR CAREERS BUILDING.”

—JIM YOUNG

CO-WORKING AND THE NEW LEASING MODEL

Familiarize yourself with WeWork and Liquid Space, which are redefining corporate real estate by accommodating companies’ real-time workplace needs. These brands are already transforming how companies lease office space and secure conference rooms. Young marvels at how their concept kills two birds with one stone, matching demand with supply while also maximizing spatial efficiency. “WeWork is Uber for space: It’s 90 percent utilization,” he declared.

Of course, it remains to be seen if their model is effective from a productivity standpoint. Providing square footage on demand is not the same thing as delivering a well-designed workspace tailored to an organization’s needs. “Are people getting their work done in these spaces? I don’t know! But this [signals] a shift in ownership of real estate,” said Young. Top investors are certainly taking note. The largest global tech fund announced in January that it is considering a $1 billion investment in WeWork, a business already valued at $17 billion. We would be foolish not to keep watch as well.

SMART BUILDINGS AND PORTFOLIOS

Smart buildings, in which the systems (energy, water, telecommunications, etc.) are integrated, are the wave of the future. The key for our industry will be to make buildings that are not only highly efficient operationally but also engaging to be in. The U.S. is leading the way in the category, said Young. “Other countries are coming here to see where smart building is.”

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Q. HOW HAS SPACE CHANGED OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS?

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THE WORKPLACE WILL REMAIN TECHNOLOGY DEPENDENT

Over the last two decades, said Durst, "technology has been the largest driver of how we think and work." The defining feature of how we think and work being, well, mobility. Laptops, Wi-Fi, iPhones, and videoconferencing are the tools that liberated work from the workplace, allowing employees to do their jobs from anywhere and everywhere—a practice we are still refining, codifying, measuring, and by all accounts imperfectly managing.

Jones noted that the original iMac, unveiled almost 20 years ago, did far more than simply inject curves and a dose of candy color—"delivered through the lens of transparency"—to the office scape. "It made us rethink how we work, our perception of furniture, and what we needed to support that kind of equipment," as Jones explained. Take, for example, the iPhone, which combines so many features that its phone-calling capability can seem incidental. Motorola may have pioneered the mobile phone, but it was Apple who took the technology a step further and pioneered mobility. "They changed the game by converging all those extra functions and features to allow us to be truly untethered," Jones said.

Of course, technology can be a double-edged sword when it comes to productivity. On one hand, tools like videoconferencing and Revit can help us save time and boost efficiency. On the other, the pace of technological change is so fast—a never-ending barrage of new operating systems, new hardware, new software, app updates—that we have to continually re-learn it, upgrading the hard drives in our heads. "Technology is constantly improving, but staying up to date takes effort and learning, and there’s a lot of inherent stress built into it," said Ware. "We are newbies every week!"

Even bricks-and-mortar real estate is forced to play catch-up to technology. "The average life of a building is about 60 to 80 years," explained Young. "But a structure will inevitably be defined by whatever technology was available when it was designed. One of the challenges we face in commercial real estate is accommodating rapid technological change." That calls for foresight and flexibility. "We need to design buildings, cities, and communities that can change and adapt," explained Jones. "We need to design environments with built-in resilience."
MAN VERSUS MACHINE

One of the most promising but existentially ominous technologies that will likely affect all industries and occupations, including our own, is artificial intelligence: the next generation of computing, where machines learn on their own, from our data. As an indication of how advanced the technology is, the AI program DeepMind AlphaGo recently beat the world champion of Go, a highly complex game involving almost infinite iterations. Man’s defeat at the hand of machine in such an intellectual arena happened a good decade before scientists predicted it would. Shortly after AlphaGo’s victory, top tech companies including Microsoft and

Google created the Partnership on Artificial Intelligence to Benefit People and Society, a public consortium to keep the technology in check. “Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, and Warren Buffett are all on record saying that if we don’t control AI, it could destroy humanity,” Young warned.

At the very least, it promises to seriously steal more jobs and potentially undermine an already fragile economy. “AI can already replace a $350,000-year Wall Street analyst,” Young noted. And, as Christopher Moyer wrote in The Atlantic:

“The important thing...is not that DeepMind’s AI can learn to conquer Go, but that by extension it can learn to conquer anything easier than Go—which amounts to a lot of things. The ways in which we might apply these revolutionary advances in machine learning—in machines’ ability to mimic human creativity and intuition—are virtually endless.”

Moving forward, we need to be careful and intentional about what we choose to automate and augment and what we protect as the unique capabilities of humans. “We are losing human knowledge about some pretty basic processes,” Ware warned. “There are assumptions built into every software. We are possibly embedding bad practices that are hard to undo.”

 ware is among the pundits who are convinced that, over time, automation creates more jobs than it kills; after all, it takes people to create, implement, and reprogram the technology that we are so reliant on. But those newly created jobs are of a very different stripe, requiring a more honed and higher-level skill set: computer savvy, critical thinking, and an ability to analyze. “It’s much more difficult to find someone who can figure out how to adapt or modify a complex technology, someone who can be innovative,” said Julie B. Cummings. “They are jobs requiring innovation and creativity—people who can collaborate and think outside the box.” She describes this as a shift from transactional to tacit jobs, meaning that knowledge cannot be transferred so easily from one person to another.

A New York Times article in January described just this phenomenon—particularly manufacturers having a hard time finding enough employees qualified for today’s factory jobs:

“...At John Deere dealerships, which repair million-dollar farming machinery filled with several dozen computers...fixing tractors and grain harvesters now requires advanced math and comprehension skills and the ability to solve problems on the fly.”

Fighting to keep manufacturing jobs in the U.S. is not enough to boost the economy if our labor force remains undereducated and underqualified to fill them. In his farewell address, President Obama contended that automation, not globalization, has been the root cause of job drain.

For now, at least, creative problem solving is man’s competitive advantage over machine. “We have to hold onto the value of the human experience,” said Annie Chu. “We need to be that creative person that can synthesize neuroscience, psychology, etc. and look beyond data to the meaning.” Edwin Beltran echoed that sentiment, adding, “The interior design bandwidth needs to expand. In addition to the expressive mediums, we also need to understand ecology, psychology, and sociology”—and how they interweave. Pressure’s on.

Of course, a culture that prizes creativity as the last bastion of humanism has positive implications for our own industry. “Design could be the most sought-after job,” said Doug Shapiro. Indeed, a McKinsey-authored report, “Where Machines Could Replace Humans—And Where They Can’t (Yet),” discovered that the jobs least vulnerable to automation are those that involve decision-making, people management, and creativity. Such jobs comprised a mere 21 percent of the 800 they surveyed.

“We need to harness technology to work for humanity and not against it.”

—Cheryl S. Durst, Hon. FIIDA

“THE INTERNET IS A DATABANK AND A RESOURCE, BUT WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THAT INFORMATION IS WHAT WE NEED TO FIGURE OUT NEXT.”

—Eileen Jones, IIDA
“WHOEVER ‘WINS’ THE FUTURE IS WHO AMPLIFIES AND MAXIMIZES PEOPLE.”

—CHERYL S. DURST, PE.

“...a competitive and protracted hiring process is necessary to earmark the right candidates, those who align with the organization’s values, priorities, and culture and have the highly specific skill set employers are inevitably looking for. These days, HR executives are also saddled with negotiating conflicts that stem from intergenerational disparity in work and communication styles, and differing value sets and perceptions of authority. Those conflicts will only become more prevalent as the millennials flood the workplace but is still present in the office. ‘They lost a lot of stocks and retirement in the recession, and many still need to work.’

• Defining traits: loyalty, discipline, sacrifice, respect for authority

Tech of the times: fax machine

MATURES/ VETERANS (THOSE BORN BEFORE 1946):

This generation is transitioning out of the workplace but is still present in the office. ‘They’re like, ‘I want your job tomorrow, just give me the chance, I don’t need the 30 years of experience.’”

• Defining traits: loyalty, discipline, sacrifice, respect for authority

Tech of the times: personal computer

BABY BOOMERS (1946-64):

This generation worked long hours in a hierarchical environment to climb the vertical ladder.

• Defining traits: competitive, hard working

Tech of the times: fax machine

GENERATION X (1965-80):

Gen Xers crave independence and the elusive work/life balance in equal measure. “They are more inclined than their elders to have been raised by two working parents; many were latchkey kids,” said Gabrielle Bullock. “They witnessed the generation above them with nothing but a pink slip to show for their hard work.” As a result, many have chosen a self-employment path where they can set their own parameters.

• Defining trait: immediacy

Tech of the times: social media (Facebook) and Google

GENERATION Z (AFTER 2001):

The most cyber-friendly generation. “They’ve been online since preschool; they’ve never not been exposed to technology,” said Cummings. They will soon start graduating from high school and entering the workforce in earnest.

• Defining traits: hyperconnectivity, mobility

Tech of the times: iPhone apps

Industry leaders described workplaces in which each demographic bracket feels disrespected, or at least underappreciated, by the others. “I don’t see millennials accepting the wisdom and the effort of the older generations,” said Gabrielle Bullock.

These days, HR executives are also saddled with negotiating conflicts that stem from intergenerational disparity in work and communication styles, and differing value sets and perceptions of authority. Those conflicts will only become more prevalent as the millennials flood the work force. Gen Xers continue to be underrepresented (working for themselves in droves), and the “veterans,” many of whom lost money in the recession, delay retirement. (And, as Young pointed out, upward-trending life expectancy rates practically guarantee people will be working longer, well into their 90s.)
The generation born during the 1980s is already in or reaching its 30s, and its members have already begun assuming leadership roles. Per the Pew Research Center, millennials constitute the largest percentage of the labor force, at more than 33 percent. Their hegemony is a new phenomenon. “The notion of a predominate generation in the workplace was not so much the conversation in the late ’90s, although the shift was starting to happen,” explained Durst. “Back then, the boomers were the predominant ones, although not identified as such.”

These digital-savvy upstarts are already agitating for leadership positions in their workplaces, making up in drive, chutzpah, and tech know-how what they may lack in job experience (and, by all accounts communication skills). They do not put much stock in the traditional corporate climb, although their sideways career trajectories often expose them to a broader range of departments and provide useful context and perspective. “You can move back and forth a lot—it’s more of a lattice than a corporate climb, although their sideways career trajectories don’t have to get creative—and a bit uncomfortable. “What situation can we create that still engages the older generation and develops the successor? Maybe part-time or seasonal work that allows veterans to travel: ‘OK, in the winters you can work remotely in St. Thomas for three hours a day.’ Or consider a lower associate-to-partner ratio so knowledge can be more easily handed down.

Millennials have demands and different expectations of loyalty and work/life balance, which is requiring us to think differently, said Cummings. Here are some ways we might engage them:

**CHANGE YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE**

Millennials tend to think the workplace should change to accommodate their desires, meaning managers should adjust their leadership style accordingly. “Millennials expect leaders to alter the way we communicate,” said Bullock. “Learning how to communicate across generations is the biggest challenge in our offices.”

Although others humbly agreed with that sentiment, Cummings issued a wake-up call. Unfortunately for millennials’ exasperated superiors, underlings don’t have to accommodate to your style of leadership. Boomers do have to change the way they communicate. To be a good leader means adjusting communication styles depending on whom you’re talking to, so you can relate to anyone.” That being said, millennials must also make adjustments, and learn the nuances of professional interaction and communication, from body language to speaking and writing tone. But they’re not going to learn those soft skills without an assist from above.

**EXPLAIN THE WHY**

Millennials often challenge authority, questioning received wisdom and protocol. Their superiors interpret this as disrespectful and rebellious, but the pushback may simply stem from not understanding the meaning and value of actions we’re trying to enforce. Cummings advised teaching a reluctant employee why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked. “Encourage them to think of the value the client provides, the revenue generated from that client, how long the client has been with your firm. Communicate why it’s sometimes necessary to, say, be the yes man and do what the client asks—simply because the client asked.

**HELP THEM SUCCEED AT FAILURE**

Many roundtable participants noted that the 30-and-under set doesn’t handle failure well and is thin-skinned, which affects workplace performance. Durst noted that the top 10 business titles in 2016 were about failing: “failing gracefully, accepting failure, benefiting from failure, etc.” She and Cummings advised leveraging failure by using it as a teachable moment. Employers can provide younger staffers safe opportunities to mess up and learn on the job—although that’s easier said than done. “A central tenet of leadership is how much rope to give people,” said Ware. Cummings proposed allowing young staffers to lead in-house presentations to prepare them for spearheading client-facing meetings. “Pull them aside afterward to give them input. This generation loves social learning and collaboration, and they value feedback. They crave opportunities to learn new skills and think differently.” We need to feed that hunger, not dismiss it as uppity.

**TAILOR YOUR BENEFITS PACKAGE**

“Benefits are no longer one-size-fits-all,” said Cummings. Millennials expect a lot of perks, but it’s not always possible or financially feasible for a company to provide them. “We have to do a lot of analysis to determine what makes sense to our people and gives us the biggest return on investment. What do employees really want? Is it a longer maternity leave—or is it more about being supported after they’ve become parents, to make the transition successful? Anyone can give you time off, but we will work hard to make sure you can successfully transition back.”
OUR PROBLEMS BEGIN AND END WITH EDUCATION

Mobility has sped up the pace of work, but it’s a double-edged sword: greater productivity, less thinking. Chu, a college professor, witnesses this in her students. “They often tell me that things are happening too fast and they don’t have time to think.”

Indeed, the younger generation is not being taught how to think critically. This has dire implications for our industry, one that depends on a high level of creativity and innovation. It means a labor pool less equipped to problem solve—and greater competition for that smaller pool of qualified applicants. “There is a growing intellectual disparity between the tech elite and the rest of the populace,” said Young.

Silicon Valley was founded on superior math skills (plus a heady dose of science and creativity), but the future of innovation in our country may rest on a generation of students less educated than their elders. Our students are currently ranked 40th in math. What was a rigorous high school education is now the freshman year curriculum at the average state school.

The American education system is in trouble. We are able to teach machines how to learn, but we are having increasing difficulty teaching real kids how to learn. How did this happen to a former education powerhouse? “The U.S. has been an indulged consumer culture for the last 80 to 100 years. We’ve taken our eye off the ball,” said Young. “Our best defense is to get as smart as we can. Fixing the education system would solve every problem.”

In this cultural landscape, the burden of higher education is shifting to employers. “Undergraduate education is now being transferred to corporations: Your advanced degree now happens where you work,” said Durst. Dream of becoming an expert in supply chain distribution? Get a job at Amazon. “Education is transforming into life-long learning,” said Barbara Dunn. Millennials have proved eager to continue their education on the job, with such benefits providing a major draw. “When recruiting, we talk to candidates about how many hours we commit to continuing ed, and how they can choose what’s applicable to them,” said Cummings. But in today’s world, the most critical skill to learn, she asserted, is how to teach yourself.
WORK IS BECOMING INVISIBLE AND HYPERCONNECTED

With sensors and big data, much that was formerly unmeasurable—productivity, for instance—we can see, or at least track or calculate, today. Yet in contemplating what “work” will look like in 20 years, Ware used the word invisible: “Digitization is creating a second economy that’s vast, automatic, and invisible. As we augment or automate work, we can’t see it any longer.” Meaning it’s all too easy to lose awareness of it—something we need to cultivate. At the same time, work is becoming ever more enmeshed with downtime. “Soon, work will no longer be a defined structure but very blended with life. It is becoming increasingly location independent and globally distributed.”

In addition, mobile technologies have allowed us to stay connected while becoming more physically dispersed, even when working under the same roof. A mere decade ago, mobility meant that you were able to connect into the office if you were home with a sick kid. Now, you can be on the road for a week and telecommute in, connect with the office via WebEx in the airport. “Co-workers will become more of a collection of individuals that can connect when needed,” said Ware. Turns out we connect a lot in the network age, distinguished by rich, massively collaborative networks and open-source problem solving. “If a millennial wants help with something, they throw it out to the world,” said Ware. “In the internet age, no one person is smarter than everyone. Knowledge is far too complex and distributed for any one of us to [master].”

But telecommuting is not for everyone; some work well at home, others are far from productive. Do we overstate its effectiveness? The answer depends on a number of factors, from the type of work you’re doing to the kind of worker you are. But there is promising research that working remotely can be quite effective—and cost-effective for employers. Cummings cited a study of airline call center staffers, in which some reservationists were allowed to work from home. “Those who were not working in a call center, surrounded by thousands of people on headsets, got higher survey scores, demonstrating that they were more responsive.”

At the very least, such research should help convince the most conservative employers that telecommuting is a viable option and can, under the right circumstances, boost productivity. And also help loosen the still-entrenched perception that if you’re not at your desk, you’re not working. And while there is a strong argument for physical presence in the workplace leading to a higher level of engagement, there is an equally strong case for the opposite. “The major thing is engagement,” said Ware. “Employees who are allowed to work from home are told they are being trusted.”

Said Cummings, “To have successful results [in implementing a remote-working policy], you have to ask, ‘Who is the right person to work remotely, and how do you evaluate those characteristics?’ Is it about drive and discipline? We know people working from home can have access to just as much tech as in the office, but the fact remains that we don’t know how to manage people remotely very well. Ask what outcomes you want, and determine how to communicate and measure them. We have to learn how to manage employees by outcomes.”
The four speakers emphasized that the future, though visible, is not yet in focus. In making predictions, we have the tendency to extrapolate forward from the now in a linear fashion. But the trajectory from today to tomorrow is not typically a straight shot, and ruptures often occur. “Technologies and advancements will become available to us that none of us would have imagined,” said Ware.

As history has repeatedly proven, our ability to accurately predict what’s on the horizon, in particular the defining technologies, is limited. To wit: “I think there is a world market for maybe five computers,” IBM president Thomas Watson said in 1943. Little did he anticipate that, 70 odd years later, some 2 billion people would carry a personal computer, in the form of a smartphone, in their pocket at all times.

Although we cannot accurately predict what the future holds, there are means of identifying the possible futures. Ware offered a framework for thinking ahead:

- Cultivate peripheral vision. “As you stand on the horizon, you never know what’s going to show up,” Ware cautions. So do your research, be open to a broad swath of intel, and be attuned to developments and innovations that may seem unrelated to what you do. “Things you don’t think are going to be important might prove to be.”
- Embrace disruption. In The Innovator’s Dilemma, Clayton Christensen explains that when new technologies are being adopted, there’s an initial dip in efficiency before it rises. “This is the crucial period where you may need to hedge your bets,” said Ware. Not everyone is OK with that. He cited Kodak as a cautionary tale. “They invented digital photography but were too invested in their old technology to move forward.”
- Tell stories about tomorrow. “I like to engage clients in scenario planning,” said Ware. “ Pretend the future is going to go this way or that way, and then tell a story. That’s far more compelling than data.”
- Build a shared vision. In The Future of Management and What Matters Now, management theorist Gary Hamel wrote that executives typically devote less than 3 percent of their time on building and sharing a vision of that time on the future of the company specifically. “In most companies, leadership spends less than 1 percent of their time on building and sharing a vision of the future,” said Ware. To stay current, we need to spend more time contemplating what’s next, to be aware of developments, and act intentionally.

“The designers who succeed will be the ones who can react to what’s happening, pivot to change, optimize, and reinvent.” —BARBARA DUNN, FIIDA