The next generation of interior designers may be unlike any before it. But interior design firms are crafting new, inventive mentoring methods to develop the skills of younger designers.
Make no mistake: Major changes are forcing businesses of all kinds to reshape their mentoring tactics in an effort to attract, retain and nurture the design leaders of the future.

First of importance is the workplace significance of the more than 70 million Millennials (those born beginning in 1977 who make up Generation Y) who have already begun to enter the workforce as the first of 78 million Baby Boomers head toward retirement. Secondly are the major differences in values, attitudes and behaviors between Millennials and the generations preceding them.

“Everyone is going to have to face this: The Baby Boomers are going to retire, and the Generation X population is roughly two-thirds the size of the Baby Boomer population. Millennials are fast becoming an influential factor in the workplace and an increasingly important part of its future,” says W. Stanton Smith, National Director of the Cross-Generation Initiatives at Deloitte & Touche USA LLP. “There are huge numbers of people moving toward retirement, and very little has been done to preserve their knowledge.”

But turn in any direction and you can see clear signs of how the design community is responding to the distinctive challenges of coaching Millennials.

In San Diego, Viveca Bissonnette, IIDA, LEED AP, Associate at Carrier Johnson + CULTURE and IIDA Vice President of Communications, makes it a point to provide the firm’s younger designers with the steady stream of “timely feedback and performance evaluations that Millennials find especially important.”

Celia Barrett, IIDA, ASID, Principal of Celia Barrett Design LLC in Jackson, Miss., is an adjunct professor at Mississippi College School of Fine Arts. She emphasizes the need for students and young designers to improve their drawing skills, which she says are often under-developed.

Farther north, more than 80 percent of the managers at HOK Canada, recently named one of Canada’s top 100 employers by Mediacorp Canada, have completed an ambitious firm-wide program “designed to train all of our managers to have better coaching skills,” says Lara Koretsky, HR Manager of Consulting, who works out of the Toronto office of the architecture and interior design firm. “It is an important step in helping us build a mentoring culture.”

READY AND WILLING

Fortunately, as a group, Millennials tend to be very receptive to mentoring opportunities.

“Millennials seem more trusting of senior leaders than Baby Boomers and Gen Xers were, and they are very willing to be coached and mentored by those with experience,” Smith says.

Part of Millennials’ willingness to be mentored stems from their oft-noted self-confidence and lofty aspirations. Says Bissonnette, “Young designers coming into the workforce today have more expectations and higher aspirations
for themselves, a quality instilled in them by their Baby Boomer parents who told them they could do anything.

“This new generation of workers also has more expectations of their employers than previous generations. They want to know they are on the professional path to success, and they are looking for guidance from employers to help them get there.”

But despite Millennials’ striking confidence and great expectations, they often have a heightened “need for reassurance,” Bissonnette says. “One interesting thing about this generation is that they are looking for validation, and they constantly are looking for feedback.”

Adds Smith, “They really don’t want to make mistakes. As a consequence, they seek continuous feedback, and they will respond positively to it.”

MENTORING THE MENTOR

This Gen Y desire for frequent evaluations and ongoing communication puts increased demands on those who try to mentor them. The need to meet those demands is a big reason why, for example, HOK launched its mentoring and coaching initiative about two years ago.

“Communication is the No. 1 skill on which we focus to improve managers’ coaching and mentoring skills,” HOK’s Koretsky says. A key component of the program is an approach dubbed SBI, which stands for “Situation, Behavior and Impact.” The initiative is intended to help mentors do a better job of providing ongoing, targeted feedback to their mentees.

“The idea is to help the coach to focus on the specific situation that has occurred, the behavior that was displayed

Making Mentoring Memorable

Each year, IIDA gives students a dose of the working world during its annual Mentoring Week. The program matches participating students with practicing design professionals, and students shadow their mentors for a day.

“What I learned was something that you could never see in a school program,” says Bailey Edwards, an interior design student at Louisiana State University. Edwards observed a working meeting at Gensler in Houston as part of the 2008 Mentoring Week events held in February. “It was a completely different experience to get to actually see people working on a project with real user needs that were not made up for a school exercise.”

But this wasn’t an ordinary project or an ordinary meeting. “We are working on a full tower renovation of the El Paso Energy building, and what makes it especially interesting is that we are doing the work while [the tenants] are continuing to occupy the building,” says Juli Schroeder, an interior designer who served as Edwards’ mentor for the day. “The IIDA event happened to fall on a day when we had a big consultants meeting scheduled, including every discipline that you could imagine — from graphics to landscape to structural, security, elevator — with maybe 25 to 30 people in the room.”

The morning meeting was an eye-opening and exciting experience for Edwards, now a senior at LSU.

“As design students, we are made aware of the many steps of the design process, but this was the first time I had actually seen them carried out and seen how the disciplines have to work things out with one another,” says Edwards, whose description of her experience earned her the 2008 Lloy Hack Memorial Essay Award. “The day left me encouraged and excited. When I returned to my classes, I urged other students to participate in Mentoring Week next year.”
within the situation and the impact of that behavior,” Koretsky says. “The point is to go beyond just telling them what they did wrong or just saying, ‘Good job.’”

The final step in the SBI approach is to “always finish off the piece of feedback with a bridging statement that allows the individual to respond and leaves an opening for continuing the conversation,” Koretsky says. “The aim is to have a dialogue, not a one-way communication.”

These communication tools are especially important when difficult conversations or discussions of performance are needed.

Says Koretsky, “When you are about to begin a performance conversation that is not going to be easy, you can start by saying, ‘We have a difficult conversation ahead of us,’ and laying out the specific framework and being transparent about it.”

THE RIGHT FIT

Today’s mentoring efforts respond to distinctive Millennial characteristics in other ways, as well.

At Gensler, the architecture and design firm has taken steps to address “Millenials’ particular trigger points,” says Janine Pesci, the firm-wide Director of Learning. “Millenials feel like they need to frequently change jobs in order to develop new skills, so we are creating an environment in which they are frequently exposed to opportunities within our own organization to get that experience without having to leave us.”

“It’s important to create an environment in which they are exposed to opportunities to develop new skills. That’s why we have developed a peer-to-peer networking initiative. The program was begun in the firm’s D.C. office by a group of young professionals who saw the need to share ideas about professional development. The idea soon spread throughout the firm. The program also involves an event called “Power Portfolios,” whereby the firm’s young professionals assess the portfolios of design students and offer feedback. “[Rising Professionals] taps
into the Millennial mindset of wanting to work through social networks,” Pesci says. “We know that they like to work in tribes, so we look for ways to create opportunities for teamwork, social interaction and collaboration.”

HOK also recognizes the importance of encouraging greater interaction with Millennials. “We have studio critiques every week in our main studio space or library that give opportunities to people from every level of the organization to give presentations about the projects on which they are working,” says Keri Daniel, HR Manager of Programs and Organizational Development at HOK Canada. In addition to serving as a forum for sharing information about projects, these get-togethers also provide a channel for firm-wide interaction and make it easier for Millennials to develop relationships with senior professionals that can lead to mentoring opportunities.

COMING FULL CIRCLE
Perhaps one of the top benefits of a successful mentoring program: “Reverse mentoring,” or junior-to-senior guidance, can be just as effective.

Says Smith, “Reverse mentoring is one way to stay on top of rapid changes in technology and how they are being applied” Pesci cites the example of one young designer with whom she works. “I am mentoring her on her professional career, and she is mentoring me on technology,” she says.

More generally, says Smith, “through their willingness to question established procedures and make suggestions, young people also can help us to identify longstanding practices that no longer are effective and that need to be changed.”

Beyond the Office Walls
For some practicing interior designers, teaching as an adjunct professor on the collegiate level represents another way to help develop the next generation of design professionals.

“It can be exhausting to teach after a long day’s work, but it is wonderful to see a talented young designer truly learn and develop,” says Celia Barrett, IIDA, ASID, of Celia Barrett Design LLC. Barrett serves as an adjunct professor at Mississippi College School of Fine Arts.

Many interior designers have found the best way to gain knowledge on a subject is to teach it. “Teaching keeps me on my toes and forces me to focus on the design process and how to express it,” Barrett says. “Working with fresh new ideas and perspectives is stimulating, and the students’ willingness to ask questions not only keeps me sharp, but it also helps prompt me to think about issues that otherwise might not come to mind.”

In fact, many interior design firms explicitly recognize the business value of teaching. “We encourage employees who want to become adjunct professors, and the number has grown in recent years,” says Lara Koretsky, HOK Canada. “We have found that not only is it a developmental opportunity for the mentee, it also is a developmental opportunity for the mentor. We will arrange work hours so that they fit with class schedules, as well as take other steps to help accommodate those who want to teach.”

For designers interested in teaching, the best first step is to reach out to nearby universities and let the schools know their availability. It’s not necessary to jump right into taking full responsibility for teaching a class. Interior designers can begin by giving a presentation to a class, taking students on a tour of their offices or inviting students to get involved on a project.