

Workplace Design: The Millennials Are Not “Coming”—They’re Here

By Fay Cobb Payton

The Pew Research Center defines millennials as those adults born between 1981 and 1997: in other words, they’re 18 to 34 years old this year, 2015. Millennials are often described as confident, open to change, digitally connected, and self-expressive. They are significantly influencing how society lives, works, and plays, and they’re defining the social networks within which these interactions occur. They’re debunking traditional business models, reshaping how society communicates, and redefining what it means to be “social”—in both the physical and the online world.

A recent *Time* magazine article¹ offers another, less pretty, depiction of millennials: selfish, entitled, a self-absorbed generation socially and digitally connected to those in their social networks yet detached from institutional structures and cultures. But it doesn’t matter which picture you favor: Either way, millennials are influencing how traditional workplace cultures function and, yes, how they are designed.

Based on a survey of current millennial professionals, the Great Rated! website provides a listing of top-rated places for this generation to work (see Table 1).² They are fairly evenly distributed in terms of geographical location, with the exception being the Southwest and the Northeast, which scored only one each. Three are in the Midwest and three others in the West. Industry delineation varies widely, with Google being the most recognized company on the list.

Millennials shared consistent characteristics when describing the top 10 best places to work: “family friendly,” “culture friendly,” “fun,” “listening leadership,” “making a social difference,” “company events,” and “campus feel.” These phrases align with research findings from the Millennial Compass Report (2014) and the UNC Executive Development Office³ (2012) as well as from academic scholars (*The Economist*, September 28, 2013; Bresman, 2015).⁴

According to The Millennial Compass Report, millennials admire leaders who have a heightened sense of social self-awareness as well as a taste for cultural appreciation. Although work/life is central to the millennial mindset, it manifests itself differently in comparison to Generation X (who are 35 to 50 in

¹ See *Time Magazine* – The Me Me Me Generation, May 20, 2011.

² <http://us.greatrated.com/rankings/10-great-workplaces-for-millennial>

³ See MSL Group, “The Millennial Compass Report,” 2015; and Jessica Brack, “Maximizing Millennials in the Workplace” white paper, Kenan-Flagler Business School, University of North Carolina, 2012.

⁴ See “Winning the Generation Game,” *The Economist*, Sept. 28, 2013; and Henrik Bresman, “What Millennials Want from Work, Charted Across the World,” *Harvard Business Review*, Feb. 23, 2015.

2015), Baby Boomers (who are 51 to 59 in 2015) and the Silent Generation (who are 70 to 87 in 2015). These earlier generations are often described by *traditional dogma based on workplace characteristics/behaviors that are defined as .loyalty, productivity, or collegiality*. Though earlier generations have experienced social and cultural revolutions, such as the Civic Rights and Women’s Movements, each generation is not without social self-awareness and cultural appreciation shifts in defining work and workplace behaviors. However, millennials are largely considered digital natives who are born digitally connected with technology full immersed into their lives.

In addition, the Kenan-Flagler white paper cited above described millennials as “collaborators.” This would, of course, have a bearing on workplace expectations and, I would add, workplace design. How do you make a workplace collaborative? You enable flexibility, organized chaos (or the “unstructured flow of information,” as the white paper terms it), involvement in decision-making and a high sense of community influence, even in the absence of physical presence. That is, the workplace design is now under the influence of digital native culture – always on, always connected, but not necessary in the same physical location. Collaborative workplace design can facilitate remote work at home, employer office and even the coffee shop.

The community sphere and its influence on workplace design are, in part, a function of social media and the digital-native nature of millennial life. Yet, collaboration must occur across generations, and workplace design must therefore address intergenerational places and spaces to foster the “employee experience” while **supporting** employee productivity. Though the Millennial Compass Report and other references noted above speak to workplace expectations, there is still an embedded cultural doctrine shared by the organizations in Table 1. Here’s where workplace design comes into play.

The social workplace

First of all, let’s note that like so many things in the digital era, workplace design goes beyond the physical boundaries associated with traditional brick and mortar. However, as with other kinds of design, user experience is critical—it’s just that the user is an employee. Designs that appeal to millennials are often described as “cool,” “fun,” “flexible,” and “campus-like”—offering places and spaces that facilitate the both professional and “personal” **needs**, yet are flexible enough to withstand face-to-face and virtual interactions with an organizational culture that is accepting of both modes of communication. This is not to say that appropriate designs aim to distract or ignore the needs of non-millennial employees. Rather, successful designs promote creativity, collaboration, shared leadership, ownership, and idea initiation in *all* employees. They also promote social connections since millennials are not only significant users of social-media technologies, but also very conscious of community influence from their connections, friends, “likes,” and “followers.”

I often ask my students where they would like to work. For some millennials, **the ideal** design is exemplified in workplaces like the ones at Google and Facebook—“Silicon Valley” designs, in my own terminology. The “Googleplex” corporate headquarters showcases its campus of more than 16 buildings offering a myriad of perks: assorted restaurants, laundry facilities, spas, sleeping pods, and free snacks and meals, just to name a few. While several technology, well-established firms, such as Microsoft and

SAS, have created the campus design workplace over 10 to 15 years ago, these perks appeal to each generation, but have become part of the expected norms among millennials. This is particularly the case for millennials as digital natives who can associate such perks as a design norm among more recently established firms and start-ups. Facebook, like Google, is a workplace-design hybrid of work and play. It offers good pay for interns, gourmet meals, local parks with schoolyard games, onsite physicians, and an annual company party that promises each employee a gift. Figure 1 shows the hybrid workplace design with an intergenerational workforce, fun scheme, and lack of material boundaries to better facilitate collaboration and idea sharing.

The theme words shown in Figure 2 are strongly associated with millennials' preferences in workplace design. They're associated with social, neighborhood-style learning and collaborative environments that offer amenities and some quasi-living characteristics, such as rest areas, "place spaces," and even socially-responsible provisions (e.g., organic food offerings, going "green" with energy conservation) that are void of traditional physical barriers, such as office locations associated with positional power. Mutual respect and some degree of ownership in organizational decisions are also leading characteristics of workplace culture—and **hence affect workplace design**.

Workplace design experience and fun

I have had the experience of working with millennials on research and service projects. One project, for instance, included 10 to 15 19-to-22-year-old college students. One research project resulted in the development of myhealthimpactnetwork.org which uses social media channels (@myhealthimpact via Twitter) to disseminate health and technology messages. My work with the students involved adopting an agile management style, yet with clear expectations of performance and project requirements. A majority of them were computer science, engineering, and information systems majors, but others came from more traditional business disciplines, such as finance, human resources, and marketing.

Our initial project meeting was held in a typical office setting, and it proved to be a learning experience for me as well as the millennials. For example, the initial communication channel I proposed was the bulletin board, usually festooned with flyers, that can be found at most universities. The students quickly noted, "We don't pay attention to those. We know they're there, but we don't see them. We communicate with social". While social was an initial intent for the project, this "we are social" ethos was captured not only in the creation of the @myhealthimpact platform but also impacted how we worked to communicate project planning and team collaboration to complete the work. Hence, this ethos impacted work product and the work processes.

Although the team regularly met in an office setting, I often hosted meeting in coffee shops, libraries that offered a hybrid design, and local malls, as well as virtual online sessions. These places and spaces supported enabled a single point for multitasking – wireless connection to facilitate work tasks, eateries with multiple food options and even close proximity to handle personal errands. They also broadened the definition of work-life balance beyond the two usual poles of career or family, instead offering an intersection of work, leisure, health, and play. The lesson to be learned here is that millennials enjoy neighborhood and campus designs that function as "one-stop shops" for most professional and personal activities that might need to be addressed during the workday.

Fun is another important characteristic for millennials where workplace expectations and designs are concerned. In fact, Lamm and Meeks⁵ define fun in the workplace as “playful, social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure.” Based on this definition and on previous research, fun may be potentially derived from multiple sources on the job, such as formal activities, interactions with others, and the job itself”⁶ (Tews, et al, 2015, p. 250). I certainly saw this with my own students. For our research team, fun manifested itself with social and professional events, such as research conferences and presentations, networking activities, and the **technology necessary for effective social-network meetings**. All of these involved the use of social media to expand research visibility as well as the millennials’ own professional networks. Interactions with others were emphasized via online and offline channels, while the research project tasks entailed using and enhancing the technical, social, and professional skills of the millennials. This created a sense of ownership in the scope of work, research delivery, and results dissemination. To this end, I noticed the frequent mentions of “our project,” “our work,” and “our results” during team meetings with students.

It seems that this workplace culture creates a ownership structure among millennials. This ownership, however, can be detached from formal institutional structures among work cultures and even leadership. An entrepreneurial structure emerges, yet requires a thoughtful leadership engagement among intergenerational workers. I speculate that as millennials explore alternative career paths, entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial-spirited organizations will become more appealing. In either case, as they progress to the C-suite, the need for and reliance on institutional knowledge will require a greater appreciation for multi-generational inclusion and thought leadership.

Intergenerational challenges

Workplace design is a critical issue for today’s workforces as well as those yet to enter the market. Organizations will continue to confront and have the need to address intergenerational challenges as millennials age and Generation Z emerges. The millennial mindset offers boundless energy, creativity, an innovative culture, a need for meaningful work and feedback from leadership, and increased support for social causes. While generational conflicts can include how work is done (face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid), where work is done (office, coffee shop, or gym), work duration (long hours with minimal personal breaks or peaks/valleys with several personal breaks), collaboration is critical. This collaboration can be accomplished, in part, via technology, but clear policies and effective leadership will drive the workplace design culture and experience. Withstanding broad generalizations, the diversity of thought that millennials in tangent with other generations offers creativity in not only workplace expectations but in design.

These changes are, of course, not limited to the workplace. They will inform many emerging technologies and affect the pursuit of innovation, the practice of entrepreneurship, and how we approach and address the grand challenges confronting today’s science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

⁵ Eric Lamm and Michael D. Meeks, “Workplace Fun: the Moderating Effects of Generational Differences,” *Employee Relations*, vol. 31, no. 6 (2009), pp. 614.

⁶ M. J. Tews, J. Michel, S. Xu, and A.J. Drost, “Workplace Fun Matters... but What Else?” *Employee Relations*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2015), p. 250.

(STEM) workforce. To do so, however, we cannot ignore the principles and frameworks offered by the design community. Design can enable a critical review of the problem-solving process, in general, and alternative solutions and prototype creation, in particular. Design offers a lens to assess innovation constraints and to account for societal as well as technical impacts of proposed solutions. Thus, here is an opportunity to merge critical and creative thinking.

For normal-sized and even smaller businesses, the the Googleplex and Facebook workplace designs are tall orders to follow for brick and mortar investments. Here is where organizational leadership sets the tone for workplace culture, and the investment in employees as “whole persons” has been shown to create more productive environments and employees. While the perks would be attractive to most, regardless of generation, blending a culture of fun and inclusion with spaces and places where employees feel and are valued is paramount. This challenges both large and small firms to incorporate design thinking in multiple aspects of the organization from human resources, office layout, customer experiences, computing, collaboration tools to create and sustain desirable intergenerational employee workplace experiences.

Captions

Figure 1.

Figure 2. Themes of Workplace Design as Influenced By Millennials

Suggested Readings

Payton, F.C., and Galloway, K. “The Analytics of Social: Listening to the Not-So-Visible.” *Inside O.R.*, November 2014.

Payton, F.C., Cultures of Participation & Design - @myhealthimpact: For Students, By Students, *Information Systems Journal*, Forthcoming.

Payton, F.C. and Galloway, K. Here Comes the #Engagement: A Serious Health Initiative Made Trendy, *XRDS ACM Magazine*, 2014 (21:2), 28-31.

Author Bio

Dr. Fay Cobb Payton is the founding director of MyHealthImpactNetwork, a social network experience that focuses on health disparities and social media technology interventions. @MyHealthImpact provides a “voice” for the millennial generation about health topics, culture, and technology innovation. Payton is also the author of *Leveraging Intersectionality: Seeing and Not Seeing* (Richer Press, 2014), an anthology of her research on STEM education and experience in both academic and corporate environments. She is an editor for *Health Systems*, an OR Society journal, and is an associate professor of information systems

at North Carolina State University. Payton received the 2013 National Coalition of Women in Information Technology (NCWIT) Undergraduate Mentoring Award. She was an American Council on Education Fellow, and worked on leadership development, curricula development, 21st century workforce development, public-private partnerships and STEM education. Her research interests include healthcare IT/informatics/analytics and disparities; social media use among the millennial and under-represented groups; intersectionality; racial, gender and ethnic identities in online communities; broadening participation in ICT & STEM education and workforce participation, and the influence of racial, class and gender identities on health information seeking and content creation. She has published more than 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, conference publications, and book chapters.

Payton has appeared on CBS Radio Network, Black Data Processing Association (BDPA) iRadio, Sunrise America, Financial Review and others to discuss Silicon's Valley, tech leadership, diversity & inclusion in the technology industry and under-representation. She will be the plenary speaker for the 2015 the Association of Women in Science and will deliver talks to information technology industry professional conferences. She received a Ph.D. in Information & Decision Systems (with a specialty in Health Care Systems) from Case Western Reserve University, after which she worked in corporate IT and consulting at IBM, Ernst & Young/Cap Gemini and Time, Inc.

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