Generational Preferences:
A Glimpse into the Future Office

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A comprehensive survey provides new insights

We surveyed about 15,500 professional employees of three US-based multinational companies in 40 countries: two in the consulting industry and one in financial services.

Using data from four generations of employees, this research provides a snapshot of the past—and a glimpse into the future. We found real generational differences on preferences for workspace features and capabilities. Moreover, these differences exist regardless of geographic location or job type.

This type of generational analysis is a powerful way to understand future issues. William Strauss and Neil Howe, pioneers of analysis using the concept of generational identity, noted that one fundamental fact of life remains true in the United States: generations matter. To understand other people, and even to fully understand ourselves, we must consider generational identity at least as carefully as we consider any other social characteristic (Carlson, 2009).

Generation Y as a Barometer of the Future Office

We live in an era in which office design is completely dominated by the worldview of the Baby Boomer generation. Their perspective is so dominant in the workplace that its influence has become invisible—like the air that surrounds us.

However, by 2020 Generation Y will comprise over 50% of the workforce (Carlson, 2009; Meister and Willyerd, 2010), while the proportion of Baby Boomers will decline to 23%. To properly support, and attract and retain Generation Y workers, companies will have to provide workspaces and facility programs that align with their needs and preferences.

Four Generations at Work

For the first time in history, there are four generations at work at the same time—employees with experiences and viewpoints that span seven decades of American life (see timeline in Figure 1) (Strauss and Howe, 1992):

+ Silent Generation: born between 1929 and 1945

+ Baby Boomers: born between 1946 and 1964

+ Generation X: born between 1965 and 1978

+ Generation Y: born between 1979 and 1997

Recently, Knoll conducted research to gain empirical insights into these four generations at work, and in particular Generation Y. We collected survey data from close to 15,500 employees representing four generations, in 40 countries, on their ratings of the importance of six workspace features and capabilities. The results from this research provide a glimpse into the needs of the future workforce. This paper provides insights into how office workspace will need to be designed and furnished to support, attract and retain the emerging Generation Y.

Key Findings: Work as an "Experience"

All four generations rate the office workspace as "important"— and they rate it about equally. However, each generation rates the importance of six key workspace features in a different order.

Generation Y rates the importance of having an "engaging workplace" highest, and "quality of meeting rooms" lowest. Conversely, Baby Boomers rate these two features almost opposite of how Generation Y rates them.

These changing priorities will drive a fundamental shift in office design, away from merely supporting work function and process. Future workspace will need to provide a consistent, engaging, work "experience" that supports a wide choice of work styles and seamless flow of work, regardless of location.
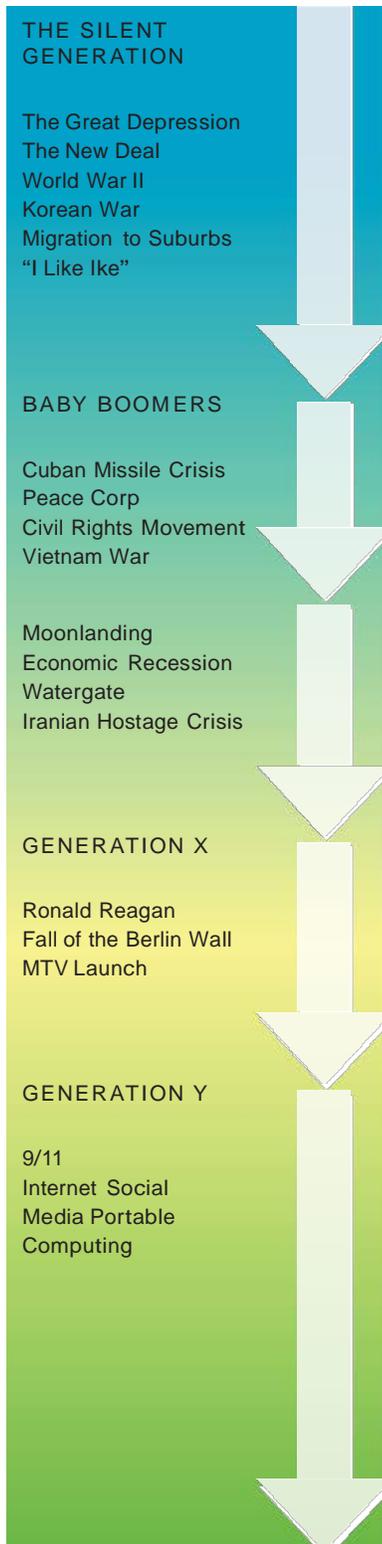
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THE SILENT GENERATION

The Great Depression
The New Deal
World War II
Korean War
Migration to Suburbs
"I Like Ike"

BABY BOOMERS

Cuban Missile Crisis
Peace Corp
Civil Rights Movement
Vietnam War

Moonlanding
Economic Recession
Watergate
Iranian Hostage Crisis

GENERATION X

Ronald Reagan
Fall of the Berlin Wall
MTV Launch

GENERATION Y

9/11
Internet Social
Media Portable
Computing

Fig 1. Profile of the generations

Each generation is defined by unique formative events or circumstances.

Generational Insights

In this section, we explore the formative experiences and general characteristics of each generation to provide context for the research results that follow. In addition to these descriptions, Table 1 provides more background characteristics related to core values, family orientation, use of technology, and attitudes towards money and work.

The Silent Generation (born 1929 – 1945)

The Silents' worldview is shaped by childhood memories of the Great Depression, the "New Deal," relatives going off to World War II, and a sense of connection to the community through scrap drives, and other forms of volunteerism. As young adults, many older Silents served in the Korean War and formed part of the early push to the suburbs. This politically conservative cohort has lived through trying times and expects minimal pampering (see Table 1 for more characteristics).

The Silents are a politically conservative cohort; having lived through trying times, they expect minimal pampering.

Baby Boomers

Traditionals (born 1946 – 1954)

The worldview of Traditionals (including presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton) was shaped by the rise of feminism and the sexual revolution, drug use for recreation and as a political statement, the Cuban missile crisis, the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement and a larger sense that society and government were "broken" and needed to be recreated. Traditionals are generally described as experimental, free-spirited and social-cause oriented (for other characteristics see Table 1).

The Baby Boom generation is actually split into two cohorts: "Traditionals," older boomers who reflect the "generation gap" of the 1960s, and a younger cohort "Generation Jones," with a more pragmatic orientation.

Generation Jones (born 1955 – 1964)

The term "Generation Jones" refers to "Jonesing," a general desire for material success (remember Madonna—the material girl?) and the notion of "keeping up with the Joneses." As teenagers and young adults, Generation Jones (whose members include President Barack Obama) was shaped by MTV, Watergate, rampant inflation, recessions and oil price shocks. While their attitudes are touched by 1960s idealism, they are largely impatient with it and are more influenced by the pragmatism of the 1980s—a desire to "get ahead" (for other characteristics see Table 1).

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Generational Preferences
Page 2

Generation X (born 1965 – 1978)

"Gen X" as it is commonly known, was originally referred to as the "Baby Bust" because of the steep drop in the birth rate following the Baby Boom (Stephey, 2008). Many Gen Xers were deeply affected by the lack of social and economic uncertainty in their childhoods caused by historically high divorce rates and mass downsizing by companies (Figure 1). While their fathers were being laid off, large numbers of women (their mothers) entered the workforce. Thus, these "latch key" kids learned to be independent at an early age (see Table 1).

Early members of this generation faced a difficult job market and were unfairly labeled "slackers" when they gave up looking or took part-time jobs. Not surprisingly, this generation craves security and reports that compensation is the largest motivator at work, which puts them at odds with Boomers and Generation Y who value learning, volunteerism, and other intangibles over pay. The other generations sometimes have negative perceptions of Gen X—sometimes viewing them as cynical.

Generation X is the first in US history to experience downward mobility when compared to their parents' generation.
(Isaacs, Sawhill and Haskins, 2007)

Table 1. General characteristics of the generations
The values, attitudes and expectations of each generation vary widely depending on the social and economic environment that shaped their life experiences (Strauss and Howe, 1992, 2007; Carlson, 2009; Hewlett, Jackson, Sherbin, Shiller, Sosnovich, and Sumberg, 2009; Meister and Willyerd, 2010).

	Silent Generation	Baby Boomers		Generation X	Generation Y
	(1929 – 1945)	(1946 – 1954) *Traditionals*	(1955 – 1964) *Generation Jones*	(1965 – 1979)	(1980 – 1997)
Broad traits	Loyalty, respect for authority, obligation to personal and community needs, sacrifice	Social causes, idealism, distrust of authority, tearing down and rebuilding institutions, hard work and long hours	Pragmatism, impatience with idealism, need to compete and "get ahead"	Self-reliance, skepticism, work/life balance, motivation by money, craving for security	Immediacy, confidence, tolerance, social connection, rebuilding of institutions
Family	Experienced traditional nuclear family as children, close to extended family as adults	Highly independent of their family as kids, "helicopter parents" as adults	"Sandwich generation"; taking care of kids and aging parents	"Latch-key kids," witnessed mass layoffs and divorce of parents, value independence in their own children	Very close to parents, can "boomerang" back to parents' house if needed
Defining technology	Fax machine	Personal computer	Laptop computer	Mobile phone	Google and Facebook
Attitudes towards money	Save for things and pay in cash	First to embrace the concept of buying on credit	Fearless borrowers, McMansion buyers, power shopping as social activity	Cautious, conservative, savers	Financially dependent on parents longer than any other generation
Work attitudes	No complaining, group approach, get the job done	Formal meetings, team work, dedication to employer, work should connect to higher values		Show me the money	Seamless blend of work and personal life, job should contribute to greater good

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To keep the analysis focused exclusively on generational effects, we employed a statistical technique called MANOVA (multiple analysis of variance) to "control for" differences in importance ratings due to geographic location and job type. This technique was used in the subsequent analyses.

Geographic location
We found that geographic location affected the importance ratings ascribed by participants to key workplace features, but not with any discernable pattern. The distribution of generations was consistent across locations and, thus, was not an underlying cause of geographic differences.

Job type (mobility)
We wanted to know if workers with greater mobility in their work style (such as consultants) value workspace differently than workers with lower mobility (administrative, professional, managerial, etc). In this analysis, we used the job type data to indirectly represent mobility level.

We found no statistical difference for level of job type (and thus, mobility) on workspace importance ratings.

At least for this study, neither job type nor level of mobility plays a role in the overall importance of workspace features to employees.

Generation Y (born 1979 – 1997)

The Internet and wide availability of portable computing and communications devices mark Generation Y (see Figure 1). The ability to shape technology to unique user needs has provided a high degree of personal and work flexibility and mobility for Generation Y—and has also fostered their expectation that the world should adapt to them.

Generation Y is a larger cohort than even Baby Boomers, because its members are the offspring of that generation (Hewlett, Jackson, Sherbin, Shiller, Sosnovich, and Sumberg, 2009). They are close to their doting parents and families. This generation seeks connection to others (especially their peers), values group work and learning, and desires new experiences. Ironically, older Generation Y (children of Traditionals) have rejected their parents' 1960s counterculture tactics of reinventing existing institutions. They are more involved with pragmatic, civic-minded consensus-building than protesting and tearing down—taking a constructive approach to creating change for greater good (see Table 1).

Members of Generation Y embrace a multi-tasking work and life style and spend an average of 7.5 hours per day online (texting, surfing the Web, etc).

The Research

### Four Generations Participated in this Study

Workers from all four generations participated in this study, which used a survey to collect information. As well, four job functions are represented: administrative, professional/technical, managerial, and executive. Of the job types in the survey population, about one-third are consultants for their organizations and the remaining two-thirds are office employees in various internal functions (such as finance, human resources, and legal).

Definition of Workspace Features

From our recent research and ongoing conversations with leading companies, we identified a set of six broad workspace capabilities and features central to the experience of today's office worker (see Table 2). We asked employees to rate these features related to how important they are to supporting effective work.

Results

In this section, we present what we learned about how the generations value the six workspace features. First we compared how each generation rates the overall importance of the workspace to their effectiveness (all features combined).
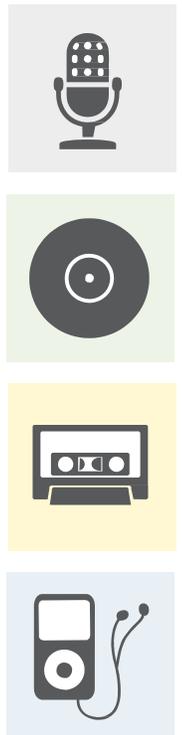
Second, we explored how each generation prioritizes the importance of the six individual workspace features.

Do generations value the overall importance of the workspace differently?

Figure 2 shows the average overall workspace importance score for each generation (based on a five-point scale where 1 = least important and 5 = highest importance). We created this overall importance score by averaging the individual feature rating scores for each respondent and then for each generation. The analysis showed no significant difference between the generations in how they rated the overall importance of workspace features (see Figure 2).

Do generations rank the importance of individual features differently?

This analysis shows that each generation rates the importance of individual workspace features in a different order (see Figure 3). In addition, Table 3 contains a summary of the most and least important workspace features by generation.

+ The Silent Generation (The "Silents") Pehaps in line with their advancing age, the single most important feature to Silents is physical comfort (see grey bars, Figure 3, and Table 3). The Silents' least important issue is acoustic privacy. The importance of the remaining issues is roughly equivalent.

+ Baby Boomers The two most important features to Boomers are acoustic privacy, followed by quality of meeting spaces (see blue bars, Figure 3, and Table 3). Their least important feature is an engaging workplace (see Figure 3). These results reflect the Baby Boomer work style which emphasizes face to face meetings combined with sensitivity to being overheard (which is sometimes used to justify a request

Fig 2. Overall importance of the workspace by generation

All generations rate the office workspace as "important"—and they rate it about equally, based on a five point scale in which 1=least importance and 5=highest importance.
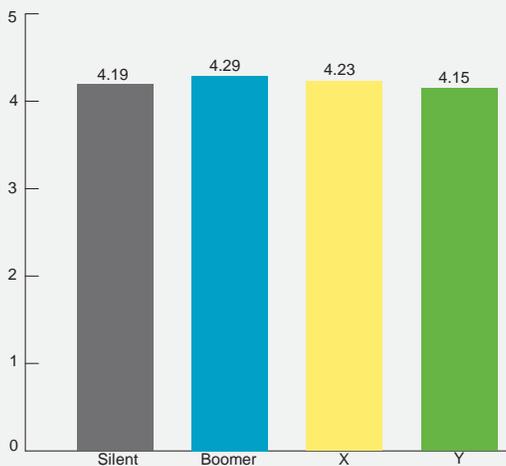

Table 2. Definitions of workspace features

From our recent research and ongoing conversations with leading companies, we identified a set of six broad workspace capabilities and features central to the experience of today's office workers.

Feature	Definition
Engaging Workplace	How well the overall office provides an engaging workplace (feeling of belonging, ability to connect with others, appropriate image of the company, welcoming environment).
Support for Casual Interaction	How well the design and layout of the overall office facilitates casual interaction and communication throughout space.
Quality of Meeting Spaces	The right number, size and location of meeting spaces, and ability to reserve and occupy meeting space when needed.
Physical Comfort	Comfort provided by the furniture and equipment within the primary workspace.
Acoustic Privacy	Ability to assess spaces that provide privacy from being overheard when needed.
Safety and Security	How safe and secure the employee feels in the building and within his or her primary workspace.

Table 3. Most and least important workspace features by generation

Generation Y and Baby Boomers are almost opposites on how they rated importance of meeting spaces and desire for an engaging workplace.

Generation	Most Important	Least Important
Silent	Physical comfort	Acoustic privacy
Boomer	1. Acoustic privacy 2. Meeting spaces	Engaging workplace
Generation X	1. Engaging workplace 2. Security	Acoustic privacy
Generation Y	Engaging workplace	Meeting spaces

for a private office). The remaining issues of security, comfort and casual interaction are significantly less important to Baby Boomers.

+ Generation X Like Generation Y, Generation X rates an engaging workplace as its most important issue (see Table 3). Not surprisingly safety and security at work is Generation X's second most important workplace issue (see yellow bars, Figure 3, and Table 3) since their early lives were impacted by issues related to lack of physical, financial and emotional security (see Figure 1). They rate support for casual interaction as a close third in importance. Acoustic privacy is the least important issue for Generation X (Figure 3 and Table 3).

+ Generation Y Because technology has freed this generation's members to choose where and when they will work, the degree to which workspace provides an engaging experience is most important to its members (green bars, Figure 3, and Table 3). They rate security, comfort and casual interaction about equivalent in importance. They reserve their lowest ratings for quality of meeting spaces (see Figure 3 and Table 3).

Fig 3. Importance of workspace features by generation

Each generation rates the importance of individual workspace features differently. An engaging workplace is most important to Generations Y and X, and acoustic privacy and having good meeting spaces are the most important feature for Baby Boomers. The data displayed in Figure 3 was calculated in the following manner. For each workspace feature (such as "engaging workplace") the importance rating scores from each generation were added together to create an overall importance score. In Figure 3, the scores for each generation are displayed as relative percentages of the total importance score for that feature. Thus, Figure 3 shows the relative percentage contribution of each generation to the overall importance score for that feature.
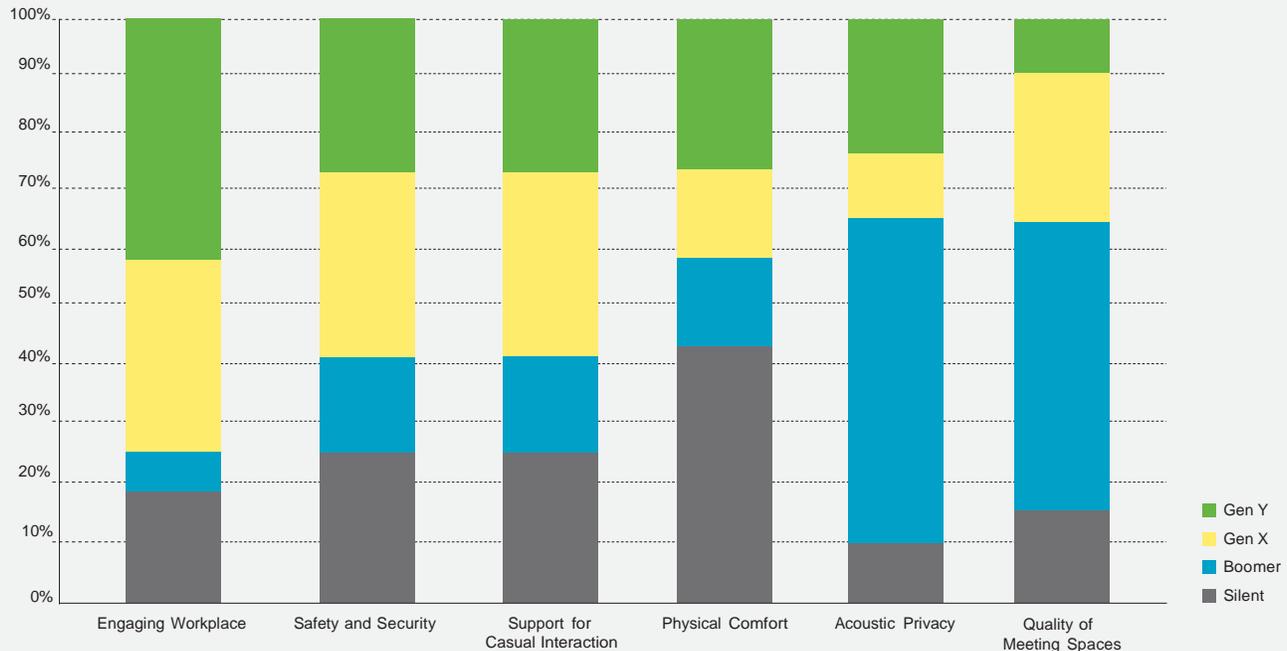
Future Workspace Themes

We developed four likely themes of the future workspace by exploring the contrasts in importance ratings primarily between Baby Boomers and Generation Y, since the workplace is transitioning between those generations. The themes include: choice, experience, integrated work, and distributed interaction.

Theme 1: Choice

The office will serve as the setting for an array of social activities and collaborative work experiences, providing spaces that employees can choose from based on their immediate needs.

Choice will be provided through a variety of means: training that helps employees make good decisions about use of space and technology resources, policies that support choice of location and time of work, and workspace design and furnishings that enhance employee control. Other research consistently finds a relationship between the amount of control provided by the environment and health and performance outcomes for office workers (O'Neill, 2007; 2010).

Theme 2: Experience

The purpose of workspace will shift from supporting function to creating experience.

Generation Y rates "having a workplace that provides an engaging experience with the organization" as its most important feature—while Baby Boomers rate it lowest.

Baby Boomers value function. Boomers, who typically separate their work and private lives, view the office workspace from a functional perspective. They want efficient spaces (which can also be luxurious, like the finishes in a fine automobile) but don't expect or want spaces that evoke the emotional connectedness of home. They may even feel uncomfortable trying to work in office space that is overtly residential in feel.

Generation Y values connection. Because of the importance of social connection to Generation Y, typical office workers of the future will expect an engaging workspace (and work culture) that makes them feel good and keeps them coupled to people they value at work and in the organization at large (O'Neill, 2008; Wymer, 2008). Generation Y blend their work and private lives and value workspaces that let them connect their personal and work realms. Thus, they may desire residential-like scale, materials, lighting and layout that make them feel comfortable and "at home."

Function versus connection. In the future, the workspace will evolve from its strictly functional role (providing support for individual and group work processes), to being part of a holistic system that creates a work experience—embracing the social and emotional components of work. In addition, facility layout, workspaces, furnishings,

Choice. *The office will provide features, technology and policies that enhance employee choice and control over how, where and when they work.*

Experience. *The office will provide a unified, engaging work experience that moves beyond simple functionality of space, emphasizing security and social connection.*

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Integrated Work. *The facility feels active and supports the seamless flow of people and work between locations and within the workspace.*

Distributed Interaction. *An easily accessed variety of meeting or multi-use spaces sprinkled throughout will largely replace formal meeting rooms and provide "on demand" privacy.*

policies, programs and technology will be designed to provide a consistency of this experience for every employee regardless of location—a unified, seamless fabric of work.

Give me shelter. The look and feel of the overall interior spaces will also convey a sense of shelter and the safety and security of home (remember security is also an important issue for Generation Y). In fact, the office will be a safer place because employee movement and location will be closely monitored and tracked through various means— ubiquitous cameras, smart employee badges, and room and furniture sensors —technologies that this younger generation of employees has grown up with and accepted.

Theme 3: Integrated Work

In the future, the most effective spaces will support the seamless transition of people moving between individual and group work modes, both between locations and within their primary workspaces.

Research has shown the benefits of supporting individual and group work modes and transitions between those modes (O'Neill and Wymer, 2009).

The future office will have an active feel. Consider the ambiance of small stores in an attractive town center, with a constant flow of people in and out of the space. Future office space will have this feel, providing the opportunity to "people watch" as a break from work—or there might be somebody coming or going that you want to talk to or meet. Contrast that atmosphere with the static library-feel from an earlier era in which people sat quietly all day in cubicles. The facility will also feel active because of the sounds from the many interactions occurring in the relatively open space. This noise will seem less distracting to the Generation Y population because they crave multiple sources of stimulation and prefer a multitasking work environment.

The individual workspace will support shifts between heads down and group work modes. While individual workspaces may be smaller and have less enclosure in the future, they will still have features and cues that demarcate the boundaries of individual space. Highly flexible task seating (unlike rigid task chairs of yore) will be augmented with flexible and adjustable work tools (task lighting, monitor arm, shelving, storage, etc). The aim of providing these flexible features will be to enhance the seamless shift between heads down work and collaboration within the workspace, which has been related to improved performance (O'Neill, 2010).

Theme 4: Distributed Interaction

Meetings will become smaller, shorter in length and more casual, and meeting spaces will need to reflect this shift.

The unit of work for the Baby Boomer is the meeting and the structured team. Thus, they value good quality formal meeting spaces to support this primary work mode.

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Generation Y prefers short informal exchanges. Its members view formal meetings through a different lens, seeing them as somewhat confrontational, and thus preferring short, socially-tinged informal interactions in smaller groups within non-traditional meeting spaces. Generation Y is also more comfortable with the role technology can play in facilitating interaction, further undermining the importance of lengthy formal meetings and the need for formal meeting spaces. Thus, in the future the fundamental nature of meetings will shift from long and formal, to short and informal with a lower number of people involved.

A variety of informal meeting spaces will support future workers. To this end, the plan of office facilities will be "landscaped"—still quite open but interspersed with some enclosed offices, lots of formal and informal meeting spaces, huddle rooms of varying sizes and formats, and small amenity spaces (pantries, coffee nooks, etc.) (Wymer, 2009; 2010). Any of these spaces can be used to support the short, informal meeting style of the typical employee of 2020.

Privacy can also be supported by informal meeting spaces used for distributed interaction. This study showed that Baby Boomers highly rate workspace that provides acoustic privacy while Generation Y rates it as one of their lowest concerns (see Figure 3). In general, Boomers expect, and highly value, the ability of an office to provide acoustic privacy. Generation Y does not share this expectation. Its members have been wireless at work from the start and are accustomed to moving around within an office space as work needs dictate. Thus, informal meeting spaces can support privacy for phone calls or face-to-face conversations. Employees who need auditory privacy at a given moment will simply move to a space designed to support that experience.

Conclusions

As Baby Boomers become less of a force in the workplace, there will be a sea change in the way workspace features are valued, which will lead to a new office paradigm.

Ten years from now, when you walk into a modern office will it look unrecognizable, incomprehensible? This is unlikely. It is probable, however, that the space will see quite different patterns of use by employees, will be managed differently, and will have evolved to a more strategic role in supporting the business. The workspace will represent a new kind of efficiency aside from solely cost considerations. This efficiency will reflect an effective alignment of the space resources with actual work styles and business requirements.

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