



## FROM A TO GEN Z: DESIGNING BETTER WORKSPACES FOR EVERYONE

Do you remember how you felt during your first months in an office job? asks Velimira Drummer, Interior Leader, Associate and Senior Architect at Stantec. Getting to know your new co-workers, being brought into an important client meeting for the first time and making professional phone calls while being all too aware your co-workers can hear everything you're saying.

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Entering the commercial workspace is often a daunting experience, especially for younger people. However, it can certainly be a positive one as well.

As architects, we know the best design always puts the needs of occupants first, which is especially true when it comes to office spaces. According to the Office of National Statistics, the average UK citizen will spend more than 84,000 hours working in their lifetime. Remote working has become a permanent part of life, and employees are choosing where to be during those hours based on their personal experiences.

Generation Z, Zoomers, the iGeneration, or whichever term you prefer when referring to those born between the mid-90s and the early 2010s, are mostly those early on in their career journeys, with many entering corporate life for the first time.

Workplace designers need to actively consider this vital demographic as they're currently expected to represent a third of the global workforce by 2025. As an industry responsible for creating new environments, we must foster the right conditions that will allow their careers to flourish from the start.

### Designing for digital natives

The first step in the process is knowing our audience. This generation grew up with smartphones and tablets in their hands, and, as a result, are some of the most diverse, globally-connected and socially-conscious people entering corporate life.

Because of this connectivity and the mass sharing of experiences, they know what 'good' looks like when it comes to work-life balance and are hyper aware of the importance of health and wellbeing.







So, how do we build an office that appeals to and supports this generation? The good news is that office design is certainly moving in the right direction. No longer are we seeing a prevalence of cubicle farms focused only on boosting productivity. The modern workplace is evolving alongside the needs of every generation that comes through it, with comfort and wellbeing on the increase with every cycle.

### Supporting growth

For Generation Z, we need to stop thinking of them as a demographic, and rather as individuals. Everyone has their own way of working, which many organisations are rapidly discovering through behavioural assessments and corporate personality tests. Simultaneously, much more attention is being given to neurodiversity in the workplace to ensure these spaces offer a comfortable and supportive environment.

Any good office design should prioritise flexibility and adaptability to accommodate differing work styles. One way of doing this well is by creating multi-modal spaces that support multiple purposes and ways of working.

In smaller offices, we should aim to create flexible multi-modal spaces that can be easily adapted using highly-mobile furniture, power technology and space division.

If space allows, designers should focus on creating a diverse workplace setting for the same reasons, empowering employees to work how, where and when they choose while giving them all the right tools to do the job well.

### A more considered approach

These tools, however, will be different depending on the office worker. Hypersensitive employees, for example,

prefer more controlled stimuli in their working environments. They are looking for consistent lighting and temperature, dedicated quiet areas for focusing and concentration and options for self-isolation when they need to get their heads down.

On the other end of the spectrum are hyposensitive workers. These people thrive in environments where they are over-stimulated, preferring colourful spaces, more open office plans where they can get creative and big screens when it comes to presenting and sharing ideas.

The most important part of creating a diverse workplace is making sure you cater to people at both ends of this spectrum. Every worker, regardless of where they sit on that scale, should have access to suitable environments where they can concentrate, create, collaborate, commune and congregate.

To further support a generation more in tune with its own wellbeing than most, embracing nature and biophilic design is a must. In 2020, Stantec sponsored biophilic design research through the Healthy Building Program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, which found that incorporating natural elements indoors reduces stress and improves creativity. The results showed that biophilic design had consistent positive impacts on physiological stress and blood pressure, especially in open offices.

### Working smarter, not harder

Technology and productivity have always gone hand in hand. With Generation Z having grown up in the digital world, making sure they have access to the tools they are used to should be a given. Considering the different types of workers, however, there are always ways of making a building smarter.

Having a more digitally-connected workspace allows for several benefits. With different people requiring varying levels of stimuli to carry out their roles effectively, having customisable humidity and temperature controls throughout a building can help ensure comfort levels for everyone. This could even be managed through an app that is linked to the building and tertiary features like smart lockers or parking.

No matter how comfortable or technologically advanced the office is, there will always be widespread demand for hybrid work patterns, and designers need to take this into account. While a traditional workspace has distinct and assigned areas for focus and collaboration, there is now more of a need to be more dynamic in our designs.

Teleworking has replaced a large majority of what were traditionally in-person meetings and helped bridge the gap between those in the office and those working remotely. These virtual interactions in themselves need to be catered for throughout the modern office. By keeping some areas flexible and unassigned, remote workers and virtual interactions can take place where they need to and for whatever reason.

### Better design, better experiences

The transition from academic life to the office can be a difficult and formative one for young people. As architects and designers, we can only do so much to help. But, by making sure that the commercial environments we create are welcoming and considerate of different work styles while supporting wellbeing and connectivity, we can help ensure tomorrow's leaders have a positive space to develop and grow. ■

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