



SCOTT PAULUS

Julie Penman (with office assistant Neal Smith) . . . "Having an open environment really helps to promote that collegial and collaborative environment."

Designing offices, from boomers to Y

Work spaces strive to meet expectations of all generations

BY BRIDGET THORESON

bthoreson@bizjournals.com

When orange chairs arrived at the new Milwaukee office of architecture firm Hammel, Green and Abrahamson Inc., Julie Penman didn't think they were comfortable. The vice president of business development leaned back so far she was nearly reclining — until a younger co-worker came along and pointed out that she was supposed to sit facing the other way and use the surface to support a laptop.

This small generational clash is part of a larger development in work spaces striving to accommodate the diverse expectations of four different generations of workers. As members of Generation X or Y and new "Millennials" enter the work force and baby boomers and their predecessors stay at work longer, offices are looking to meet the needs of their oldest and youngest employees.

"The workplace is becoming more accommodating in helping to create an atmosphere that applies to both," said Laura Schalk, ac-

count manager and designer at furniture dealer M&M Interiors in Pewaukee.

Those generations bring different expectations to the workplace, and different approaches to their work.

For the baby boomers, people born during the years after World War II into the mid-1960s, and the preceding generation, the status and security of a personal office is often desirable.

"The boomers want more privacy," said Scott Gierhahn, president and chief executive officer of facilities management company Schroeder Solutions, New Berlin. "They want the ability to have heads-down work time."

In contrast, younger workers — from Generation X, born after the boomers until about 1980, Generation Y and the Millennials, born after 1980 — value social interaction and work-life balance.

"They are much less ruthlessly interested in getting into the corporate hierarchy," said Robert Greenstreet, dean of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning. "If they don't like what they're doing, they're not so inclined to stick it out."

This adds extra incentive to building workplaces that will be attractive to these mobile Millennials. The office features they look for

SEE GENERATIONS, A29



SCOTT PAULUS

Clockwise from left to right, architects and medical planners David Janous, Sara Langjahr and Karen Desing work in the open concept environment of HGA.

GENERATIONS: Office designers address needs of multiple age groups

CONTINUED FROM A28

are technology, amenities and common areas, professionals said.

For example, when Hammel, Green and Abrahamson moved to its current office at 333 E. Erie St., the firm designed the space to promote teamwork. Tables and chairs are placed next to a tackboard wall in six major "teaming areas" around the office for quick or impromptu meetings. Everyone works in cubicles, which have low walls so a colleague can stand and talk to someone sitting at a desk.

The only doors to be found are at the entrances to conference rooms tucked away in the corners of the 130-person office. Three coffee bars accompany other teaming spaces, which include those orange chairs.

"Having an open environment really helps to promote that collegial and collaborative environment," Penman said.

The firm also offers spaces geared toward younger workers — if they want to bicycle to work, there is a shower, lockers, and a room to store the bikes. Building a space that appeals to young workers is a plus, Penman said.

"To be competitive now and in the future we have to attract the best and brightest talent," she said.

Attracting employees is a big motivation behind designing for different age groups. Well-designed workplaces enhance productivity and employee retention. The trick is to meet each employee's expectations for his or her environment.

"The ability to design a good interior space and yet give individual freedom to the surroundings is challenging," Gierhahn said.

By designing for the individual, offices can come up with spaces that suit not only the youngest generation, but the older ones, too.

BOOMERS LIKE PRIVACY

As an example, insurance company Acuity considered personal space when working with Milwaukee architecture firm Epstein Uhen

Architects to expand its Sheboygan headquarters in 2004. The workers, who have an average age of about 41, have larger cubicles than typical with personalized space and large side panels for privacy. Classes are offered for free in an aerobics room, part of a 10,000-square-foot exercise center, including private massage and locker rooms.

"It's like a country club atmosphere," said John Signer, vice president of human re-

The workplace is becoming MORE ACCOMMODATING in helping to create an atmosphere that applies to both.

Laura Schalk
M&M Interiors

sources. "We have a real strong commitment here to make sure all the space is really, really nice."

Following these tenets of designing for the generations — communal areas, amenities, technology and personalized space — can also improve relationships between the generations. For instance, the new office at the Madison branch of law firm Quarles & Brady features a cafe where staff can meet with each other or with clients.

"Bringing a firm together like that means you bring all generations together," said Patricia Algiers, president of Milwaukee design company Patricia S. Algiers & Associates, which worked with the law firm on the design. "It allows the different generations to communicate."

This open format based on communication is where offices are headed, UWM's Greenstreet said. The school has an ongoing studio that looks at the office of the future, where general work spaces have replaced traditional single-person offices. Although it may be difficult for older generations to adjust to the change, it will be positive for everyone involved, he said.

"At the end of the day a more balanced work force is a much more creative group," Greenstreet said. "You have to allow evolution to take place."