



# International wellness trends in occupational health: New workforce-outdated workplace?

An aide memoire to Health Surveillance  
 Primum non nocere FIRST DO NO HARM

**Dr Murry Coombs** – Ampath OH consultant, email: mwcoombs@dow.com

**Lisa Liebenberg** – Ampath AAT OH Manager, email: liebenbergl@ampath.co.za

## INTRODUCTION

People are living and working longer and, for the first time in history, five generations will be working side by side. Even though the lives of workers have changed, society's idea about what constitutes an ideal worker has not. We still perceive the ideal worker as somebody that is always available, has no outside responsibilities or interests, rarely gets sick, and prioritises work above all else. In order to redefine and understand today's worker, it is important to take into consideration the vast differences between generations, regarding life and workplace expectations.

## FIVE GENERATIONS WORKING SIDE BY SIDE

If we compare these generations (Table 1), it is clear that managing a workforce with all five generations will be challenging, and managers will now have to focus not only on the risk associated with the job, but also on the risk that arises when these generations meet in the workplace.

According to Jeanne C Meister, a founding partner of Future Workplace, it is the employer's job to help employees recognise that they each have distinct sets of skills and different things that they bring to the table.<sup>1</sup> The changing workforce requires a different management strategy to ensure that the expectations of these five generations are met, without compromising a company's goals. With employee wellness programmes being one of the main

strategies of companies today, we see the proportion of companies with wellness programmes increasing, as organisations realise that they need some type of wellness initiative to stay current and competitive.

## WELLNESS TRENDS IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

The new year calls for more flexibility, greater emphasis on total well-being, healthier work environments, and improved technology for worksite wellness.

### Flexibility: working anywhere, anytime

Workers are still expected to prioritise work, yet the majority of them no longer have the support at home to do so. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, 48% of married couples are in dual income households in the United States, where both the man and the woman work.<sup>3</sup> The ability to work from home, as well as flexi working hours, are ideal for any employee who is raising a family, or even for an employee with a long commute. Working anywhere and everywhere will improve work output and worker's commitment.

More than 60% of the current workforce in the United Kingdom and United States come from Generations X and Y.<sup>2</sup> As 'work-life' balance and flexibility are their main aspirations, flexibility in the workplace is an important factor to consider. Employees with flexible work schedules have been

**Table 1. Characteristics of five generations<sup>2</sup>**

Characteristic	Maturists (pre-1945)	Baby boomers (1946-1965)	Generation X (1966-1976)	Generation Y or Millennials (1977-1994)	Generation Z (post-1994)
<b>Aspiration</b>	Home ownership	Job security	Work-life balance	Freedom and flexibility	Security and stability
<b>Attitude towards career</b>	Jobs are for life	Careers are defined by employers	Loyal to profession not employer	Work 'with' organisation not 'for'	Move 'seamlessly' between organisations
<b>Attitude towards technology</b>	Disengaged from technology	Early infomation technology (IT) adaptors	Digital imigrants	Digital natives	Technoholics - totally dependent on IT
<b>Signature product</b>	Automobile	Television	Personal computer	Tablet/Smartphone	Google glass, nano-technology, 3D printing, driverless cars

shown to have reduced stress levels, improved work-family balance, and improved physical and mental well-being.<sup>4</sup>

### Total well-being: a happy employee is a productive employee

It is becoming evident that wellness is about more than just physical health. Even though total well-being can be harder for employers to monitor than physical health, it is just as essential to cover in employee wellness. The general view of health and safety now includes a wide-ranging approach that protects psychological health, promotes mental well-being, and actively works to prevent harm due to negligent, reckless or intentional acts. Mindfulness is also working its way into worksite wellness. Mindfulness focuses on 'being' rather than 'doing'. It trains your mind to understand how you are feeling without making judgements. Anxiety and depression are still the most common psychological health problems in the workplace and programmes should be focused to address them.

### Healthier work environments: healthy environment = productive employee

A physically safe and healthy environment contributes to an employee's psychological health, and a well-designed workspace has a positive effect on wellbeing and productivity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 150 minutes of moderate activity per week.<sup>5</sup> Offices should therefore be designed to not only encourage greater movement, but also to encourage the trend that work happens in a variety of spaces around the building. One example is to centralise resources such as kitchens and boardrooms, forcing employees to get up and move around in the workplace. Companies are also beginning to see the workplace as a source of competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is the extent to which the workspace supports a company's vision and goals. Competitive advantage can be measured by means of productivity of workers and frequency of workspace utilisation.

### Improved technology

The signature product for Generation X, Y and Z is technology-based. Technology is a huge enabler of work and has become a huge driver in workplace design and strategy. As the workforce becomes more global and mobile, technology will become more and more critical to the success of companies. According to an article published by Healthcare Trends Institute, wearable devices are booming for both Generation Z and millennials.<sup>6</sup> Wearables are trending productivity and personal health outside the workplace and can therefore be successfully introduced into the workplace.

### CONCLUSION

The generation gap refers to a difference in attitudes between people of different generations, leading to a lack

of understanding. Although challenging, this gap can, and must, be used in the workplace to optimally use each generation to its fullest potential. Employers have to focus strategies for well-being to accommodate these differences in a manner that one generation can feel secure and another can learn in a safe environment to adapt to changing times.

### REFERENCES

1. Managing people from 5 generations. Harvard business Review. <https://hbr.org/2014/09/managing-people-from-5-generations>
2. Barclays. A summary of talking about my generation: exploring the benefits engagement challenge; 2013. Available at: <https://wealth.barclays.com/content/dam/bwpublic/global/documents/global-stock-rewards/multi-generations-summary.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2017).
3. United States Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor. Husband and wife employed in 48 percent of married-couple families in 2015, May 2, 2016. Available at: <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2016/husband-and-wife-employed-in-48-percent-of-married-couple-families-in-2015.htm> (accessed 15 May 2017).
4. Focus on workplace flexibility. [http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/need/need\\_employees](http://workplaceflexibility.bc.edu/need/need_employees).
5. Williams J. 2016 trends in the workplace (undated). Available at: <https://www.arcadis.com/media/2/3/6/%7B236A8585-8DF7-4FD2-B6C1-8EBC5A2D6906%7DWorkplace%20Trends%20for%202016.pdf> (accessed 12 May 2017).
6. Healthcare Trend Institute. Wearable Technology New workplace Trend for 2016, May 6, 2016. Available at: <http://healthcaretrendsinstitute.org/wearable-technology-new-workplace-trend-for-2016/> (accessed 15 May 2017).

### OTHER SOURCES

- Aguilar L. Gender News: The myth of the ideal workplace: new workforce, outdated workplace, April 16, 2012. The Clayman Institute for gender Research, Stanford University. Available at: <http://gender.stanford.edu/news/2012/myth-ideal-worker-new-workforce-outdated-workplace> (accessed 12 May 2017).
- Shah R. Working with five generations in the workplace, April 20, 2011. Forbes. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rawnshah/2011/04/20/working-with-five-generations-in-the-workplace/#77c917d43e7a> (accessed 12 May 2017).
- WJSchroer. Generations X, Y, Z and the others (undated). Available at: <http://socialmarketing.org/archives/generations-xy-z-and-the-others/> (accessed 12 May 2017).
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Total well-being in the workplace, September 16, 2017. Available at: <http://www.plant.ca/features/total-well-workplace/> (accessed 12 May 2017).
- Nash DB, Fabius RJ, Skoufalos A, Clarke JL, Horowitz MR, editors. Population health. Creating a culture of wellness. Burlington: Jones and Bartlett Learning; 2016.
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). Healthy minds @ work. Available at [http://www.ccohs.ca/healthy\\_minds](http://www.ccohs.ca/healthy_minds) (accessed 12 May 2017).

These pages are sponsored by Drs Du Buisson, Kramer, Swart, Bouwer Inc./Ing.