

This year's Steel Conference keynoter ponders if it's generational or a problem.

DO YOU WEAR Flip-Flops or Thongs?

BY GEOFF WEISENBERGER

IS IT GENERATIONAL or a problem?

The question of whether you call a particular type of casual footwear flip-flops or thongs served as an analogy for a discussion of generational differences at this year's NASCC: The Steel Conference in Nashville. Haydn Shaw, the keynote speaker, used the question to frame the fact that for the first time in American history, four identifiable generations are all currently in the workplace together: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials.

The presentation, "Leading Across Generations," was about the differences between these four generations, the clashes between them, who is "right" when conflict occurs and generally how all of them can learn to work productively together. The question was meant to determine whether a clash is something that is just a difference of opinion between generations or something that poses a true risk, such as a company losing money or customers. Take the matter of wearing flip-flops in the workplace, for example. The older generations might say, "We have a strict policy that states that no one can wear flip-flops to work," while the younger ones might counter with, "Why does it matter as long as I'm comfortable and am getting my work done?" Who's right? Is it generational or a problem?

The theme of generations and cycles was a common thread throughout the conference. For starters, the conference itself hit a high of its own with nearly 4,600—an increase of more than 800 from the previous record in 2013. And that doesn't even include the nearly 1,000 people that tuned into the two dozen sessions that were streamed live over the Internet.

Of course, representatives of all four generations were at the show, some of whom were attending for the first time and others that have been attending for, well, multiple generations.

"After 35 years of attending these conferences, I still acquire some usable information every year," said Bob Petroski of Hercules Steel Company.

And in some cases, multiple generations from the same company were represented.

"The Steel Conference is always a great balance of networking and learning," said Todd Weaver of Metals Fabrication Company. "We brought a couple younger employees for the first time and they got a lot out of the conference."

The theme of cycles was also present in AISC vice president John Cross' presentation "The Construction Market—Where to from Here?" One of his key observations was that the number of construction starts this year is similar to the number of starts a year ago, though the projects are larger on average. Why? Because more people—specifically, Millennials—are moving to cities, thus creating opportunities for retail, office and residential developers to further build up urban centers. Cross also noted that we are living in an increasingly volatile world and while construction activity will always remain cyclical, we should expect these cycles to shorten from the historical 15- to 20-year variety to 10 years or so, hopefully with less dramatic swings. (For more recent construction market numbers, see "Crude Effects" in the April 2015 issue of *Modern Steel*, available at www.modernsteel.com.)

"AISC BIMSteel Initiatives," presented by AISC's director of technology initiatives Luke Faulkner, was noteworthy and aimed at pulling all generations of the steel fabrication industry into the future in a very specific way: updating the steel ordering process from fax-driven to electronic-driven. "What year is it?" he asked, to drive home this point. "It's not a trick question." Ordering steel via fax in an age when everything else is ordered online isn't generational; it's a problem.

Another session, "Lessons I Wish I had Known Starting Out" (which pushed past standing-room-only to overflowing), focused on advice from multiple engineers on things they learned as they were starting their careers. For example, one speaker, Jie Zuo of Walter P Moore, provided a handful of simple suggestions, such as: understand the load path, don't reinvent the wheel, don't over-rely on software, understand that the fundamentals of design don't change and brace yourself for the fact that changes will occur on every project—good reminders for experienced designers and other industry personnel and also

- Several past T.R. Higgins Award winners were on hand at this year's Higgins keynote, "What Seismic Steel Design is all About," presented by current recipient Chia-Ming Uang of the University of California–San Diego. From left: Rafael Sabelli, Lawrence G. Griffis, Jerome F. Hajjar, Donald W. White, Larry S. Muir, Uang, Michael D. Engelhardt, Reidar Bjorhovde, Joseph Yura, Theodore V. Galambos and Thomas M. Murray.



the type of advice that those soon entering the workforce might not learn in class.

"The session gave me some good advice that I can carry over when I start my career after finishing school," said Derek Marucci, a graduate student at the University of Cincinnati. "And thanks to hearing from several speakers, I got several perspectives on what to expect and how to make the best of the first few months/year of my working life."

Meanwhile, the session "Vertical Bracing Connections-Analysis and Design" provided one attendee, Adam Knous of Safety Through Engineering, with practical information for the immediate future.

"Not only did it provide me a path to seek more information, it also clarified the methodology behind the application," he said. "This subject was quite fresh in my mind as I am currently on a project that involves several vertical and chevron connections."

The exhibit hall was equally diverse, thanks to the approximately 200 companies that made the trip to Nashville. Solutions ranged from the high-tech—like Tekla Structures 21, which lets teams access and manage project data via a cloud platform, and the associated Tekla Warehouse, a free online library of Tekla Structures modeling tools, intelligent parts and templates—to Rapidrill, an ergonomic new drill press that fits virtually any handheld drill and applies even pressure at a perfect right angle, even during upside-down use.

If you didn't get a chance to attend the conference, or if there were sessions you wanted to hear but were busy at other sessions, AISC posts recordings of all of the sessions at www.aisc.org/2015nascconline about 60 days after the conference.

Next year, The Steel Conference completes a cycle of sorts as it returns to someplace where every generation can feel young again: Orlando (where it took place in 2010). Be sure to bring your *flip-flops*. ■

