

New kids on the business block

A generation gap is emerging in many workplaces where younger recruits use technology in ways that their older colleagues find difficult to fathom. **David Dumeresque** explains

Would you be surprised if I told you that, in their undergraduate years, today's business recruits and those entering the workforce over the next three to five years will probably have spent more time using their digital technologies than they did reading - in fact, at least 50 per cent more? To the older workforce and management, this may come as a surprise, but not to those called the 'net generation'.

'Digital natives', as they are more commonly referred to, are people born between 1980 and 1999, and who have grown up in the digital age of Web 2.0 with a host of digital 'toys', from smartphones and PDAs to MP3 players. What makes them different from most of today's managers - people we refer to in this instance as 'digital immigrants' - is that digital natives grew up and learned with digital technology. Previous generations came into the digital era learning about, and adopting, many of the new technologies as they emerged. It might seem a subtle difference, but it's a very important one. The fact that digital natives often used their digital gadgets while studying at colleges or universities doesn't mean they are less intelligent or less educated. What it demonstrates is that they learn in a very different way.

Digital natives live, study and work in an environment where they receive, assimilate and process information very rapidly. They prefer non-linear or random access to information rather than sequential access (a CD versus cassette tape analogy), and they are also very capable of multi-tasking, functioning best when they are networked. Blogs, wikis - web-based software that allows people to create content collaboratively - and RSS are terms that fit comfortably with this generation, whereas to many digital immigrants, they can be mumbo-jumbo.

A growing number of educational establishments are realising that today's students are not only distinctly different from previous

generations, but that they also differ fundamentally from the people their institutions were designed to teach. Now we are starting to see some major changes within our schools where faculties are beginning to understand how the net generation learn and interact with each other, developing curricula that meet everyone's educational requirements.

So if the digital natives are irrevocably changing methods of education, then it stands to reason that the working environment that they are beginning to enter is also being affected. While there is nothing new about different generations working together, the arrival of the digital native has heralded one of the biggest generational shifts since the 1950s, resulting in a significant discontinuity within the workplace. As this generation comes together with an older generation at all levels within the organisation, it is essential that managers have an in-depth understanding of the differences in order to capitalise on the diversity of styles, skills and job requirements.

In Mark McCrindle's Australian research into digital natives and their attitudes to work (<http://mccrindle.com.au>), he found that they don't seek a job, but rather that they seek an opportunity. Certainly, job description is important, but what drives these people and keeps them motivated is the workplace culture, management style, fun, variety and flexibility. This is very different from the digital immigrant era, where building a career was seen as all important.

As the two generations converge across a number of corporate activities - where digital immigrants are managing possibly several generations and, as is increasingly happening, younger and developing executives are managing older workers - generation gaps need to be fully addressed. This is to provide a positive connection between, and integration of, both sides. Particularly in middle



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management, older managers often find it difficult to adjust to superiors who are younger – and in some cases much younger – than themselves, yet, conversely, with digital native managers, age and life cycle are not important issues in their workplace. What is important is the contribution people can make.

Bridging the gap

In bridging the generation gap, it is imperative that senior management fully understand how digital natives receive, process and share information, the role and value of communities and networks, and the use of personal technology in the organisation. While digital natives receive and process information in very different ways to digital immigrants, it is how they share information that is changing the internal communications landscape. Managers from an earlier generation would feel quite comfortable with emails, whereas to digital natives, this form is both cumbersome and very slow. Instant messaging is their preferred method of communication, particularly with the widespread use of mobile phones. For HR managers, the methods and speed with which information can now be channelled throughout the organisation – often with traditional communication routes that can be monitored – has meant a re-evaluation of their role in disseminating information both downwards and upwards.

In recent times, the gap between business and consumer-focused technologies has narrowed significantly, even though applications such as social networking, user-generated content and wikis remain uncharted waters for many business leaders. Security issues aside, there remains a general mistrust among senior managers of social networks and the use of personal technology in the workplace. That view must change if companies are to attract and retain the human capital required to maintain their competitive position in a rapidly changing marketplace.

With the net generation now entering the workforce, we are witnessing one of the biggest generational changes in employment since the end of the Second World War. Leading

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corporations such as Linux, British Telecomm, GSK and Top Coder are pioneering change, but senior managers of many other organisations remain unaware of the impact this fundamental shift is going to have on their businesses. Success requires that management understands and accepts that technology and social media will play an increasingly important role, requiring the establishment of an infrastructure that allows digital natives to operate most effectively. **bex**



Machine driven

If managers are concerned about the personal gadgets that their employees are bringing to work or the time spent on the internet, they should educate them about company rules, expectations and violations, rather than banning the technology altogether. It has been suggested that those employees who bring their own technology into the workplace will actually help their companies find innovative ways to operate, in addition to doing investigative work on new and potentially more effective technologies.

Management will also need to develop new and collaborative methods of leadership, since the ‘command and control’ methods still evident in the majority of businesses are too formal and can be alien to a generation of future managers.

Digital natives develop communities and networks that are based on informal relationships, and this conflicts with the more formal structures seen within commercial and professional organisations, resulting in the digital natives disengaging themselves from the hierarchical format.