

Capturing the Value of "Generation Tech" Employees

by Marc Prensky

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Capturing the Value of “Generation Tech” Employees

The new breed of staff can be an enormous force for positive change and success in their companies — if managers listen to them.

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After years of debating the limitations of hierarchically run organizations and the merits of democratization, the end of command-and-control management may finally be here.

Blame the people 25 and younger in our midst.

Unprecedented changes in electronics and communications over the past 30 years have led to fresh patterns of thinking in these young “digital natives” — a new generation of people who are collectively harnessing both new technology and new behavioral skills — often to effect dramatic change within the organizations that employ them.

Think about Microsoft in the 1990s. The software giant was rolling along with “billg” at the

helm, garnering big profits, living off simple operating systems, and ignoring the Internet. But younger Microsoft employees, more in tune with today’s technology, began filling Mr. Gates’s e-mail box with charges that he was neglecting the Web, thereby putting the company in peril. The digital chant finally got loud enough for Mr. Gates to write a now-famous strategic change memo declaring that the Internet would now be at the center of everything Microsoft did. Here was an example of transformation — from the bottom up.

A recent tale of bottom-up change initiated from the U.S. military’s front lines is equally intriguing. Troops on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq were issued “kits” that were

less than perfect for their jobs. But with a quick Internet search, soldiers found clothing and equipment much better suited to dusty and intemperate Middle Eastern environments. They began ordering their own gear directly online, ignoring established procedures. Eventually, military brass was won over.

Natives and Immigrants

Why do I call these young computer enthusiasts and organizational activists “digital natives”? Think about the extraordinary cumulative digital experiences of each of these future business, military, and government leaders: an average of close to 10,000 hours playing video games; more than 200,000 e-mails and instant messages sent and

received; nearly 10,000 hours of talking, playing games, and using data on cell phones; more than 20,000 hours spent watching TV (much of it jump-cut-laden MTV); almost 500,000 commercials seen — all before they finished college. At most, they've logged only 5,000 hours of book reading.

This generation is better than any before at absorbing information and making decisions quickly, as well as at multitasking and parallel processing. In contrast, people age 30 or older are “digital immigrants” because they can never be as fluent in technology as a native who was

stand. Blog? Wiki? RTS? Spawn? POS? AstroTurf? How do these sound when juxtaposed with *cross-functional cooperation*, *team-based management*, and *360 feedback*?

Unfortunately, many digital immigrant leaders — including many of those who claim to be “plugged in” — don't get the fact that digital natives bring unique capabilities to large organizations. Often, immigrant managers are caught between their old beliefs and the new realities they observe. As one senior executive put it: “Blogging has proven the vitality of participatory journalism. Now there

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People under age 30 are better than any previous generation at absorbing information and making decisions quickly.

born into it. You can see it in the digital immigrants' “accent” — whether it is printing out e-mails or typing with fingers rather than thumbs. Have you ever noticed that digital natives, unlike digital immigrants, don't talk about “information overload”? Rather, they crave more information.

The youngest workers don't need to adapt to fit into the agile, flat, team-based organizations older executives are striving to design. They just do it: They communicate, share, buy, sell, exchange, create, meet, collect, coordinate, play games, learn, evolve, search, analyze, report, program, socialize, explore, and even transgress using new digital methods and a new vocabulary most older managers don't even under-

are people like me coming along and trying to figure out how to package it.” That is simply digital ignorance, say the natives: There's far more to blogging than the next new product.

Learning from Youth

This is not to suggest that a premium shouldn't be placed on the knowledge of organizations and the management experience of top executives. Nor is it to say that digital natives — business neophytes, almost by definition — would be better at running a company than seasoned leaders. It's simply to argue that technology is altering the face of organizations in more ways than just by improving productivity, and smart managers would do well to pay attention to what this technological-

ly savvy generation has to offer. By overlooking or underestimating digital natives, older executives are sending a message to some of the most talented people in the work force that they are not appreciated or supported. Recently, a senior Coca-Cola executive recalled what happened at another Fortune 500 company he worked for when a young engineer

see the customers and look them in the eye” may no longer work in fast-moving industries that are populated increasingly by people accustomed to building and maintaining their relationships online and using software tools to assess product quality or a business’s reputation. Or managers could ask digital natives for recommendations about new prod-

Digital natives are using technology to transform institutions from Microsoft to the U.S. military.

from MIT, brimming with enthusiasm, was hired. Threatened by the young recruit’s skills and eagerness, some managers made his life at the office uncomfortable. In short order, the recruit quit.

Far more prudently, before he left GE, Jack Welch had his top 1,000 managers be mentored by young GE employees, “many of whom had just joined the firm, but who nevertheless understood the new technologies better than GE’s finest,” according to *The Economist*. Microsoft now sees the role of its managers as “clearing obstacles from the paths” chosen by its programmers, often its youngest employees, who carry the firm’s future products in their heads.

Why stop there? Executives could consult with digital natives about new ways of connecting with their customers. The old idea of “go

ucts that might satisfy younger customers’ needs more directly.

If consulted, these young employees can be an enormous force for positive change and success in their companies. If ignored, they will doubtless spend their brain cycles on the job plotting (in ways managers can’t control) how to make their own work lives, not their companies, better. +

Resources

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