



Effective Engagement of Digital Natives in the Ever-Transforming Digital World

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INTRODUCTION

According to the latest estimates, more than 4.2 billion people worldwide have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2018). That number is more than half of the world's present population. The digital divide is being demolished every second of every day and we are fast moving into a hyper-connected networked world where past boundaries of geographical distances, time zones, and cultural differences are ceasing to matter. The average person uses more than four connected devices every day, and digital technology has arrived as the invisible but all-knowing, all-controlling dimension of our everyday lives.

Modern-day businesses have to thrive in a data-driven culture where the only thing that does not change is change itself. And the speed at which the changes happen is increasing so exponentially that it feels like everyone is on a constant learning loop. Jumping off this loop is equivalent to committing professional suicide as you can no longer refuse to embrace constant learning and change. How can businesses negotiate a world where everything is digital and connected and your customers are at

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times more informed than you are? The best solution is by letting go of the scary connotations of the phrase ‘digital disruption’ and embracing the possibilities and opportunities of ‘digital transformation.’

Digital transformation can be defined as the acceleration of business activities, processes, competencies, and models to fully leverage the changes and opportunities of digital technologies and their impact in a strategic and prioritized way (Edmead, 2016). It can also be called digital business transformation, since digital transformation is in essence transformation of the underlying framework of your business too. Technology innovation, customer behavior and demand, and external environmental factors are some of the reasons why a business might want to undergo a digital business transformation (Edmead, 2016). For this we need to build ‘digital fluency’ among our employees as well as increase the ‘digital readiness’ of our organizations (Briggs & Makice, 2012).

Digital fluency is an ability to reliably achieve desired outcomes through use of technology. It is the maximum individual potential to achieve desired outcomes through the use of digital technology (Briggs & Makice, 2012). It is not enough to know how to use the technological tools but one has to understand how to use them to achieve the desired outcomes. Therefore, being digitally fluent is a step up from mere digital literacy. A digitally literate person will have the basic skills required to participate in the digitally enabled social sphere, but, in contrast, a digitally fluent person will be able to navigate the same with an ease that comes from constant practice and immersion in the technology. Companies can be described as being ‘digitally ready’ when they are able to support the digital fluency of their employees by aligning their resources, culture, and purpose with the tasks they are asked to undertake (Briggs & Makice, 2012). Digital fluency is not a static state of being. It is a state of constant learning, up-gradation, and up-skilling because of the speed with which digital technologies change.

Like for any language, being digitally fluent implies that you have a level of comfort with the digital world that implies that you were born speaking the digital language. And that is where the digital natives or millennials enter the discussion. Who are the digital natives? Why are they important in a discussion about digital transformation of business? Digital natives (Prensky, 2001) is the terminology used to describe that part of the world’s population who were born after 1980 and have been immersed in a technological environment all their lives, thereby making them especially adept at handling changing technology with an almost effortless flair.

Digital immigrants, on the other hand, lived part of their lives in a simpler time where technology was not the driving force of their lives and hence have a more difficult time navigating in and adapting to today's technology led milieu. It is expected that by 2025, digital natives will comprise 75% of the workforce, thereby making them the most economically powerful demographic group in history (dmresourcecenter.com, 2018).

In this scenario, it is important for businesses to understand who the digital natives are so that they can better leverage them as employees and also understand what makes them tick as customers. An organization that has to manage a successful digital business transformation will require a workforce that consists of both digital natives and digital immigrants to cooperate with the process and successfully make the transition so that no one is left feeling overwhelmed and falls behind in the process. This chapter attempts to throw some light on how to manage digital natives both as internal and as external stakeholders of the business.

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH THE DIGITAL NATIVES

To quote Mark Prensky (2001), digital natives are “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet.’ ‘Digital immigrants’ are those who need to learn the digital language, they are not born speaking it, so they carry an ‘accent’ no matter how proficient they become at using digital tools. Digital immigrants prefer to use e-mail for online communication, whereas digital natives prefer the more synchronous forms of instant messaging. With mobile phones, digital immigrants favor speaking to people, whereas digital natives prefer speed texting. Digital natives prefer to share differently as well. Blogging is increasingly becoming popular among both digital immigrants and digital natives, but once again for different reasons. Digital natives use blogging to share personal experiences and treat personal blogging websites as forms of online journals. By contrast, digital immigrants tend to use blogging sites more as intellectual tools to share and discuss ideas with their peers (Prensky, 2001).

Not only do digital natives use technology differently—their lives are also being impacted by technology differently to the extent that their self-presentation, self-image, self-esteem, and wellbeing are influenced (Colbert, Yee, & George, 2016). They are often described as digitally literate, highly connected, experiential, social, and in need of immediate gratification (McMahon & Pospisil, 2005). Digital natives consider the

digital world to be part of their personalities. They expect to be connected at all times (Vodanovich, Sundaram, & Myers, 2010).

Digital is almost coded into the genes of the millennial generation; it is that natural for them. They are digital by default. Research has shown that they spend 41% of their free time on their devices (Morrison, 2015). They own an average of 2.4 devices, which might include smartphones, laptops, notebooks, iPads, and music streaming gadgets. Prensky (2001) says that brain scans show that their increased use of digital devices has actually caused changes to their brain structure. They relate to technology in a different way and are naturals at interacting and understanding with technology.

Among the adverse consequences of this constant connectedness is what is called FOMO in urban slang—the Fear Of Missing Out. It is a compulsive need to be up to date in what is going on within their social circles as well as in the outer world, which can even lead to disruption of healthy sleep patterns as people take their smartphones to bed with them and check messages and other updates during the nights and first thing in the morning.

At the same time, many among digital natives say they feel a sense of social fatigue, which is ‘a feeling that being connected all the time is too much. A desire to disconnect and be offline and to regulate and bring down the time spent on social media’ (techopedia.com). As a result, the more conscientious among them try to limit their time spent on social media by prioritizing their social media use and limiting themselves to being active on only a handful of social media sites rather than trying to be everywhere all at once and getting overwhelmed by it.

Many digital natives have grown up playing video games and have acquired a set of unique skills such as the ability to take risks and overcome obstacles, to learn from failures, to manage diverse teams, solve conflict, distribute rewards equitably, and so on as a result (Colbert et al., 2016). These skills make them invaluable assets in the workplace. Similarly, businesses that are looking to implement ‘design thinking’ for their innovation process will do well to inculcate the gaming skills of learning by trial and error (Beck & Wade, 2004; Glen, Suci, & Baughn, 2014).

The digital workforce will likely be comfortable with technology-based instruction (Kraiger & Ford, 2006), giving organizations a low-cost, replicable solution for helping employees develop the skills that they need. Some tools that are currently in use are Google Drive for collaborative writing, Trello for collaborative project management, and Yammer or

Slack for communication and enterprise-level social networking. With more organizations using firm-generated social media content to connect with customers and build their brands, employees who understand and can leverage the power of social media will also be valuable to organizations (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016).

On the other hand, many millennials experience a decrease in face-to-face communication skills and nervousness during telephone calls because most communication is conducted via texting which is seen as more efficient and gives the opportunity to self-present in a favorable manner. Also they display decreasing levels of empathy probably because of increasing levels of technology immersion (Colbert et al., 2016).

Technology has blurred the lines between work and nonwork domains (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). While email, the Internet, and even social media are integral tools for doing work, they also provide easy access to family, friends, online shopping, and other nonwork purposes while at work. Inability to disconnect from technology during nonwork hours can lead to higher levels of stress and work-life conflict (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013) adversely affecting employee wellbeing (Colbert et al., 2016).

WHAT CAN COMPANIES DO FOR DIGITAL NATIVES?

As Employees

Digital natives are highly cause driven and will love to work for companies that measure performance not just in financial terms but also in terms of contribution to social good. They are also aware of and support brands that have a social cause (dmresourcecenter.com, 2018).

While digital natives boast a strong work ethic, how, when, and where they accomplish the work should be left to them. Companies that expect a 9–5, 5-day workweek from them can expect a dissatisfied bunch of employees (Lovelock, 2018). Work-life balance is very important to them, especially because they have the technological tools that make this balance easier to achieve. While they want to earn enough to facilitate their life goals, they also want the free time to pursue their interests outside of work (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013).

They have grown up in a culture where collaboration is important (Commonplaces, 2014) and companies should provide the necessary internal knowledge management tools to accomplish this. They seek opinions and inputs from various quarters and believe that this gives them better solutions

to problems. Companies should be open to setting up collaborative teams not limited by location or department. Virtual teams are a great way to accomplish this (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015).

Digital natives are not intimidated by titles, seniority, or positions. They see their superiors as mentors rather than bosses and will expect to be treated as equals. They are highly ambitious and expect to make managerial positions in two years of joining the work force (Ashridge and MSLGroup, 2014).

Loyalty to a particular organization is not important to them and they will switch jobs if they get bored. Millennials will not stay in a company and wait for a promotion every 3–5 years (Ashridge and MSLGroup, 2014). Companies should function as corporate lattices where employees are moved horizontally across business functions for different projects rather than as corporate ladders where the only movement is vertical (Benko, Anderson, & Vickberg, 2011).

Mobility is an important factor for millennials (Gilson et al., 2015). Companies should provide the necessary technological support to enable this. A combination of cloud computing and use of light technological solutions to enable mobility will increase efficiency in the workplace too. Also an option to bring your own technology (BYOT) will be a boon to this workforce (Puybaraud, 2012).

As Customers

For marketers and brands seeking to engage their millennial audience, it is first of all imperative to realize that as a result of living all their lives in an environment where information is available at their fingertips, they are impossible to fool and incredibly impatient with slow responses and campaigns that don't really speak to them. They carry their idealism proudly and will happily purchase brands and products that espouse a social cause. They are also vociferous in speaking out about anything that they dislike, so companies need to be very careful about how they engage with this audience online (dmresourcecenter.com, 2018). Be quick at apologizing for any mistakes and try to rectify them at the earliest. Best strategy will be to not make any mistakes at all!

Millennials are also characterized by their focus on accumulating life experiences rather than owning property. So they might opt to use their income to travel rather than settling down into a typical middle-class lifestyle buying homes, cars, and other large immovable investments

(Niewiadomski & Anderson, 2015). This demography is moving from a lifestyle of ownership to a lifestyle of easy access, instead of buying a car they will use a ride aggregator such as Uber, instead of investing on office space, they might prefer to work from shared office spaces. This type of thinking gives them all the conveniences of modern life that money can provide access to without having to bother with the hassles that come with ownership such as maintenance and upkeep.

They are constantly digitally networked at all times (Sørensen, 2016), which means they have easy access to information at all times and this means that they are attuned to an on demand lifestyle and have a growing sense of entitlement. Millennials handle half their ecommerce transactions from a mobile device and are the largest online audience and have more buying power than any other previous generation (dmresourcecenter.com, 2018).

Therefore, given their high buying power, their influence on the online market, their active social media presence, and most of all their impatience with delay, it is imperative that brands make all effort to understand and engage them. This is especially pertinent in a country like India, which is expected to become the youngest country in the world by 2022, with the average age of 29 years (Financial Express, 2017).

Firms should wake up to the advantages of using social media as a business tool to engage their digitally savvy audience (Lovelock, 2018). An effective social media marketing strategy can help increase an organization's brand awareness, improve customer engagement and satisfaction, and allow the company to establish their voice. Social media provides an accessible platform for direct communication between a company and a client and allows for a more human-centric approach to customer success and support. Firm-generated content (FGC) has a greater effect on customers with a longer customer–firm relationship, who are technologically savvy, and who are more prone to social networking. It is social media's ability to give 'voice' to customers in the form of likes and comments that makes FGC more effective. FGC can play a key role in strengthening customers' relationship with the firm by encouraging them to buy across several product categories (Kumar et al., 2016).

Statistics show that desktop sales are falling rapidly, while smartphones are being used for everything ranging from work to leisure. So the way to engage the consumer of today is by going mobile and social and being entertaining while doing so. That is spend more on mobile and digital

campaigns. Give your target consumers a chance to connect with their friends and other like-minded people through your campaign.

Use the trails of digital data that is left on the Internet by your consumers to really understand them. Social Media Analytics and Big Data should be seen as an opportunity to understand consumers and customize and individualize your offerings rather than as an insurmountable challenge best left to the geeks. While designing platforms for customer engagement remember to personalize, interact, be intuitive, attractive, and social (Vodanovich et al., 2010). Companies can work on enhancing the customer experience through understanding customers by using digital trails, analytics-driven customer segmentation, and digitally enhanced selling.

SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED FOR THE DIGITAL WORKPLACE

Many times the obstacle toward implementing a successful digital transformation is people and not technology (Bonnet & Nandan, 2011). This is because digitalization changes the ways of working and increases the rate of change of the organization. It will require the manpower to rapidly acquire new skills and competencies, and also usher in a new organizational culture. Leadership also has to change to new forms to accommodate and enable this transformation to digital. Digital transformation requires the continuous alignment of people, technologies, organizational structures, and ultimately organizational culture (Briggs & Makice, 2012). Effective change management is required to manage this process well and adopting a design thinking style will help with the implementation (Gruber, De Leon, George, & Thompson, 2015). Design thinking can be defined as ‘a human-centered approach to innovation that puts observation and discovery of often highly nuanced, even tacit human needs right at the forefront of the innovation process. It considers not just the technological system constraints but the socio-cultural system context’ (Glen et al., 2014).

The speed and complexity of digitalization will change how we handle information (find, filter, and use information from many sources), interact with people (choosing an identity or identities to engage with others through multiple channels), inspire, and involve people to act in support of organizational goals, and empower them to move toward a future reality. To succeed in the digital age, a person must be able to appropriately weight the practical risks and future benefits of new tech. New

levels of skilling required to make the transition to digital fluency transcend from basic computer skills such as conducting a basic search for information, creating a profile on different social media apps to performing basic troubleshooting tasks to more advanced ones such as editing and uploading photos, tagging content, crafting semi-public content for various contexts, navigating complex privacy controls, and editing a wiki page. Some of the skills exhibited by an email-able person remain useful: good typing skills, writing a persuasive argument, and finding an optimal time to communicate.

Adaptation is what allows us to use our abilities effectively when shifting between contexts, usually as the world changes around us. Adaptation is an *ability of abilities*, drawing from the knowledge and relevant skills one accumulated from previous experience. Adaptation requires a mindset that sees all of this change as an opportunity to learn.

Briggs and Makice (2012) listed the skills and abilities needed for employees to make a successful digital transition as enumerated by Jenkins (2006) and summarized them as given below:

1. *Networking*: The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information
2. *Play*: The capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving
3. *Performance*: The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery
4. *Simulation*: The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models for real-world processes
5. *Appropriation*: The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content
6. *Multitasking*: The ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details
7. *Distributed cognition*: The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities
8. *Collective intelligence*: The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal
9. *Judgement*: The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources
10. *Transmedia navigation*: The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities

11. *Negotiation*: The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms
12. *Visualization*: The ability to interpret and create data representations for the purposes of expressing ideas, finding patterns, and identifying trends

A number of tools are now available to measure the new skills needed. These include the iSkills assessment (Katz, 2007), New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), and the New Media Literacies (NML) framework (Literat, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Digital natives are a great mascot for organizational transformation programs, as they have the ability to come into a company unhindered by previous experience with legacy technologies and provide new solutions to modernize business processes and drive a truly digital workplace. As digital natives join the workforce, they bring with them a willingness to embrace technology as a driver of not just productivity, but also profitability. Organizations must adopt this mindset and plan for digital disruption in the modern workplace, or risk being left behind.

Digital natives can help their older colleagues use technology more efficiently and effectively, thereby increasing productivity. The technology gap between generations will lessen as elder generations learn to embrace and understand new technologies like their digital native peers. Digital natives' higher level of intuition when it comes to technology, coupled with the fact that new products are easier to use than their predecessors, means that integration with technology will be less of an issue for all generations (Gilson et al., 2015). In addition, digital natives have a healthy level of respect for the older generations' work ethic and values and will want to imbibe these from their seniors at work.

Ultimately, digital natives seek the same things from their employer as any other generation that came before them. A sense of belonging and value and an opportunity to contribute to the success of their employer. They seek to be respected and nurtured and to work for companies that work for social causes and innovation and have a sense of social responsibility. They want their work and lives to be an extension of their own

identities and will want to work in and buy from companies that provide them this avenue for self-expression.

As customers, digital natives are highly tech savvy, value conscious, and cause driven. They desire instant gratification and quick responses for their issues. Companies should set in place efficient teams to monitor, engage, and address their millennial customers, as this is considered the most economically powerful demographic that the world has ever seen. The most effective customer touch point for this audience would be some form of social media outreach in addition to the usual sales and promotion activities. Companies that go the extra mile to really understand their digital native market will be able to target their offerings in a way that truly speaks to the identity of the millennial.

To conclude, business leaders should acknowledge the direction that technology is leading the world in, embrace the future, and ride the waves of technology into the hearts and minds of their digital native stakeholders. Since the number of digital native stakeholders are continuously increasing and leading to a world filled only with digital natives in the long run, companies should have short-term and long-term plans and strategies for attracting, engaging, and managing digital native to retain them as loyal stakeholders. Digital transformation is a never-ending process as the technology is growing and transforming every day, and this poses a challenge to organizations, as they need to cater to the ever-changing needs and behaviors of the digital native. No company would be able to continuously either engage or satisfy the digital native without having continuously upgraded technologically based plans, strategies, and actions.

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