

# Digital Natives: The Revolution of the Generation born to the Web

*By Andreas Neef, Willi Schroll, and Björn Theis*

**"Digital Natives" were brought up with Wikis, Blogs, and Social Networks. They no longer distinguish between the virtual and the real world. The business community would do well to take them seriously. After all, they might just transform our society.**

The Internet Generation is about to rise up: It was only recently that the denizens of the 'Net, brought up with the Internet and drawing a line between themselves and the passive TV Generation, made themselves heard. One key demand of the authors of the German "Digital Natives' Manifest" is that "the world of work should be digitally opened and digitally updated." The declaration originates with DNA Digital, an initiative under the patronage of the German Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, which has the objective of promoting knowledge exchange between the business community and the Digital Natives.

The core theory of this working group: The Internet causes economic, social, and societal change which will shape the future of work. With regard to enterprises, they discuss the use of Wikis, blogs, and social networks which is to usher in a new age of knowledge exchange. Today, however, the majority of the people inhabiting the world's executive floors are not naturally and constantly blogging, posting, twittering, and chatting. The result is a divide between company structures and social reality.

## Generation Internet

Marc Prensky, a US-American e-learning expert, coined the term digital native already in 2001. He assigned it to a generation who grew up with the myriad application opportunities offered by the World Wide Web. Almost like a second mother tongue, they acquired the semantics of browser queries, data management, and handling a multitude of formats as well as searching in the largest pool of information ever. They stand opposite generations born before the rise of the computer: the Digital Immigrants. It was universities and schools that Prensky had noticed the divide between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants": When it came to using computers or the Internet, knowledge transfer was reversed. Students introduced their teachers to the capacities of their digital tools.

Recently, however, the creator of the opposites of Natives and Immigrants returned to raise doubts concerning his own theory: In view of the digital pervasion of our everyday life the difference was slowly becoming insignificant. We have to both agree and disagree: The boundary between those born before and after 1980 may be problematic and become increasingly blurred in a time when even Merkel and Obama

have long since discovered the digital communication channels for their own use. And yet there has been a global revolution over the past two decades – on the one hand technological, social on the other: People who grew up with digital opportunities have different ways of learning, working, writing, and interacting than those of earlier generations. They meet and even fall in love online – on the net, they communicate with people they might have never met in real life. Compared to older generations, the digital revolutionaries differ in the following characteristics:

### **1. Digital Natives are Net Denizens**

Marc Prenzky emphasises a cultural perspective: Whereas the Immigrants make a clear distinction between virtual and real, Digital Natives no longer distinguish offline and online. What others may consider virtual, they consider experienced reality. They not only see the digital realm as a new communication tool, but a social-cultural space built, captured, and maintained through content, social networks and constant participation. For them, the Internet has become the main channel of a new and open cultural change, creating unique definitions of identity, friendship, and privacy. Many Digital Natives feel that their avatars in Second Life or World of Warcraft represent them better than their real person.

### **2. Digital Natives Are Free Spirits**

For the Net Generation, interactivity is a shared and highly valued property: The digital world has a participation culture. Making use of a huge array of creative tools, they produce offers and collaboration opportunities. Free blogs, sharing sites for photos, illustrations, and music compete with traditional service providers. Often they do not seek to profit, but to enrich the digital community. The Web turns Digital Natives into makers, and their self-produced content and open-source mentality are increasingly replacing fee-based offers.

### **3. Digital Natives Live Simultaneously**

To Digital Immigrants, the Natives' working habits look unfocused. The latter, however, consider their distributed attention a way of completing tasks more efficiently. If nothing else, it seems to be that playing computer games at an early age changes one's expectations vis-à-vis media – many Digital Natives find it hard work to get involved in long-winded narratives, whether it's books or movies. Their increasing ability to multi-task influences their user behaviour, which in turn drastically impacts on the business models of many companies. "In the Net economy, the roles and functions of the market actors will change dramatically", says Internet-guru Ossi Urchs.

#### 4. Digital Natives Are Media-Based

Prior to the rise of Web 2.0 and the digital media it was hard to make one's voice heard beyond the confines of the local pub. Today, however, nothing is easier than using a blog to offer the world your theories. Personal opinions become public. As a result, the communication competence of the Net generation is markedly different. The Internet's creative tools make it possible for users to exert influence and participate actively in the affairs of the world. Hence, Digital Natives are even willing to enter the political arena when it comes to their rights, values, and standards.

This is illustrated by the foundation of the Pirate Party: The group has committed itself to reforming intellectual property rights for, e.g., films and music. While there may be, for image reasons, some controversy about the party name, this does not impact its members' mission – there is no revolution without friction. On the one hand, the sharing of copyrighted media threatens traditional business models, on the other hand, experiments will result in new concepts of copyright which will allow the creative class and publishing companies to make money which benefiting from the energy and purchasing power of the amateur scene.

At the same time, the Digital Natives are entering the labour market. In the context of creative and knowledge economies, their skills are more and more important. Recruitment is increasingly focusing on the online roleplaying community, as it has been realised that online games train strategic thinking, communication skills, and leadership qualities. Moshe Rappoport, IBM's Executive Technology Briefer, is expecting positive change on the executive floors and attests the Net generation especially fast reaction speeds, above-average information processing, readiness to assume risks, and staying power.

The generation change, however, results in a transformation period which is not without its problems: A survey conducted by LexisNexis, an online archive providing access to legal, economic, and financial information, found that employees in the 44 to 60 age group consider the use of laptops in meetings distracting, whereas the majority of those younger than 29 think this is efficient.

“Managers need to acknowledge that a technology gap among generations exists, and they must find ways to maximize productivity by implementing effective workflow solutions and integrated resources that address the challenges they face,” says Mike Walsh, CEO of LexisNexis. It is businesses with conservative structures, in particular, which find adapting to the requirements of Digital Natives a challenge: For many among the young Net generation, nine-to-five jobs are a relic of the early days of industrialisation. As networking employees, they have friends and colleagues in different timezones and prefer flat hierarchies, the right to co-management, transparency, and challenges. In return, they offer flexible process structures and are often highly efficient at work.

## Digital Patterns of Consumption

Furthermore, in view of the opportunities provided by the Internet, businesses have to consider how to offer added-value services which generate turnover. Urchs, the IT expert, suggests learning how to handle digital traces on the Net and inverting the knowledge pyramid. This is not only necessary to integrate employees of different generations in business processes, but also to understand their patterns of consumption.

The Digital Natives are no homogenous target group, to the regret of many marketing professionals. They are hard to reach through traditional advertising channels. 97 percent of all 14 to 19 year olds in Germany have access to the Internet, and they use this medium more intensively than anyone else: on average 120 minutes daily, according to a survey by ARD and ZDF, the German public service channels. TV is watched only 100 minutes, with a downward trend. 68 percent of all German teenagers and 57 percent of the 20 to 29 year olds have a profile at one or several social network providers. They also count on these networks for information about products. Instead of relying advertising messages, they increasingly trust the opinion of their personal networks as their main source of product information.

Digital media skills not only divide people from different generations, but also increasingly peers. Some fear that the education sector will see an aggravated two-class society. John Palfrey, Professor of Law and Vice Dean at Harvard Law School and author of "Born Digital - Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives", believes that ignorance of the digital world and the resulting educational deficits can have devastating effects for locations in the tough innovation competition. When it comes to training young people, the issues of Internet access and acquiring social media skills play an increasing role. Students and teachers alike have to be able to handle social networking on the Internet and learn to use it.

Are we on the verge of an intensified clash of analogue and digital cultures? Or is one generation lost in virtual fantasies while traditional and proven structures lie idle or may even go to waste?

For Mizuko Mimi Ito, a social anthropologist, these laments are nothing but fearmongering. For her, the only difference is in user behaviour: "Using media has become a key element for children and youths when projecting their personalities. They are used to the immediacy of all information and self-directed learning." Ideally, they would adapt much more rapidly than earlier generations, and keep their skills and capabilities up to date without having to be sent to an official training.

The researcher was unable, however, to find evidence of the anti-social behaviour Digital Natives are often accused of by a large number of detractors: When looking at the social behaviour of these youths, she found it to be little different. They use new media to hang out with their friends and get romantically involved.

The conflict is much less between generation than between a conservative and a progressive idea of society. At second glance it appears that the Digital Natives phenomenon is not a clash of cultures which will sweep away everything in its path. Rather, it should be understood as a cultural revolution: The Digital Natives generation will definitely change the industry, the global markets, the education system, and politics, but that what the Boomer generation did, too – and in the total absence of chats and emails. What is groundbreaking is the pace at which the Digital Natives are transforming society. This is the speed business have to keep up with if they want to survive in the Net society.

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