Generation Y:
Is the "Digital Native" a Myth?

Reframing the Net Generation: Superficial but Savvy Users of Technology

Susan, 22, a recent college graduate and newest addition to the marketing team, smiled and shook her head in amusement. "Here, hand me your phone," she said to Tom, her 50 year old manager. "I'll show you how to download an app." Susan is happy to help because Tom is so generous with his mentoring and career advice.

Susan is a member of Generation Y, made up of people born roughly between 1979 and 1997, a larger group than the Baby Boom generation. Like Susan, in school and work, others in this newest generation seek connection (especially to their peers and mentors), and value group work, learning, and new experiences. Its members embrace a multi-tasking work and life style and spend an average of 3.5 hours per day online (including texting, surfing the web, using Facebook, etc). Younger members of Generation Y (ages 13 to 18) spend an astounding average 7.5 hours per day interacting with electronic devices (Lewin, 2010). **Members of Generation Y grew up with the Internet and personal computing technology. Because of this experience, they are called "digital natives" and are thought to approach learning and work in fundamentally different ways from other generations.**

In support of this point of view, some research and expert opinion suggests that this generation does learn and work differently (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). For example, Generation Y would post a YouTube video instead of writing an essay, as their parents would have done. Educational leaders have called for massive changes in the teaching system to accommodate this new use of technology, while business management and human resource experts claim they need to be managed differently and provide reams of advice on how to do so ("provide constant feedback," or, "create a collaborative environment").
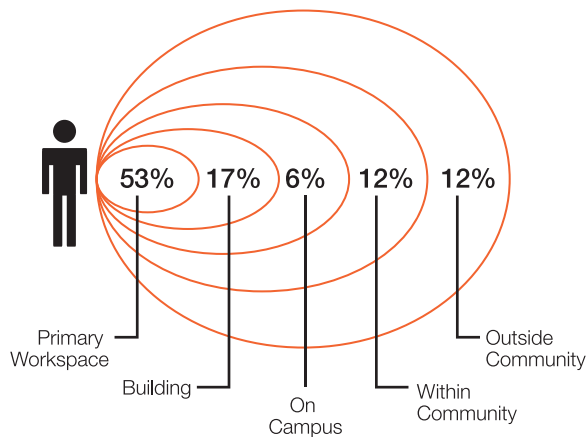
Others doubt that an entire generation of people is fundamentally different in the way they learn and work. Some research has attempted to debunk the "myth of the digital native," showing that there may be as much variation within Generation Y in terms of technology proficiency, as within the Gen X or Baby Boomer generations (Bennett, Maton, and Kervin, 2008). Further, these researchers could find no evidence of a difference in the brains or cognition of Generation Y that would lead to different approaches in learning or work process.

Educational leaders do not think Generation Y has a unique understanding of technology. There is no "built-in" awareness of technology not already shared by teachers, or the need for teachers to "catch up" with their students. Rather, many educators feel that most students have only a superficial understanding of the digital tools they use and that only a small fraction could really be called "digital natives" (*The Economist* Technology Quarterly, 2010).

The "digital native" moniker is about creating choice and flexible work styles. A recent Knoll global research project included four generations at work (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Generation Y) and revealed that all generations feel the office work space is relatively important (O'Neill, 2010a). However, the research also revealed that Baby Boomers and Generation Y value work space features and capabilities differently.

The reason? The two generations value office space differently because they use it in different ways. Boomers, especially the older members of that generation, grew up having to go to the office to access their fixed technology: computer, landline phone, etc. Generation Y simply doesn't have that frame of reference, bringing a different perspective on how and where it is possible to work. Generation Y places less overall importance on a single, central "office" than other generations, using technology in clever ways to provide a high degree of personal and work flexibility and mobility and, thus, a great deal of choice in their work location.

53% — Primary Workspace
17% — Building
6% — On Campus
12% — Within Community
12% — Outside Community

Generation Y is using technology to vastly broaden its "geography of work." Other Knoll research confirms that 47 percent of all "office" work does not occur in the office at all, instead taking place in other locations (O'Neill and Wymer, 2010). Accelerated by the Generation Y work style, the office workspace is evolving as one of many options in a wide-ranging roster of potential work locations, within and even outside the community.

Thus, the definition of the "digital native" may be less about being a technology geek, and more about being clever in using existing tools, especially in the work place. Members of Generation Y are not "high priests" of technology, sitting around writing java-script in their spare time, and they do not have any unique cognitive or genetic makeup that sets them apart; they are simply the first generation free of the baggage of an old model of work and workspace. While most Generation Y members may not be true digital natives, they are the first generation to embrace the advantage of the flexibility and choice that the digital world provides for their work styles.

Resources and References

Alsop, R. (October 21, 2008). The 'Trophy Kids' Go to Work, The Wall Street Journal.

Bennett, S., Maton, K., and Kervin, L. (2008). The 'digital natives' debate: A critical review of the evidence. British Journal of Educational Technology, Vol. 39, No. 5., pps. 775-786.

Lewin, T. If Your Kids Are Awake, They're Probably Online., New York Times, January 10, 2010.

O'Neill, M. (2008). Supporting Generation Y at Work: Implications for Business. Knoll research topic brief.

O'Neill, M. (2009). Future Work and Workplace. Knoll research white paper.

O'Neill, M. (2010a). Generational Preferences: A Glimpse into Future Work Space, Knoll research white paper.

O'Neill, M. (2010b). A model of environmental control and effective work. Facilities, Vol. 28 No. 3/4, pps. 118-136, Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2010). Implementing Integrated Work. Knoll research white paper.

Palfrey, J. and Gasser, U. (2008). Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives. Basic Books, NY.

The Economist Technology Quarterly. (March 6, 2010). The Net Generation, Unplugged.

Wymer, T. (2008). Magnet Space: Space that Attracts Users, Knoll research white paper.

Knoll researches links between work space design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit www.knoll.com/research/index.jsp