Dancing with Digital Natives
A great resource for understanding those who have grown up with digital technology

By Cheryl Cheatham

In the introduction, the editors state, “Here we offer a range of interconnected ideas that provide insight into this generation of digital natives that will empower those of us working with them to make the most of these interactions, to drive education, business, and innovation forward in the digital age.”

The first example of the contrasting impact of technological development on digital natives and immigrants is the evolution and global impact of mobile phones. The engineers who designed the cell phone could not have imagined that it would eventually transmit video, music, and text, as well as calls. The popularity of texting versus talking on cell phones could not have been predicted.

“Appropriation, modification, and re-appropriation” are what everyone faces when new technological developments evolve into the tools we use to live our lives, do our work, and stimulate our imaginations. But, as with other tools of modern life, simply owning them doesn’t always equate with using them to achieve multiple—and frequently conflicting—goals. Dancing with Digital Natives looks at this unique period of time from the viewpoint of the digital native in the workplace and discusses marketing and selling to digital natives, entertaining digital natives, and, finally, educating digital natives. Each chapter is written by digital communication professionals with supplemental readings and websites listed at the end.

Digital Natives in the Workplace—Work Practice and Spaces
How work gets done is different for digital natives. Accustomed to various digital technologies throughout their lives, work travels anywhere, everywhere, and at all times. The same devices used for producing work are relied upon for social interactions, creating a level of trust that technology is dependable. Project work, requiring bursts of focused attention on a task before switching to another task, is preferred and has been shown to increase productivity in the workplace. This pattern of work also applies to social life. Instead of taking a walk at lunch, a digital native might take digital breaks by catching up with friends or reading articles at his or her desk.

Social media has multiplied the large, diverse, and nonoverlapping social groups to which digital natives belong with both social and business implications. A professional network of social ties with people of different backgrounds, interests, geographic locations, and life stages is an invaluable resource for information exchange and professional development. As a whole, social connectivity encourages sharing ideas and problem solving that promotes innovation and creativity.

Even the concept of a “workplace” may no longer be office space at all. A chapter titled “Thinking Outside the Cubicle” looks at how the digital age is changing our definition of “office.”

Shifting economic conditions combined with a digitally connected workforce that does not require much day-to-day direction have made employers consider options such as flexible schedules, four-day workweeks, and other opportunities to work remotely. With the increasing number of people who are self employed, home based, or sharing office space, workers will be more receptive to individualized work schedules.

Marketing and Selling to Digital Natives—Social Customer Relationship Management
Establishing close customer and company ties is crucial for digital natives. Using free social media tools to establish relationships with customers is successful because it is based on a shared passion for products or experiences. Instant feedback validates the customer’s effort and establishes trust.

Customer relationship management concepts and strategies used to turn a dedicated group of passionate people into a future customer base. As customers, digital natives want to be listened to and they want to know who they are talking to. In many respects, they are accustomed to dissecting and reconstructing products to fit their needs. In a positive sense, the aura of entitlement, evident in the assumption that there should be free access to practically everything on the
Entertaining Digital Natives—When Fun is No Longer a Game

The ethical use of digital technology by digital natives is made more difficult by the fact that most are not accustomed to pre-digital laws and practices or how to apply them to global digital connections. After all, most digital natives were introduced to digital technology in the form of games or entertainment. In the chapter “Ethics, Technology, and the Net Generation,” the reader is presented with the dilemma of making good decisions based on “foundational virtues and practices that have widespread acceptance in the world. . . . Ethical decision making is about knowing the law and not violating it (and working to change it, if necessary); acting appropriately where there is no applicable law; and doing the right thing.”

There is no question that the law needs to reflect today’s digital realities, but there will never be a law for every situation. For instance, there is no “fair use” exclusion for video or music. If a person wishes to share a remix, for personal or commercial use, he or she is required to obtain advance approval from the rights holder. Although not impossible to do, official permission is rarely obtained for personal noncommercial sharing. A change in the law could eliminate this situation by allowing fair use for sharing of digital content under defined conditions. Or, without changing the law at all, publishers could offer a very low, easy-to-pay student price for copying protected music or video files. Unfortunately, a creative solution that incorporates the rights of the artist, consumer preferences, and business interests has yet to be implemented. The unintended consequence for many digital natives who have grown up sharing videos and music with little concern about the ethical dilemma of copying and sharing protected digital content is few good options.

Educating Digital Natives

This section is focused on younger students, but it is an interesting observation of the important role of librarians as research instructors. For librarians (especially digital immigrants) in the classroom, computer laboratory, or reference interview, being aware of the expectations and experiences of digital natives may have practical instructional implications. (See chart for my summary of the book’s findings.)

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<th>Characteristics of Digital Natives (DNs)</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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<td>DNs like to network, collaborate, and share.</td>
<td>DNs will seek others’ opinions and engage in creative communication. Willing to rethink copyright and plagiarism rules.</td>
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<td>DNs are less concerned with privacy, as evidenced by the proliferation of social media, online banking, and online shopping.</td>
<td>For DNs, convenience may trump privacy.</td>
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<td>DNs’ search techniques include bouncing, skimming, and overprinting.</td>
<td>DNs move quickly from one resource to another without close reading.</td>
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Recommendation

I highly recommend this book for all libraries because of the insight it brings into the differences in work practice that can undermine our effectiveness with our customers and colleagues. By drawing upon the best characteristics of digital natives and digital immigrants, we can forge a new tool for diverse library staffs who want to leverage multiple competencies for their faculty, students, attorneys, and other patrons. Given the enormous challenges facing libraries, promoting ingenuity in our workplace is the best marketing around.

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