Touch Me Often but Not Deeply:
Understanding the Interpersonal Style of the Petites Digerati

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Abstract

Students and young workers, late teens and twenty-somethings, now constitute the petite digerati, people who have been wired and in constant contact with their friends and peers since pre-school. Their use of technology is intuitive, instinctive, and pervasive, their confidence in their group opinions is almost unprecedented, and they are about to enter the work force in large numbers. Will they represent an enormous boon to American knowledge worker productivity and to productivity more generally, or will they constitute a burden and a challenge to HR departments everywhere?

What are you rebelling against?
"... What have you got?"
(The Wild One, 1953) [22]

1. Introduction

Much is being written about the emerging power of the new petite digerati, not the cyber elite, but the new, young, perpetually online, perpetually wired teens and young twenty-somethings. They’re tightly linked [12], they’ve been online literally since before they could read [4], and academics are calling them the new “digital natives” [18, 20, 22]. They appear as self-congratulatory as the VCs responsible for the dot-com silliness had in the late 1990s. Are they as silly? Are they as dangerous? Or have they truly been rewired internally after constant exposure to the newest technology, with reflexes, synaptic wiring, and forms of group behavior and cooperation beyond the capabilities and beyond the comprehension of the rest of us? Seen from this perspective, we elders, “digital immigrants,” and pre-digerati may be equally knowledgeable, or even far more knowledgeable about the actual technology, but we will always be merely users of the technology, we will never be full participants in the borg.

Are digital natives the savior of American industry, creative, cooperative, mentally agile, and capable of attacking problems like packs of cheerful velociraptors, ripping them apart from all directions at once, and sharing the rewards? Or are they shallow, selfish, narcissistic game-players, in for whatever they can get quickly for themselves and their network of closest friends, with no sense of commitment or even of deferred reward for sustained effort? Will they be the future source of enhanced innovation for American industry, or the greatest problem that HR has ever faced, impossible to integrate into the work force, and destructive of operating efficiencies in all aspects of the organization? As always at times of generational discontinuity and conflict, the answer probably lies somewhere in between the unfounded self-congratulatory elation of youth and the equally unfounded despair of their elders.

2. What has changed,
What does it mean?

2.1 What has changed?

We can all see the obvious signs of behavioral change when observing the digerati, and many studies are already underway (see, for example, Pew Internet and American Life Projects for some early examples [12, 14, 15]. The first and most visible

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1 cnn.com/2007/TECH/10/26/teens.internet/index.html

2 The borg in the later Star Trek movies were a biological-cybernetic fusion, humans with cybernetic implants linked into a common, hive intelligence, with no real use for purely biological humans who refused to become integrated into their community [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borg_(Star_Trek)].

3 This was the somewhat surprising assessment of a twenty-something “senior” software development manager describing the difficulty of finding suitable job candidates today.
difference is the young digerati’s obvious need for constant stimulation. Many of our younger students receive dozens of brief SMS (cell phone text) messages an hour, at all times, and in all places. It’s not always clear whether this is about the enjoyment of sharing or the need for constant affirmation and self-affirmation. The roles of Twitter (http://twitter.com/) and of microblogging more generally are particularly puzzling to non-digerati; Twitter describes itself as follows:

“Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?”

One of our young colleagues described microblogging this way: “Suppose you wanted to tell everyone that you were in the car, and not ‘there yet’. You wouldn’t want to send a million emails, so you Twitter ...” Note, this is not telling a specific person who is expecting to meet you at a prearranged time that you’re going to be late. This is telling everyone you know that you are not actually doing anything at the moment but rather are still in between, in a car. The greater question, why would anyone want to do this, and why would anyone care, remains not only unanswerable but unmasked. A respected former print journalist and high-tech blogger, Monica Guzman, was happily Twittering away at an academic session in Seattle this June, somehow being both a panel participant and a microblogger at the same time. She just could not wait to tell the broader world of her network exactly where she was and exactly what she was doing 4.

When Heath Ledger died there was a spike in SMS text traffic, as digerati texted each other and forwarded messages to each other. This “mini-event” and the surge of traffic it created was enough to disrupt classes

“Also on Tuesday the actor Heath Ledger died. I was in class when the news broke, but my computer was on and I received an e-mail and a text message telling me the news. At the end of my class I was talking to a guest speaker who came to another class. I asked him how it went, he said fine, “But when news of Heath Ledger’s death came on-line we had to stop and discuss it. I thought they were taking notes with their laptops not surfing the net.”


Older workers are so pressured that they divide their attention between meetings and work-related emails. Emails are still critical to getting work done. The biggest problem for older and more senior workers appears to be that there is just too much of it 5. And yet, email-dependent pre-digerati are amazed to hear digerati assure them that email is dead, is for fossils, and is so last year. The change is real:

"E-mail is, like, soooo dead' is the headline at News.com, where a piece looks at youth attitudes towards communication mediums. A group of teenage internet business entrepreneurs confessed that they really only use email to 'talk to adults'. Primarily, these folks are using social networks to communicate. 'More and more, social networks are playing a bigger role on the cell phone' 6.

It is indeed still disconcerting to hear that email is dead for personal communications ... and that SMS text and Twitter have achieved primacy. On occasion shallow digital interaction seems to take priority even over face-to-face interaction; as one of our students observes "I get between 30 and 60 text messages on Saturday nights and when I’m on a date mostly I ignore them ... unless they are from Asif or someone, in which case I drop what I am doing and join him.” These changes may be puzzling. Digerati check text messages on a date; pre-digerati remember when dates were indeed for deeper interaction in pairs, not for time-sharing with your posse.

This appears to be a reversal of the move towards media richness [7]. Historically, we observe a move from books to radio, from radio to television, and from TV to HDTV. The move from email to text initially appears incomprehensible, but can be explained only by understanding the motivation of users. Digerati do indeed seem to prefer fast and easy communication, and a constant, shallow stream of messages. The theme of their lives can be summarized as “touch me often but not deeply!”

We believe that the explanations for these changes are complex. Some parts of the explanation no doubt have to do with social changes or changes in child-rearing behaviors. Others no doubt have a technological cause [6]:

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4 Monica Guzman’s most recent twitter (http://twitter.com/moniguzman) posts at the time of the completion of this first draft were “Someone just asked me if New Mexico is the same thing as Mexico. 01:53 PM June 11, 2008 from twirl
Question 1: Are the brains of “digital natives,” (young people who grew up with technology) wired differently? Short answer: yes. 08:40 AM June 10, 2008 from twirl

At the Seattle Innovation Symposium at UW. Lots of people with laptops. They're recording this for TV. 08:38 AM June 10, 2008 from twirl

5 http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/117/next-tech-email-is-dead.html

6 http://slashdot.org/article.pl?sid=07/07/22/1717244&from=rss
Historically, the leader of an organization had superior access to data; he or she had been thoroughly briefed before preparing a communication or calling a meeting.

Historically, the leader had superior access to intra-organizational communications, for scheduling a meeting or sharing and influencing opinions within the organization.

And yet, with modern technology, neither of these advantages is still available to senior executives. This has profoundly altered the classroom experience, which we believe is a leading indicator of future changes in the workplace.

We conducted an online survey of 80 individuals [6], of ages spanning late teen high school seniors to late 50s executives and faculty, and we did find significant differences in attitudes towards technology, hierarchy, and the workplace in general. In particular, the findings indicate significant changes in younger workers’ attitudes towards their superiors, their managers and their managers’ managers in the organizational hierarchy:

- They do not believe that managers are better informed than they are.
- They trust their own data.
- They do not believe that their managers are better connected to others within the organization; suits with secretaries are no substitute for a network of Facebook friends.
- They trust their own ability to assess the mood of the group, call meetings, direct action, and indeed change the mood of the group; they don’t feel that they need editors or other formal review processes.

In traditional, bandwidth-constrained organizations, the individuals who were higher up in the hierarchy had superior access to numerous subordinates who provided them with a broad array of information sources. Likewise, individuals positioned higher in the organization were able to communicate orders back down to their numerous subordinates, direct reports and those subordinate to their direct reports. Both served to underscore the power and authority of leaders.

Not surprisingly, in today’s flatter and more universally connected social networks, both the need for explicit and formal hierarchies and the communications-based factors that legitimated them have been eroded. Survey respondents say that the only arena where those senior to them know more about work issues is “overall company problems,” not job activities, peer working groups, strategies for respondent’s responsibilities, nor areas for employee improvement.

The popular perception of “the scientific method” as defining rationality helps determine the zeitgeist and mental paradigms of the times. Galileo, Newton, Gauss, and Descartes left the West with a fascination for logic, reason, observation, data, and analytic styles. Without a doubt it has been the dominant decision paradigm of bureaucrats and executives the world over, as described in John Ralston Saul’s *Voltaire’s Bastards: The Tyranny of Reason in the West* [23]. Where Saul attacks the over-reliance and deliberate misuse of logic and reason, more recent popular literature and film actually occasionally highlights the uselessness and failure of reason.

Given the preeminent position of data, models and analysis in legitimating the procedures of Western decision-making, when access to data and access to computation were limited to the most senior levels of the organization, this was in part the basis of leaders’ authority. (Indeed, it was a capital offense for an able seaman (enlisted man) to maintain his own estimate of a ship’s position in the 19th century British navy and legend has it that the loss of Admiral Sir Clowdisley Shovell, his flagship *H.M.S. Association*, and his entire expedition could have been averted had the Admiral accepted the navigational advice of a seaman aboard the *Association* who had been doing his own calculations of the ship’s position. Legend has it that the crewman was, instead, hanged [25].)

It is also not surprising that, given the change in access to data and to models, the authority of leaders based on the unquestioned acceptance of their superior information endowment has been undercut. Our survey indicates that respondents view senior managers as power-based (50%) rather than authority-based, suggesting that they do not have special knowledge or insight that our respondents need to acknowledge. Three developments are emblematic of the shift:

- Spreadsheets have made working with data easy and personal. Significantly, 90% of survey respondents say that younger employees use the latest technologies while older employees do not. In fact, some older employees are as savvy as anyone about new technologies. While this is merely a perception, this perception supports the idea that younger employees believe that they enjoy superior command of technologies and superior access to data and to data analysis techniques. This shift in confidence, from belief in the company’s analyses to trust in your own, is significant and measurable; 20% of younger employees in our survey say they believe the “company line” vs. 45% of older employees.
- The personal computer in all its forms has, likewise, made working with data easy and has made
every person able to perform many forms of analysis; again, younger employees now feel that they have superior skills and superior access to data, devaluing the data access monopoly previously enjoyed by senior management.

- The Internet provides ubiquitous access to information and to data. Survey respondents say, almost 4 to 1, that younger employees are more data-driven than older employees. This may be perception, but it reinforces younger employees’ sense that they connect more strongly to data, and continues the limitation of the data monopoly previously enjoyed by senior levels of management.

And these changes may indeed be disconcerting to individuals in positions of authority. The following examples, while anecdotal, paint a picture that is starting to emerge in the classroom, and will ultimately be as pronounced and as disruptive in the workplace:

- MBA students value their own opinions and the opinions of their peers more than the opinions of faculty members. A faculty member who expresses strong disagreement with his class may be told by students that he does not know how to teach.

- MIT freshmen have been known to Twitter each other during class and then attempt to vote down their professor’s solution to a problem in classical Newtonian mechanics. It is difficult to imagine a discipline within the undergraduate curriculum, anywhere, that is less subject to debate and less amenable to subjective interpretation or reinterpretation.

No doubt it is possible to teach and to reach a deeper level of understanding when students reserve the right to challenge everything and demand to be convinced. It is certainly a slower way to teach, and there are some subjects that perhaps cannot be taught by Socratic debate with a rebellious crowd.

2.2. Is this really a generational difference?

Our own surveys suggest that the generational differences towards authority are real. Likewise, our surveys suggest that there are real differences in digerati’s attitudes toward personal communications technology. These differences are visible even when comparing undergraduates to graduate students. We conducted surveys on the use of mobile technology, surveying over 300 undergraduates and over 100 graduate students:

- Nature of the technology deployed: Smart phone usage ratio was 54% among the graduate vs. 23% for the undergraduate; internet usage was 93% among the graduate vs. 37% for the undergraduate and unlimited internet plans usage was 52% for the graduate vs. 20% for the undergraduate. This shows a statistically significant difference in all the above usage parameters and indicates that the graduate and undergraduate groups have very different mobile phone data usage patterns, which may be due to income differences or previous employers’ willingness to provide smart phones. However, the levels of unlimited text messaging plans between the graduate and the undergraduate populations were very similar (46% for the graduate vs. 44% for the undergraduate) which could indicate that text messaging is perceived as essential to both groups.

- Nature of SMS messages sent and received: When asked which characteristics are most frequent in the cell phone messages they send and receive, 41% of the graduate answered that the most frequent messages are Messages leading them to do something (e.g., “don’t forget to turn in the homework”, “meet me at the movie theater”). Another 36% answered that the most frequent messages are messages relevant to where they are, whom they are with and what they are doing at the time (e.g., “how’s the party?” or “tell the group I say hi!”). These results are very similar to the ones we got from the undergraduate group (38% and 39% respectively). We then asked both groups which kind of messages are most important to them and, as expected, the graduate group considers entertaining messages or “quick fun and pointless” messages to be of lesser importance when compared to the results we got from the undergraduates.

- Attitudes towards commercial SMS messages and cell phone spam: Graduate students seemed overwhelmingly hostile towards commercial messages, sent to their phones, by commercial organizations, while undergraduates were more neutral and even somewhat accepting of the idea. Graduate students were significantly more willing to accept commercial SMS messages and to view them favorably if they were forwarded by a friend or significant person in their network rather than originating with a company, and the difference between graduate and undergraduate groups was much smaller if asked about messages forwarded to them. Interesting, because the act of forwarding was seen as so important to the recipient, graduate students were far less willing than undergraduates to forward commercial messages unless they were certain that the
messages would be favorably received. See figure 1, below.
We do see differences. Do the digerati themselves think they’re different?

2.3. Do the Digerati think they’re different?

We claim that this rate of rebellion, change, and self-satisfaction is not unprecedented, despite the digerati’s belief in their uniqueness. The history of generational change and rejection certainly embraces the generations that the digerati are rejecting; see The Wild One [21] or The Who’s “My Generation” for recent examples, or Max Weber on “Generational Resistance and Maturity” [19] for an early 20th century example. Indeed, one can go back to ancient Greece and generational conflict over the role of their gods in every day life [2].

And yet, casual observation leads to a recognition that the digerati do indeed believe that they are different, and commentary from elders suggests that their elders may agree that they are different even if they disagree with digerati’s self-assessment. The following come from a recent symposium on innovation, embellished and transformed:

• Digerati Group: For us, the transactions costs to find and assess information are now zero.
• Elder: For you, the transactions costs to find and accept factoids is zero, but that’s not the same as wisdom, as understanding, or even as accurate information.
• DG: Individuals know what to trust and do not respect authority just because it’s authority. We don’t need editors to assess articles for us. We Digg it and essentially can vote on del.icio.us websites. We’re all journalists today.
• E: Editors actually do know something … and certification of factoids should be more important than their popularity. That’s how securities fraud gets built into chat rooms.
• DG: We are many minds together, not one mind thinking deeply and that will work as well
• E: “Where have all the engineers gone, long time passing? Where have all the techies gone, long time ago? Gone to India, every one. ... When will we ever learn?” Some things really do require study, depth, and expertise. You cannot vote your way into an engine design, or a cancer therapy, or a new operating system.

• DG: You’re teaching us what you know, not what I want or what I need. You’re not a native, and you’re the problem.
• E: In a world where half of what you learn will be obsolete before you finish graduate school, and almost all the science and engineering you learn will be obsolete during your lifetime, we are teaching you how to learn, how to think, and how to analyze. It’s the only way to prepare you for the future we know you will face.
• DG: Why should I have to wait? I can have it all, and have it all now … I can start a company, I can make a video, I can do whatever I want.
• E: Well, no. You don’t have enough talent. And you can’t all have that much talent. You’re not willing to work hard enough. There are not enough big ideas and we can’t all get rich on edible nail polish.

• DG: You’re not teaching me what I want to know. I’m going to find another class. You’re not assigning me work I love. I’m going to find another job.
• E: You don’t know enough to know what you need to know, but you’re welcome to find another class. And you don’t know enough to do what you want to do yet. But you’re welcome to leave and to try to find another job.
• DG: I can work in a post-virtual fantasy world with speed and agility. I say post-virtual because who’s to say that virtual worlds are not real enough? • E: Doh. You’ve lost me on that one!

It’s not clear that the digerati’s confidence in their group mind and quick collaboration is well-founded. Although the power of the group and the wisdom of the crowd are much in favor at the moment [16, 26], evidence suggests that crowds are not always to be trusted and that for true catastrophic folly the enthusiasm of the mob is often required [9, 24].

2.4. Is the impact of technology on the behavior of a generation or a society new?

Technology has always changed social interactions, hierarchies, and behavior. Social interactions in the 1960s were strongly influenced by available

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8 http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/15-07/st_cnn
9 halfbakery.com/idea/Flavored_20_2f_20Edible_20Fingernail_20Polish
10 Readers unfamiliar with virtual worlds may wish to review Second Life (secondlife.com) [30] and World of Warcraft (www.worldofwarcraft.com) [31].
11 See Häfner [10] for a striking example, placed in the context of Sherry Turkle’s earlier work [27].
highly stylized observed sequence of interactions. In emergent behavior, as exhibited by the following collection of congregation points, modern herding is herding, which involves again replacing bilateral dating. Unlike previous technologies. As a result, herding behaviors are once again largely superceded by multilateral network broadcast have been augmented, and in some age groups. Bilateral technologies like the telephone and email have been augmented, and in some age groups. Modern herding is an emergent behavior, as exhibited by the following highly stylized observed sequence of interactions.

- An instant message is sent out, saying simply “Thursday?”
- Numerous responses arrive in no particular order, among which “mall” and “movie / pirates” predominate.
- The choice of going to the mall wins, a group of friends congregates at the mall and find each other using cell phones.
- They change their minds, try to see “Pirates of the Caribbean, At World’s End” but can’t get tickets.
- Everyone ends up at Charlie’s house.

Surely, digital technology cannot be the first family of innovations to transform society within a generation:

- The combination of indoor plumbing and the flush toilet, and the patenting of a safe elevator, led to the rapid urbanization of America. Skyscrapers and towering cities would not have been possible without either, and the confluence drove the final stage of our transition from hunter-gatherers, to agricultural villagers, and then to a hive species, with astounding speed.
- The inexpensive automobile and the easy to operate automatic transmission led to the rapid suburbanization of America immediately after the Second World War, moving us back from a hive species into isolated cocooning.
- Telephony transformed dating; if you were willing to forego physical contact there was no limit to the time you could spend together.
- The pill transformed dating again; if there was no limit to physical contact, suddenly the telephone became a poor substitute for really being together.
- Sesame Street has definitely improved some aspects of learning at the expense of others. Many long-term teachers feel that Sesame Street contributed to the shortened attention span of an entire generation, although scientific evidence is lacking.

2.5. Are these changes important?

Clearly the changes are indeed huge. On the one hand, petites digerati make problematic employees in some forms of organizations, for reasons we will explore below. And yet, when they can be harnessed, their power can be surprising.

The internet harnessing of the digerati was without a doubt the greatest innovation of the Obama campaign in the 2008 primaries, and is frequently considered to be one of the reasons that a young relatively unknown Senator with less than two years in the Senate was able to defeat the heir to the Clinton Democratic Party political machine. Regardless of who wins the 2008 presidential election, the transformation of grassroots politics will be irreversible. A Google query with the words “obama” “internet” and “advantage” on 11 June 2008 found “about 269,000 hits.” Monica Guzman, one of the wired and influential digerati to emerge from print journalism, writes in SeattlePI.com, “Think what you will about Barack Obama’s political clout. His dominance of the Internet is second to none.” This internet capability not only enabled Obama to overcome a lack of familiarity, name recognition, or track record; it also allowed him to overcome Clinton’s funding advantage and, apparently, the funding advantage usually enjoyed by Republican candidates in national elections. Janet Hook and Dan Morain of the Los Angeles Times write that “Barack Obama brings many distinctive traits to the 2008 presidential campaign, but one is especially rare for a Democratic candidate: He has an unusual ability to raise lots of money, which he will be able to spend earlier in the election season than his predecessors.” The emerging role of the internet and of the youth vote in American politics is stressed in the BBC analysis of the 2008 primary.

“The internet has been moving to the mainstream of political life in the US for some years. But in this presidential cycle it has been particularly important for the Obama campaign, which was starting from scratch with few resources and little name recognition. The internet favours the outsider; and gives them the ability to quickly mobilise supporters and money online. “And the more nimble use of the internet by the

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13 blog.seattlepi.nwsource.com/netnative/archives/111728.asp
15 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7412045.stm
Obama campaign in its early stages helped him overcome the huge initial lead of Hillary Clinton in the presidential nominating race.

... “Mr Obama’s internet strategy was at the heart of his plan to win the Democratic nomination, according to expert Phil Noble, who tracks trends in relation to the internet and politics.

... “His use of social networking sites has helped Mr Obama to mobilise young people, a group which has traditionally been uninterested in politics, according to Professor Thomas Patterson of Harvard University.

Commentators do not yet provide an explanation of the process by which the digerati were harnessed.

3. But why is this happening?

No doubt there are several causes for the changes that we observe. All of the following have been suggested:

- Technology, and the fact that the digerati have been online since pre-school, and have been in constant and uninterrupted electronic contact with their closest friends, through phone, email, IM, cell phone, SMS texting, and Facebook and MySpace for their entire lives.
- The nature of pre-school experience, and the fact the digerati have been forming friendships and alliances, and have been surrounded by constant youthful interaction and stimulation. Wired interaction is simply a continuation of friendships, networks, and shifting goal-seeking alliances.
- The nature of work and the fact that work is more routine, more structured, and less experientially rich than the digerati’s online lives.
- The changing perception of time or of commitment. With instant everything online, the work experience is just too slow, rewards are just too slow, and commitment seems to be more of a fool’s game than a rational strategy for interacting with employers or others outside their network.
- A surge of youthful optimism, based on the digerati’s perceived technological superiority over their elders and the accompanying sense of general superiority and of entitlement (“I don’t have to wait! I’ll start a highly successful company with my friends!”)

- A sense of workplace despair (it’s nothing but a starter McJob. Even at Microsoft “I’m nothing but a Microserf” [5], “I’ll find value and meaning on my own time.”)
- Regrettably, some of the changes have come from a failure of the educational system. In his appalling paper, in which he made the first distinction between digital natives (digerati) and digital immigrants (those of us who have not had the good sense to die and who are trespassing on turf that now rightfully belongs to the digital natives, Prensky notes “Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.” (emphasis in the original) [22]. He claims, today’s students “think and process information fundamentally differently”, in essence that access to technology has rewired their brains. The rest of us, the pre-digerati, “speak an outmoded language (that of the pre-digital age)” and “are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.” (again, emphasis in the original). It is the instructors who are the single biggest problem facing education today. The alternative, that the digerati are temporarily learning impaired, or lazy, or narcissistic, and that we are attempting to teach them the essential tools of deep thought and analysis, rather than rapid access to amusing factoids, never seems to enter into Prensky’s pre-digerati adoration of the new natives.

4. So what are the big changes?

Here unfortunately we must step outside the dangerous realm of overworking our limited survey data driven speculation and into the potentially lethal realm of anecdote-driven speculation. What follows is based on a limited interaction with students and with patients, but is not yet supported by survey (One of the authors is a therapist in private practice).

- Change in values: There is greater importance placed on me, on my immediate team, or network, or posse, and less on my company or my country. This is a form of instrumentalism, of viewing others, simply in terms of their immediate utility.
- Change in attitude towards teams and work groups: Teams and work groups are not the same as networks and posses. Success of my team advances me as a member, but when it is necessary or convenient to advance myself by abandoning members of my teams then I can renege on my commitments without guilt. I will cooperate until what Harvard Professor Michael

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Jensen called “optimal time for breach of promise.”

- Changes in attitude towards the pursuit of truth and of knowledge: Engineering may be dying as the profession of choice among America’s most gifted and most privileged youth. Sustained study, in pursuit of deep understanding, is of limited interest; fast access to adequate information to kill the exam is sufficient. If enough of my friends believe it, it’s true enough. If the presentation was passionate, that’s good enough. There is a constant refrain: “How is that useful to me now and why are you wasting my time on detail?”

- Change in attitude towards analysis. Getting factoids fast trumps depth. Voltaire’s Bastards [23], dominating corporate and political discourse through controlling data and analysis, are so out of date. They worked too hard on their analyses. Fluff is enough! Once again, the refrain is “Why are you wasting my time on what you call rigor?”

- Change in attitude towards rank and authority. Some of this is actually good. An academic classroom is much less likely to accept bad ideas simply because of the authority upon which they are based. Rankism [8] is not a factor. The class will defend its position. It’s a slower way to cover the material, but that may not always imply a worse way to cover the material.

- Perhaps the largest changes dealt with behaviors, with the need to be in constant contact, and to have someone “touch me always but not deeply.”

There is no reason to believe that this change is universal or complete; we are indeed still functioning as a society, not a collection of sociopaths. There is no reason to believe it is unprecedented; many of these behaviors would be recognized by Machiavelli’s Prince [17] or Thucydides’ Alcibaides [10].

5. Implications for future of the organization

Clearly, there will be short-term gains from blogging and from the newly permeable boundary of the firm, as employees share with and benefit from members of their personal networks of friends and former coworkers, former colleagues, former classmates and housemates. Just as clearly, the X-teams [1] will result in accidental and not-so-accidental sharing, and tremendous difficulty with the maintenance and control of confidential or valuable corporate intellectual property.

Changes in the relative importance of group-identity and self-identity will lead to a shift from seeking to achieve group advancement to self-advancement. The organization man may be gone [28]. One of our students cheerfully asked General Peter Pace (at the time Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), if principal-agent issues did not interfere with execution of deployment or completion of assignments. When General Pace seemed puzzled by the question, the following translation was offered: “why would anyone do that if it were personally dangerous?” The days of “Follow me boys,” and “Come on, you sons of bitches! Do you want to live forever?” may be gone forever [29].

The inability to move forward without consensus may prevent some poor decisions, but it makes some actions significantly slower. This has been visible immediately in the classroom, but when the empowered Twitterers, texters, and bloggers move from our classrooms to their employers’ offices, the reduction in speed will become apparent.

5.1. Implications for Teaching

Certainly, teaching has already changed. Many American students have abandoned undergraduate study in science and engineering, and most have abandoned graduate study in those fields. Fields that are seen as immediately useful and well paid, like financial engineering and private equity, are moving ahead of slow advancement fields like medicine or strategic consulting. The classroom is a more exciting, democratic, turbulent place than at any time since the 1960s, but it in many instances it may have become more shallow as well. But the solution for us is simple. We need to figure out what business we are really in, and communicate it better and then truly execute on it. We are there to teach learning, not to teach faculty’s preferred historical factual accumulations. We are not digital immigrants in our classrooms, the digerati are, and their youthful exuberance is no substitute for experience, knowledge, or understanding. We need to teach them to think, to learn, to analyze, and to communicate. Not all decisions can be reached by counting the number of guys who said “K Ø” or “no Ø”. SMS is not the new writing, simply because it lacks nuance and is too ambiguous.

5.2. Implications for Corporations

For corporations the disruption may be bigger. It’s hard to know how to deal with perceptions like “the firm is simply where I get my paycheck,” or “the firm is not the focus of my life or even the focus of my attention” or “the boundary of the firm is less important than the boundary of my posse, my network, or my friends, and we share when asked.”

17 http://www.mondaymemo.net/010813feature.htm
We need to see how corporations will adapt and what these changes will do to operating efficiency, staff turnover, confidentiality of information and intellectual property, or to career development and deferred rewards.

The following suggestions are cribbed from our earlier paper on managing the IM generation in the workplace:

- Manage down – let networks self-organize and evolve (exploit their emergent aspects), then have the firm rely on the ones that are most productive.
- Balance cooperation and competition – IM generation folks want to cooperate beyond and across companies and will do so, extending their networks and their loyalties across the boundaries of their firm. It will be interesting to see how this can be accomplished within a capitalist framework and within our current legal protections for trade secrets, patents, and copyrights; this may even suggest an evolution of business practices, laws, and regulation, much as the ubiquitous presence of photocopiers changed fair use rules on distribution of copyright material.
- Provide immediate rewards for network success. IM-ers seem to require faster acknowledgement. The best way to validate useful activity is to reward success during the process.
- Make latest technology available to networks, since, once again, your network is competing against so many alternatives for your employees’ attention. Remember that employees can easily abandon your corporate intranet for open, unprotected, external networks.

5.3. Directions for Future Research

There have already been conferences and special issues of major journals dedicated to the future of research in virtual worlds and online social networks; for example, see Bray and Konsynski [3]. The questions we raise here are fundamentally different; they are not why would customers pay for virtual goods to be used in virtual worlds, or how can social networks be harnessed for word of mouth marketing campaigns. We ask the following:

- Are the behavioral differences real and permanent, or are they merely transitory? Every generation goes through periods of behavior that look like lack of depth and lack of focus; while today’s high school students text each other, IM, and play their iPods while doing their homework, their parents probably had a phone in one hand and a remote control in the other when they were in school.
- Are the differences in values truly significant?

Are tomorrow’s new hires likely to be more agile, more risk taking, and more cooperative? Are they likely to be more superficial, more prone to rapid mistakes based on group behavior, and less concerned with the welfare of their firms beyond the direct implications for their own advancement and compensation? Are both changes real or neither?

- Can organizations learn to forge high performance teams from more superficial employees? That is, can organizations learn to train, manage, and achieve performance from the incoming groups of wiki-workers?
- Can organizations learn to forge high performance management teams from more superficial employees? That is, does wiki-leadership offer any promise?

Whether one accepts the specific conclusions of authors with a view that suggests generational cycles [13] it is clear that there are differences among generations. Some, like the generation of the 40s, provided spectacular leadership. The generation that followed them exhibited far different leadership behavior. We need to know what to expect from the generation of workers coming up behind us; our economic and political future depends on them, as, of course, does their own.

6. Conclusions

The disorientation of managers today is not unprecedented, and pre-digerati among us remember with glee the confusion of our parents’ generation as they tried to figure us out, and to some extent we actually were as confused by ourselves as they were by us.

Of course we are now as confused by the digerati as the pre-pre-digerati were by us. Of course, the new digerati purport not to be confused by anything. They wouldn’t write a poem to mock us. They might simply Twitter, or text each other “DYMJ? ROFL”.

The cast of Edit-Undo, a musical comedy for the digital age, probably recorded the following for their amusement, not ours, but it does provide some insight into their mind sets:

Our dads are so pathetic;
They’re like trapped in an H. G. Wells time machine.
Stuck in like the 20th century!

7. References


18 http://www.editundo.org/pages/cit-info.html


Figure 1. Comparison of attitudes of undergraduates and graduates towards commercial SMS messages from different sources.