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The Myth of Generation N

Contrary to popular belief, not all kids are naturally adept with technology—and that spells trouble in an increasingly wired society.



Staff Illustration

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[The Net Effect](#)

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For decades, social scientists and technologists have alternatively predicted the emergence of “computer kids” or a “net generation”—a cohort of children, teenagers, and young adults who have been immersed in digital technology and the digital way of thinking since their conception.

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This new generation, the thinking went, would be everything that their parents weren't when it came to technology: They would know how to type, partake in electronic communications, and be able to rapidly figure out how all this stuff worked. They would be so adept at using computers that calling them “computer literate” would be an insult. They would see society as something to be mastered and hacked, not something that they need to fit inside.

Certainly, a lot of evidence supports a “net generation” effect. Although there are no reliable statistics on computer literacy, good figures do exist on Internet usage, thanks to the Pew Internet Project. According to its survey released earlier this year, 74 percent of people in the United States age 18 to 29 have Internet access, compared with 52 percent of those age 50 to 64. Among the over-65 set, Internet access plummets to just 18 percent. And in my own age group, 30 to 49, 52 percent have some kind of Net access. These figures certainly argue for the existence of a “Generation N.”



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But the more time I spend with the kids who should be members of Generation N—today’s high school and college students—the more convinced I am that the notion of universal computer competence among young people is a myth. And the techno-laggards among us risk being relegated to second-class citizenship in a world that revolves around, and often assumes, access to information technology.

People who spend years working with computers learn how to use them; people who lack that experience, don’t. I’ve seen 40- and 50-somethings who burn their own CDs and have phenomenal command of applications like Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. Like Generation N, they’ve wanted to get something done and invested the time to do it.

The difference between these old fogies and today’s teens is that, for many teens today, learning to use a computer is no longer optional. The teachers in my town’s high school refuse to accept papers unless they are typed on a computer. Typing itself is taught in the middle school (where they call it “keyboarding”); students who went to a less technologically progressive school system and transferred in are expected to pick up the skill on their own. Not a problem! “We all figured out how to get Napster going and download music,” says a friend of mine who recently graduated from Stanford University and now works for a major investment firm. Everybody her age knows how to use a computer, she says, just like “everybody knows how to change their oil.”

Experts in human-computer interaction say that the real difference between teenagers and their elders is teens’ willingness to experiment with computers, combined with their acceptance of the seemingly arbitrary conventions that are endemic to contemporary computer interfaces. In other words, teens aren’t worried about breaking their computers, and they’re not wise enough or experienced enough to get angry at and reject poorly written programs. The teens just deal with computers, as they are forced to deal with many other aspects of their lives. These strategies, once learned and internalized, are incredibly effective for working with today’s computer technology.

Likewise, today’s systems are teaching their users—young and old alike—to multitask as never before. Just as their parents talked on the phone while doing math homework, today’s teens browse the Web, send e-mail, and simultaneously engage in multiple chat and Instant Message sessions while allegedly working on an essay. A friend of mine has a daughter who developed a flair for language: she routinely has chat windows going in English, French, and Japanese—and both her parents are native English speakers!

But the point that seems to have escaped my friend is that everybody *doesn’t* know how to change the oil on their car. It’s not a generational thing; it’s simply the result of 20 years’ experience. But when you are surrounded by people who all share the same technological skills, it’s easy to forget that there are others who aren’t with the program (so to speak). Unfortunately, with the changes overtaking our society, today’s kids who don’t have tech experience and tech aptitude are going to be left behind much faster than their elders.

And that’s the danger in believing that time will give us a population that’s completely computer literate. Remember, the Pew study found that 26 percent of young adults do not have Internet access. An even bigger determiner than age is education: only 23 percent of people who did not graduate from high school have Internet access, compared with 82 percent of those who have graduated from college.

Certainly, more kids today are growing up wired—but millions of them are not. Meanwhile, we're rebuilding our society in ways that make things increasingly difficult for people who aren't online. For example, people who don't want to (or can't) buy their airplane tickets on the Web now typically have to wait on hold for 30 minutes with the airline or go through a travel agent and pay an agency fee—sometimes as much as \$50. When I needed to renew my passport, the local post office didn't have the form: they told me to download it from the Internet.

This is a problem that won't be solved through more education or federal grants. As a society, we need to come to terms with the fact that a substantial number of people, young and old alike, will *never* go online. We need to figure out how we will avoid making life unbearable for them.

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