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The irresistible rise of the Net Generation

Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World
by Don Tapscott
McGraw-Hill Books, New York, 2009, 368 pp

The world in which many of us grew up is evolving in ways that few of us could have imagined only a short time ago. Everything is fundamentally changing and, to quote a favourite line from one of the popular *Star Trek* movies, 'Resistance is futile'.

That is the basic premise of *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, Don Tapscott's latest attempt to help us understand what is happening before it is, figuratively as well as literally, too late. Toward this end, Tapscott clearly and convincingly demystifies the intricacies of the interrelationships between the economy, employment and education as the 'Net Generation' accelerates its execution of a paradigm shift of unprecedented proportions.

Since there is no universal agreement regarding the terms used to describe the demographic categories to which Tapscott alludes throughout the book, some preliminary definitions are in order. He defines the 'Net Generation' as anyone born between January 1977 and December 1997, which sandwiches this group between 'Generation X', which began at the end of the 'Baby Boom Generation' in December 1964, and 'Generation Next', which began in January 1998. Statistically, the Net Generation consists of 81.1 million individuals – even larger than the Baby Boom Generation.

This is where an initial criticism of *Grown Up Digital* seems appropriate and applicable. As part of a precursory investigation, Tapscott and his team interviewed almost 6,000 members of the Net Generation from 12 different countries: the USA, Canada, the UK, Germany, France, Spain, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, China, Japan and India; and although Tapscott references the global economy throughout the book and includes examples from many different countries, it is obvious that he tends to focus principally on Western culture in general and often the USA in particular. At times this is confusing for the reader because it has to be kept consistently in mind when considering the implications of his work for a worldwide audience.

In any event, the Net Generation's sheer numbers, Tapscott asserts, should be sufficient motivation for acquiring a better understanding of how it is influencing almost everything.

Methodologically, *Grown Up Digital* is based on a qualitative investigation conducted by Tapscott and his research team. Employing a rather innovative and sophisticated data collection strategy, the researchers set up a community on *Facebook*, a popular social networking site on the Internet. The community, called 'Grown Up Digital – Help Me Write the Book', enlisted the services of over 200 individuals who helped to solicit and compile viewpoints and stories from members of the Net Generation. In addition, Tapscott interviewed a variety of experts on the various themes represented in the book, which includes an extensive set of footnotes for each chapter as well as an exhaustive reference section.

Structurally, the book is organized into three sections. The first part, 'Meet the Net Gen', consists of five chapters outlining Tapscott's characterization of the members of this demographic group. The second part, 'Transforming Institutions', is made up of four chapters in which Tapscott describes how fundamental societal institutions are evolving as a direct result of their collective influence. In the final section, 'Transforming Society', Tapscott spends three chapters discussing how the changes being driven by the Net Generation can ultimately serve to revitalize our political, economic and cultural systems.

Along the way, Tapscott manages to explain how members of the Net Generation typically process information, how they prefer to be educated and employed, how their growth and development have been facilitated, and how they are almost congenitally engaged in political and social reformation.

Tapscott is especially passionate when attempting to dispel many of the myths he believes are being wrongly perpetuated about the Net Generation by those who simply do not understand the intrinsic nature of the immense changes they are precipitating. He is particularly adept at pointing out what is often overlooked by many commentators who seem to feel threatened by the rise of a

technologically enhanced communication culture.

Again, a significant portion of *Grown Up Digital* is spent deconstructing a number of misconceptions about the Net Generation. These include the widely held stereotypes of young people today as – compared with previous generations – having lower social skills, less shame, a more dysfunctional work ethic, and being essentially more violent and narcissistic than their predecessors. Tapscott sees these characterizations of the Net Generation as symptomatic of widespread ignorance and an almost irrational allegiance to cultural, political and economic structures that are becoming progressively less relevant.

The myth he seems most interested in debunking is the idea that the Net Generation is somehow less intelligent than its counterparts from the past. Tapscott observes that some authors have even gone so far as to suggest that they should be more accurately described as the 'Dumbest Generation' because '…they spend so much time staring at the screen, the young people forfeit the ability to think deeply or creatively' (p 290). Tapscott points out that there is absolutely no substantive evidence to support such an erroneous characterization.

The real problem, Tapscott argues, lies not with the members of the Net Generation *per se*, but with educational policies and practices that are out of touch with their reality. As an example, he alludes to the fact that many classroom teachers have not been specifically trained to facilitate learning for the Net Generation: that is, they are using techniques and strategies that were developed for students who were not raised in the computer/Internet era. Tapscott is exactly right when he discerns that '…the Industrial Age model of education will be hard to change' (p 127). Anyone who has even a rudimentary understanding of the reactionary nature of educational institutions would be hardpressed to disagree with him.

It is obvious throughout *Grown Up Digital* that Tapscott is much more interested in describing the Net Generation in terms of 'what they are' as opposed to 'what they are not'. Following this more positive orientation, he lists and describes eight 'norms' that collectively define the Net Generation. These can be summed up as: (1) a strong preference for individual freedoms, (2) an inclination towards customization and personalization, (3) a belief in complete transparency, (4) a desire for corporate integrity and complete openness, (5) a need to have entertainment and play woven throughout their work, education and social lives, (6) an affinity for collaboration and relationships, (7) an intolerance for anything that is not realtime, and (8) a compulsion to innovate constantly.

In one of the better chapters in *Grown Up Digital*, Tapscott argues persuasively that the Net Generation is decidedly less narcissistic than previous generations: that is, as a group they are not the 'selfcentred risk takers' (p 300) some have portrayed them to be. This stereotype, according to Tapscott, is reflective of a lack of understanding of what actually drives members of the Net Generation to succeed in the modern world.

Moreover, Tapscott provides empirical evidence supporting the premise that the Net Generation is perhaps the most entrepreneurial in history. As part of the defence for this claim, he cites a worldwide study that found '…young adults age 25 to 34 were the most active entrepreneurs, not only in the United States but in many other countries around the globe' (p 170). He also makes a strong case supporting the premise that most 'Net Geners want to be entrepreneurs or own their own company' (p 170). This conclusion confirms what social commentators and futurists such as Alvin Toffler, Jeremy Rifkin, Richard Florida and Glen Hiemstra have been preaching for decades: namely, that in the coming decades, the global economy will increasingly be driven by those who possess an entrepreneurial spirit.

Tapscott further explores the implications of the ideological shift associated with the rise of the Net Generation for contemporary business and industry when he asserts that 'In the workplace, innovation means rejecting the traditional command-and-control hierarchy and devising work processes that encourage collaboration and creativity' (p 95). Moreover, he sounds a much needed wake-up call when he notes that 'Companies have to change in a far deeper way to adapt to the Net Gen's way of working' (p 172). Specifically, Tapscott explains that '…the old model of employee development – *recruit, train, supervise*, and *retain* – is outdated. The more appropriate employer–employee paradigm for this generation, we believe, is *initiate, engage, collaborate*, and

evolve' (p 172).

It is interesting that Tapscott spends much of *Grown Up Digital* describing ways that members of other generations have to adjust in order to accommodate the innate preferences and personal work styles that characterize the Net Generation. By comparison, he expends considerably less effort in explaining how the Net Generation likewise has an obligation to compromise and conform to some extent to the social, political, economic and cultural expectations established by their predecessors. Near the end of *Grown Up Digital*, however, Tapscott does provide some valuable insights and advice for the Net Generation based on the results of his study. These include recognizing (1) the heightened value of a college education, (2) the efficacy associated with being more patient at work, (3) the central importance of family life, (4) the virtue of having more respect for experience, (5) the inherent advantages of living a principled life of consequence, and (6) the supreme importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.

In the final analysis, Tapscott is overwhelmingly optimistic about the future and he manages to end the book on an upbeat note. After laying out all the relevant issues and ideological imperatives, he comes to the inevitable conclusion that '…this generation will change the world. They are already bringing and implementing radical views regarding the way business should be conducted and about the process of democratic governance' (p 310).

Ultimately, Tapscott succeeds in defending his primary thesis that we are not in Kansas anymore. Perhaps we never were. In any event, it is a safe bet that the Net Generation is indeed changing the world in ways that would have seemed incomprehensible only a few years ago. And yes, resistance is futile.

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