Why the digital generation needs communication training

The 'digital generation' are roughly 30 or younger. As they arrive in a workplace dominated by the non-digital generation, one thing becomes clear, says **Teresa Martini**. They are challenged when it comes to communication skills (or at least 'communication' as it is traditionally understood).

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50%

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What makes the "digital generation" different? It is widely known that while the non-digital generation adopted the use of technology, the digital generation was born into a world where technology was an inherent part of their life and the use of – and exposure to - technology in their formative years changed their cognitive process.

This means the digital generation processes information in a different way to the non-digital generation. This has led to differences in how the digital generation relates to the world and how they understand it.

The digital generation was born into a world of video games, internet, mobile communications, digital social interactions, television, the ability to stream video content, the technology to create their own media content and so on.

Take video games alone. According to Jane McGonigal, a game designer and author, by the age of 21 the average young person in the US has 10,000 hours of gaming under his or her belt. That is just 24 hours less than they spend in a classroom (middle and high school combined) if they have perfect attendance.

Add to this the hours spent surfing the internet, texting on mobile devices, watching TV, streaming video content and the rest, then the amount of hours understanding and relating to the world via a screen is significantly greater than the time spent at school, one of the most important environments where children learn key interpersonal and social skills.

Given the non-linear nature of the internet and the amount of information that technology makes available nowadays, the digital generation has been conditioned to best process information when it is presented:

- with simultaneous and multiple stimuli
- in short amounts and at a fast pace
- in a non-linear sequence
- involving constant interaction

Consequently, it is clear why the digital generation has a short attention span for traditional ways of presenting information (such as reading a book or attending a lecture) but in turn has the ability to spend long periods of time consuming information when it is presented with the characteristics mentioned above.

The challenge then is on. In business, companies must learn to package their marketing messages differently in order to reach out to digital generation consumers. In the education system, some institutions are developing video games to teach subjects to students. It is, then, no surprise that the interpersonal communication sphere has also been affected and traditional ways to relate to one another are being challenged, and this clash also needs to be addressed.

Half of the world belongs to the digital generation; according to the UN, today roughly 50% of the world's population is under the age of 30. As the digital generation advances into spaces until now controlled by the non-digital generation, both groups face challenges, especially when it comes to personal interaction and the ability to engage in a dialogue.

Communication is the ability to pass on a message to an audience. The communication is successful when the recipient understands what the sender intended to convey, there being no misunderstandings.

Any message has two dimensions: what is said; and how it is said.

The sender will have to have the right communication skills to make the right selection of information and present it in a way that aids the message to be understood, making it clear, engaging and therefore memorable.

Looking at both the content ("what") and its presentation ("how") we have identified three major areas where the communication between the digital generation and non-digital generation usually clashes.

Let us start with the "what", the content. There seems to be two areas of difficulty:

Written and verbal skills: the digital environment has developed its own language, from abbreviations to emoticons. The limit to the amount of characters a message can take (Twitter or text messages) or the level of comfort a device provides to type a message (small keyboards) have taught young users to be both succinct and creative to convey a message.

Emotions get abbreviated ("OMG") or completely replaced by visual symbols such as emoticons. In the confined space of a digital communication, and the fast space of the environment where it takes place, there is no room for long, elaborated ideas.

These written habits have filtered into verbal skills. This abbreviated way of communicating is effective among the digital generation. The problem arises when the digital generation transfers this "digital language" to interpersonal communications with the non-digital generation. They are forgetting one key characteristic of an effective communicator: *the ability to adjust their message to the audience*.

The digital generation's failure to adjust their communication style to the non-digital audience is especially problematic in the workplace – dominated as it is by the non-digital generation – where business communication has very different expectations and requirements.

Non-digital managers get frustrated with emails that look more like a chat box than correspondence addressing issues following a rational or analytical line of thinking. This also takes its toll on verbal communication, which takes us to the next point: the lack of ability to reflect on issues and elaborate arguments with supporting evidence – in other words, logical reasoning.

Reasoning: to create and sustain an argument requires the ability to build a certain narrative with a beginning, middle and end. It is a linear way of thinking that the internet does not teach with its possibility to constantly click away.

The short span of attention for linear narratives characteristic of the digital generation challenges their ability to elaborate an argument, support it with evidence and present it in a logical linear way which is the way the non-digital generation conducts business.

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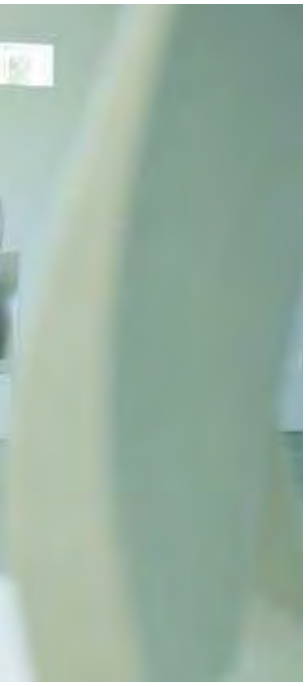
> *Communication among the digital generation is based on authenticity. They write what they think without delays: they type it and it is published*



This same short attention span is reflected in the digital generation's inability to focus during long meetings. They quickly switch off and start fiddling with their mobile devices, tuning out and disconnecting from their non-digital managers giving the wrong impression of themselves as professionals.

Body language is the third area of communication where we see clashes between the digital and non-digital generations. We are now talking about the "format" or the "how" in communication.

Communication among the digital generation is based on authenticity. They write what they think without delays: they type it and it is published. Again, there is no time for reasoning or analysing what they are about to publish. It all happens in an instance and that is partly what makes it authentic.

This authenticity lives behind a screen; it is communicated to the world without having to literally see the world face to face and sometimes without even saying a word verbally. Therefore problems arise when the digital generation steps out of the room and into the business world.

Once again they transfer their "digital body language" without filters, failing to adapt it to the non-digital business code. That is when HR recruiters are faced with, for example, candidates who show up to job interviews wearing bermudas.

Because interpersonal interactions among the digital generation happen largely via a digital device, when at work they struggle to use gestures and voice projection to convey their professional image, therefore limiting their career progress.

As we mentioned earlier, half of the world's population is aged 30 or younger. But the business world is still largely shaped and controlled by the non-digital generation. Therefore a communication clash is bound to happen in the business world.

The challenge is mutual but leadership belongs to those who have the flexibility to adjust. Clearly, if they want to stay in business, the non-digital generation must learn to communicate with the following two audiences of the digital generation:

Digital consumer: a large percentage of consumers belong to the digital generation, and that percentage will only keep growing as the digital generation gets older. Businesses will have to be able to design marketing communication campaigns that can successfully engage the digital consumer. This will only be possible if they listen to the digital generation's needs and interests.

Digital employee: non-digital managers must make an effort to connect and open communication channels with their digital employees because they are the only ones who will be able to provide insight from their generation and develop the right marketing tools to reach out to them and engage them.

At the same time it is key for digital generation graduates to learn non-digital communication skills to make the transition to the offline work environment less painful.

They must make an effort to understand the business needs and ways of the non-digital generation. They will learn useful skills such as linear reasoning and analytical thinking, the power of body language and the power of speech.

Only then they will have the best of both worlds and a brilliant career ahead of them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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