

Internet and Technology: Are digital natives really equipped?

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We have come a long way digitally from the time when shorthand and typing were considered essential skills to fetch a job based on your speed. Today, we are in an era where a primary school student – a ‘digital native’ – can type faster than even a professional. ‘Digital Native’ is a term coined by Marc Prensky to define individuals born after the digital revolution who have grown up surrounded by technologies such as computers, video games, music players, cell phones, and other toys and tools of the digital age¹.

Digital natives, in contrast to ‘Digital immigrants,’ people born before the widespread advent of the personal computer, is a generation of networked youth who are technologically adept at operating modern tools and gadgets in their everyday routine for communication, socializing, and recreation. Although the adroitness with which they use technology is impressive, their constant online interactions can be a cause of concern on occasion. They send personal messages rather than traditional mails, voice chat rather than call, play online games instead of physical games, and have an online presence through various social media channels.

However, technological fluency goes beyond the mere turning on of a device, playing next generation apps, and creating a social media account. Being born into the age of information and communications technology (ICT) does not certify today’s youth to be experts in digital technology. Today’s generation admittedly have exceptional proficiency in the use of computers and laptops along with mobile and social media technologies, possessing a good level of digital literacy. Nevertheless, they still need to be formally educated to use technology to advance society further; otherwise, they will become ‘digital orphans’ who lack the qualifications or experiences to get meaningful employment.

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<http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>

Surveys suggest that the majority of young people do not possess the skills and abilities required by today's job markets. It has become a challenge for companies to recruit somebody who is digitally literate and can make the most of the internet and what digital technology has to offer rather than just a digital native who has led an active virtual life but lacks the skills to use the medium to deal with the needs of the work environment. As parents and educators, our responsibility does not end with providing for modern devices and equipments such as smartphones, tablets, personal computers, and gaming consoles. We will have to prepare our children for the future job market where they are able to land a satisfying job with a good pay package due to their advanced IT skills.

According to a UK/BCS Survey, 81 per cent of Human Resources professionals and employers require their staff to be digitally proficient. They specifically rated skills in the following areas as very or quite important: e-mail (97 per cent); word processing (92 per cent); spreadsheet (89 per cent); and social media (71 per cent). Around 51 per cent of those surveyed believe that their workforce has the digital skills needed to meet future challenges. Digital natives may know how to operate smart devices, including smart phones and tablets along with their latest innovative features, but this will not necessarily help them advance far in their future jobs. The skills and knowledge gained from formal training offers unparalleled advantage, especially in future careers for digital natives who are already adept in using new devices and technologies.

While it opens new horizons for creativity, learning and economic growth, digital technology also fosters an open, unsecured world of cyberspace, which is much like a free-for-all environment where everybody can practically do anything under the guise of anonymity. If not armed with an in-depth and clear understanding of the digital world, digital natives might find themselves befuddled or worse, easy prey for cyber bullies and criminals. Lack of formal training and education often leads to exploitation. Cyber safety is fundamental in our technology-centric and highly interconnected world. Simple familiarity with computers and the internet will not automatically arm the current generation, with the crucial knowledge and skills to protect them from the dangers lurking online. Learning the intricacies of the digital world and how they can be optimized is not something that can be discovered overnight or by early exposure to technologies. It is through proper training and education led by digital experts that one can truly be empowered.

As parents and teachers of digital natives, we are constantly challenged to look after the safety of our children as they receive their education. We have to emphasize on the importance of their learning as well as the skills to keep themselves safe as they make a future in a digital age. We will have to prepare our children for a future that requires more than just surrounding them with the latest devices. A formal education in digital technology will enable them to be creative, expressive, and innovative as they shape their identities and at the same time empower them to protect their privacy, keep themselves safe, and be responsible citizens.

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