

# Aperius Consulting

## ARE DIGITAL NATIVES AUTOMATICALLY DIGITAL EXPERTS?

### Summary:

- Digital *natives* are people born after the general introduction of digital technologies and take them for granted as integral parts of their life.
- Most digital natives have (easily) spent 10,000 hours leveraging digital technologies. But, that doesn't necessarily make them digital *experts*.
- Digital experts have an *aptitude* for, and devote *time* and *energy* to, learning about, discussing, hypothesizing, experimenting with and developing digital technologies.
- Digital natives are *likely* to be digital experts ... but, sophisticated digital *immigrants* (that understand both the technology and the user needs) are just as likely to be experts.

## 10,000 HOURS – ARE DIGITAL NATIVES AUTOMATICALLY DIGITAL EXPERTS?

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*Millennials have grown up in an era of pervasive information.*

My (teenage) daughters learnt to read and write with the help of a Leapfrog LeapPad ... I used Janet and John books. They've had untethered access to a PC since birth whereas I didn't touch a computer until I was 14. They're never known a world in which (almost) limitless information isn't available at their fingertips while I remember visiting the Central Reference Library to do research for school projects. They've owned their own *laptop* since they were 9 or 10 while I bought my first *desktop* when I was 21. They've had smartphones since age 12 whereas I was provided with a mobile phone (a Motorola 8500x that weighed more than half a kilogramme and wouldn't even qualify as a feature phone) when I was a production support engineer aged 22.

By any commonly accepted measure, my daughters are 'digital natives' – an expression attributed to Marc Prensky to describe people born after the general introduction of digital technologies. I, on the other hand am a digital immigrant. Rather than having technology pre-embedded into my life, I have integrated it as it has emerged from R&D labs.

*Are the digital natives also the digital experts?*

So, who are the experts? The natives (like my daughters) who don't even need to think about digital technology but take it as much for granted as the air that they breathe? Or the immigrants (like me) who continually adapt to the 'new normal' and adopt technology as an augmentation of everyday life? My daughters would say that they are the experts. After all, digital technology has been an integral part of their lives since before they could walk. They don't read manuals they just connect directly with new technology and figure out (intuitively) how to use it.

There are a lot of people that agree that digital natives are the experts. The idea is that their natural understanding and extensive use of technology creates proficiency and knowledge. At the same time, as everyday life becomes more technologically advanced its more and more difficult for non-digital natives to keep up.

But, is that true? Does familiarity and usage breed expertise?

*Practice makes perfect.*

Those that feel it does, often refer to Malcolm Gladwell's (excellent) book, 'Outliers' in which he puts forward the concept that success in any field is closely linked with practice. His basic hypothesis is that practicing something for 10,000 hours creates expertise. He uses a variety of examples that support this claim from The Beatles (who honed their skills during four years of live performances in Hamburg) to Bill Gates (who gained access to a computer when 13 and spent >10,000 hours

programming it). So, theoretically, 'ordinary' people can become experts at something if they practice (or study) it for 20 hours a week for 10-years.

If this is correct, my daughters are certainly well on their way to achieving expertise. They've both been very active digital *participants* (especially in social media technologies) for the last five years, and somewhat active for the three years prior to that. I would estimate that during that time they've averaged 2-5 hours a day of digital technology interaction. So, that's around 10,000 hours.

But, I live with these girls and I can tell you that, although they're definitely expert *users*, they're not true digital experts. They're intimately familiar with how to use technology but don't understand how the technology works – or even how others interact with and use the same technology that they do. Neither of my daughters could tell you the growth rate of mobile active users on Facebook, or what SEO means (and how important it is to a CMO), or what motivates Millennials (or even what a *Millennial* is).

*Familiarity and awareness do not create expertise.*

I believe that familiarity doesn't breed expertise. Watching three hours of television every evening for ten years (10,000 hours) doesn't equip the viewer to know anything about developing or broadcasting television programmes. At least, not unless the three hours of daily viewing was specifically focused on how to make and/or broadcast TV programmes. In the last five years I've covered ~36,000 miles (and spent 600 hours) driving to and from my parent's house in the north of England. In all that driving, I've learnt nothing about building cars ... or roads ... or the driving habits of other road users. All I've learnt is that British roads are appalling.

The reality is digital natives aren't *automatic* experts in digital technologies any more than digital immigrants and vice versa. I fully subscribe to Gladwell's 10,000 hours rule-of-thumb, but experts devote 10,000 hours of *relevant* practice to a particular discipline, and even then they need some basic *aptitude* for it. I'm pretty sure that even if I put in 10,000 hours of sprint training, I still wouldn't beat Usain Bolt in the 100m. I suspect he might just have the edge over me because of his natural aptitude, which I concede is (a little) better than mine.

## **Summary**

Digital experts are those that have an *aptitude* for and devote *time* and *energy* to: learning about, discussing, hypothesizing, experimenting with and developing digital technologies. I acknowledge that those people are *likely* to be digital natives. But, sophisticated digital immigrants that understand both the technology and the user needs, are just as likely to be experts.

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