

# Book Grown Up Digital

## How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World

Don Tapscott  
McGraw-Hill, 2008

### Recommendation

In 1997, Don Tapscott wrote *Growing Up Digital*, an extensively researched inquiry into how growing up immersed in digital technology changed a generation. Now, he returns to this question, exploring what has happened as that generation and its technology have matured. Tapscott addresses numerous concerns and delves into accusations commonly voiced about this “New Generation.” He generally finds that the insults are without merit. In fact, he is almost a cheerleader for the digital generation (or “Net Gen,” as he calls it). The book reads quickly, especially considering that it is based on a \$4 million, multiyear research project including nearly 10,000 interviews. Where Tapscott shows his supportive research, he is highly persuasive. When he wanders into personal positions, his reasoning is less compelling. *BooksInShort* suggests his comprehensive report to a wide range of readers: all marketers and futurists, anyone interested in cyber-culture and any human resources professionals who wonder how to integrate Net Gen into the workforce.

### Take-Aways

- The technology that members of the “New Generation” grew up with fundamentally shaped them, and they are shaping it.
- These “Net Geners” use computer technology naturally and easily.
- Net Geners share “eight norms”: “Freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed” and “innovation.”
- Net Geners prefer to learn and work collaboratively.
- They anticipate fast, frequent communication.
- Net Geners customize their purchases, and expect to work with businesses to improve them.
- Net Geners are close to their families, and find them safer and more democratic than earlier generations found theirs.
- Net Geners judge corporations by their integrity, workplace practices and concern for the environment.
- Net Geners want to be evaluated on performance, not seniority or loyalty.
- Net Geners don’t make sharp distinctions between work and play, or their public and private spheres.

### Summary

#### Who Are the “Net Geners”?

You may have heard that members of the “Net Generation” (or “Net Gen”) are selfishly addicted to their computers, which have rotted their brains, destroyed their social skills, and left them violent and immature. This generation is definitely different from earlier generations, but how could it not be? It’s the first generation to grow up taking digital technology for granted. Net Geners assume continual, constant access to computers, the Internet and each other, via phone, text or some other still-emerging technology. Those factors have changed how Net Geners act and even how their brains function in some areas. However, many of these changes are positive.

“The Net Generation is a distinct generation. It is made up of the children of the post-World War II generation, called the baby boomers in the United States.”

For context, start with Net Gen’s place in history as the latest in a series of generations with distinct identities. The introduction of television defined the technological tone of the baby boom (born 1946 to 1964). The “baby bust,” or Generation X, (born 1965 to 1976) is a much smaller cohort. Though its members are quite educated and regularly use advanced communication technology, they didn’t grow up with computers, and many feel somewhat excluded from the central cultural debate. The Net Generation (born 1977 to 1997) is again a larger group, a kind of “echo” of the baby boom. They’ve been around computers since before they could speak. For them, “technology is like air,” necessary but invisible. They can’t imagine living without it. Their continual connection to others worldwide has produced the first truly global generation. Immigration to the U.S. has made Net Geners “increasingly multiracial” and tolerant.

“Technology is influencing the way kids think and behave, but it’s a two-way street – the way kids think and behave is influencing and shaping the Internet itself.”

Because Net Gen members were “bathed in bits” – that is, immersed in computer technology their whole lives – they are far more adept than earlier generations. This has produced a “generational lap” in which the younger generation must guide and educate the older. Net Gen uses the media differently than its predecessors. Rather than being passive receivers, Net Geners are more active. Almost 80% of them read interactive blogs daily, leaving comments and adding links. They multitask, watching TV while texting, talking on the phone or surfing the Internet. They’re more likely to use their cellphones as everything from alarm clocks to GPS devices. They may even use their phones’ cameras as a kind of instrument for social action, for instance, to document police misconduct. They see the computer as more than a tool, as a place to congregate with friends. Their safe communal spaces aren’t mainly in the physical world, but rather online, on social networking sites like Facebook. Rather than being antisocial, Net Geners are developing an entirely new set of social skills.

“To this generation, the Internet is like the fridge. They don’t belabor the nuts and bolts of its operation; it’s just part of life.”

## Net Geners share “eight norms” that unify them as a generation:

1. **“Freedom”** – Net Geners expect and demand freedom, choice and variety in all areas of their lives. Rather than finding a job after college and holding on to it, they keep looking for the right job. They want to live and work where and when they choose.
2. **“Customization”** – Previous generations accepted mass-produced products. Net Geners regularly customize their purchases and even their jobs.
3. **“Scrutiny”** – Having always been exposed to countless competing media channels, Net Geners almost instinctively scrutinize any information they encounter. They expose hoaxes quickly, and make short work of false pretenses. To communicate with Net Geners and to sell to them, you must be honest and open.
4. **“Integrity”** – Net Geners demand integrity. They expect companies to display honesty. They can forgive genuine mistakes, but not deception or harmful practices.
5. **“Collaboration”** – Members of previous generations sometimes swapped stories about work over a drink, but they did their actual work alone. Net Geners grew up collaborating; it is natural for them. Their collaboration goes beyond teamwork or social contributions, and often takes the form of co-creation (think Wikipedia).
6. **“Entertainment”** – Net Geners love to be entertained. They expect to take regular breaks from work to relax. In fact, they don’t even see clear lines between work and play; they want to have fun at work. That’s why Microsoft and Google put so many games online.
7. **“Speed”** – Net Geners are fluent users of texting and instant messaging, which are built on high-speed connections, so they expect everything to happen quickly. Their Internet connections and computers have become faster and faster. They want rapid answers, decisions and action. Slowness makes them bored, worried and irritated.
8. **“Innovation”** – All their lives, Net Geners have seen new products and technologies arrive in a steady stream of change. They expect change and want the best, latest toys.

## Brain Change

Interaction with computer technology has changed Net Geners’ brains. Recent studies show that when new neural connections form in the most-used parts of the brain, they continue throughout adulthood. Thus, Net Geners’ experience tracking multimedia has made them more visually acute and better at spatial awareness. Video games have benefited them in surprising ways. They’re better at hand-eye coordination, and are more effective decision makers and collaborators. Their memorization skills have gone downhill, but omnipresent Internet access makes those less necessary. You don’t have to know all the facts anymore; you need to know how to search and evaluate what you find. Net Geners can do that. They’re skilled at zooming from site to site, sorting, sifting and assessing information. What hasn’t improved? Critical thinking. It still requires focused attention, so Net Geners may need to learn to disengage from distraction.

## How the Net Gen Will Change Social Institutions

Traditional education mass-produced information and distributed it in the same way to everyone. Content flowed to students as passive receptacles. That no longer works; education’s methods are outmoded. Far too many students are dropping out of high school, and those who stay often find school an obstacle to real learning. Education must evolve to meet Net Gen’s changing demands and to teach students what they need to know to thrive in an information-based economy. Since students can access factual data instantly online, and since the body of knowledge in any given profession now becomes obsolete quickly, education should not focus on transmitting knowledge, but on teaching students how to learn. Teachers should shift from lectures to interactive, collaborative guidance, and let students explore and discover on their own. Schools should use computers to individualize access and maximize the use of student time.

“Young people insist on freedom of choice. It’s a basic feature of their media diet.”

Net Geners also will be different in the workforce. Rather than being loyal to one employer, they will follow their own career paths – changing jobs, pursuing independent entrepreneurial ventures or returning to earlier employers after adventures in learning. Rather than annual performance reviews, Net Geners want regular – even daily – feedback. Rather than being rewarded for seniority and for working set hours in a set location (like the often-mocked cubicle), Net Geners want rewards for performance. They want to work flexibly, in terms of time and place. They want work to be fun and they expect the workplace to emphasize interpersonal relationships (even if they are virtual). They want to collaborate, invent and advance quickly. Net Geners can seem entitled, but they bring waves of talent and technical expertise to their jobs.

“The Net Gen’s values were shaped not only by technology but by their parents.”

Net Geners are not passive consumers. They expect interactive relationships with the companies they buy from. To use Alvin Toffler’s word, think of them as “prosumers”: consumers who also produce. Net Geners approach commercial activity differently, so marketers must approach them differently, starting with their immersion in media. Net Geners have swum in ads since they were born, and are adept at ignoring commercials or using technological tools to skip them. Rather than flooding Net Geners with standard broadcast ads, marketers must approach them on their terms: via relationships.

“In the blogosphere, customer review engines, consumer advocacy sites and other nontraditional social spheres interact – often in unpredictable ways – to influence consumer decisions.”

Net Geners look first to their peers for feedback on new products, so sellers need to gain access to someone within their “N-fluence networks.” For instance, get bloggers to comment on your product and bring it to the attention of people on social media sites. Once Net Geners have your product, expect them to customize it and share their opinions about it. When they ask questions, they want answers. They will judge your company not just on its products, but also on its behavior. Any ethically dubious practices or environmental harm will come back to haunt you.

## Net Gen at Home

Baby boomers grew up in hierarchical homes with limited access to the global community (few TV channels, no Internet). Net Geners were raised in more democratic

homes. Unlike boomers, Net Geners didn't have to leave home to have a say in their lives; they already had a say. Boomer kids ran around outdoors playing, but the outside world seemed more dangerous and complex by the time Net Gen kids were being raised. Fear of crime spiked. Parents tightly scheduled trips to the outside, driving their Net Gen children to lesson after lesson. Home was a safe place where Net Geners could socialize via computer with no fear or constraint.

“We’re seeing the early signs of a major collision between the freewheeling Net Generation and the traditional boomer employees.”

College costs have skyrocketed, making it far more expensive than it was for earlier generations. Thus, living at home or moving back home bears little tension or stigma. This closer family tie is also necessary because the Internet bears many dangers from which even tech-savvy young Net Geners need adult protection: pornography, cyber-stalkers, cyber-bullies and big risks that open up from simple errors in judgment. The most common risk is keeping too loose a rein on personal privacy. Kids don't realize that embarrassing comments or images posted on social media Web sites may pop up later to damage their jobs or school prospects.

“The Net Gener who wants to change the world now has not only a digital printing press but the equivalent of a million volunteers to pass the flyers from friend to friend.”

Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign shows how Net Geners will change politics. Once they were largely uninvolved because they didn't trust politicians or the entire political structure, and because traditional politics approached them the wrong way. The slow pace of organization and policy change turned them off; engaging them required a dramatic combination of factors. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks were the first activism trigger. Subsequent attacks on Net Gen social values, like tolerance, further pulled them into the political arena.

“Activists are operating at speeds we’ve never seen before.”

Since Net Geners are likelier to vote as Democrats, they were ready when Obama engaged them via social media. Obama let some of the traditional party hierarchy dissolve, giving Net Geners more of a voice and more independence. He actively used YouTube and Twitter. He employed Net Gen-style collaboration in campaign videos showing him speaking amid a mix of volunteers' music and commentary. This may sketch out where Net Geners will take politics: interactivity; faster mobilization; a more genuine, online marketplace of ideas; and closer, more democratic scrutiny of mainstream media claims (including attack ads).

## How Net Geners Will Change the World

Net Geners won't just inherit the world. Instead, they'll actively alter it. In fact, it's already happening: Witness the “Davos Six.” The British Council chose six teenagers to attend the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. They addressed the assembled global leaders about their community activism, from raising funds for schools in other countries to planting trees in Mongolia to help fight sandstorms. That's the sort of immediate, grassroots, experience-based political change to expect from Net Gen members, who assume they have the right to be heard and to act. They won't wait for some higher-up to take notice. Given the interconnected nature of the Internet, they know that they can make a global splash immediately. Volunteering is up and Net Geners are far more concerned than earlier generations about the global implications of their actions. Many seek out green products and insist on integrity from their institutions.

“The shocking conclusion from my research is not that the generation is somehow fatally flawed. Rather, it is that the mean-spirited, gleefully contemptuous characterization of youth today is pretty much without foundation.”

The Net Gen isn't perfect, and neither are the Internet and digital technology. The technology makes it possible to steal music, see pornography easily, and cheat or bully people in new ways. However, many of these accusations are old flaws in new forms. Individual Net Geners, especially younger ones, need guidance on ethical action, on responsibility, and on constructing and keeping boundaries. Talk to your kids. Meanwhile, studies show that the rest of older generations' common worries about Net Geners are ill-founded. Kids today are not just fine – they are flourishing, and they will make the world a better place.

## About the Author

**Don Tapscott** has written or co-written 11 books, including *Growing Up Digital*, *Paradigm Shift* and *Wikinomics*.

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