



How can you ensure your meetings aren't a turn off for tomorrow's delegates?  
Katherine Simmons reports

# The digital natives are restless



Turned on or switching off: can digital technology improve meetings?

Today's students - and some young people already within the workplace - belong to a generation known as "digital natives".

This generation has mastered the concept of multi-tasking - talking and networking with peers via mobile phone, text, e-mail and social networking sites such as Bebo, Facebook and MySpace, downloading music from iTunes and sharing photos with friends on Flickr. All at once.

The term "digital native" was first coined by educational theorist Marc Prensky to describe those who have grown up with digital technology. Digital immigrants grew up without digital technology but adopted it later.

Much has been written and debated about the brain function of the digital native being different from that of digital immigrants (golden oldies aged 25 plus). In a technologically-driven world, the digital native's brain has to work harder and faster to sift through vast quantities of information.

It's easy to see why the younger generation has become disengaged from old style one-way methods of communication. Interactivity is now the norm. We now all have the individual power (and the technology) to become a citizen journalist for the 9 O'Clock News, a YouTube celebrity or a professional Ebay auctioneer.

'If we find something engaging then our attention span is as long as it always been'  
Helen Petrie

We share information and exchange ideas on a size and scale which has never been possible before. And we can do so at a time which suits us.

The new generation has never had to live under mantra of "put up and shut up" (anyone who says this will probably be told to "blog off"). So, with the rise of the digital natives, does this mean the death of the one-way model? Can digital technology with its own lexicon of Google, Facebook and Wiki be harnessed to improve meetings?

It's not only the 'natives' who are restless. Few of us have the time or inclination to sit still for an interminable lecture. If Prensky is right, methods of delivery need to be changed to reflect the reality of life outside meeting rooms.

Helen Petrie, a professor of human-computer interaction at the University of York, says it may appear that attention spans are shorter because people have to "sift and filter more" but like Prensky, she says the key issue is whether or not people are truly engaged in what they are doing: "If we find something that is engaging, then our attention span is just as long as it has always been. I bet you during the Rugby World Cup game people's attention span wasn't any shorter than it might have been before."

Newspapers, magazines and TV channels are now playing catch up with interactive sources which

are gaining audience share and fragmenting the media market. Web-savvy corporates are exploiting this age of interaction, building communities around their brands to build loyalty and putting tools in place to gain valuable insights into their customer's thoughts which can be used to shape their products.

Maarten Vanneste, president of the Belgium-based organisation the Meeting Support Institute ([www.meetingsupport.org](http://www.meetingsupport.org)), says meeting planners have no choice but to adapt - the new web order is already here.

"Web 2.0 today has infected the meetings industry," says Vanneste. "Collaboration will only increase as kids from the Facebook generation are joining the workforce. Co-creation is here and it's here to stay."

But, he adds, it's not just the digital natives who are switching off from one-way communication. The problem affects all adults, whatever their age. And improving meetings isn't just a case of throwing technology into the mix. Vanneste cites a recent meeting where delegates contributed their thoughts in variety of different ways from tapping into a wiki (a website where all individuals that register, can add, change, and adapt the content) to scribbling their thoughts on humble Post-It notes - read more about this event in the case study panel on page 63.

But Vanneste doesn't think the new technology will replace the need for

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people to meet face-to-face. Instead, he thinks planners should integrate technology into the event. "To make an interesting twist, you can bring in wikis but I don't think that we should just be doing things like this just for the digital natives. It is a way of interacting with the audience as the meeting is in progress. You get the energy from the room that you wouldn't get from a virtual meeting.

"There are a number of meeting professionals who are worried about video conferencing, staff blogs and social networking sites that do serve as a virtual meeting and you can even have a virtual meeting in Second Life.

"This is taking meetings away from hotels and other destinations. What the Wiki Workshops are doing is bringing the virtual meeting back to the real live meeting. Combining the virtual meeting with the real meeting works great with delegates getting together on round tables in front of laptops. Having this equipment and facilitation makes a dynamic package."

Vanneste says keeping delegate's attention is crucial if the meeting planner is to achieve the objective of a learning outcome: "There are two states to the brain - the alpha state - which is a kind of semi-sleep mode and beta, when the brain is really alert. It's at that point when you can really learn. We switch between the two. In our industry, it's critical that we help our delegates make that switch from alpha to beta.

"Learning is the number two level of measurement on the Jack Phillips Method of measuring ROI (return on investment) - without this you are failing to get a return on your investment."

Vanneste works all over Europe and in Belgium, where he lives, even local government, notorious for its dated committee structures, is changing to reflect the possibilities of Web 2.0.

Vanneste works as a consultant for the upcoming conference of councillors and mayors from the Flemish community. He explains: "They are asking us to re-design their conference format into 'Meetings 2.0' to reflect Web 2.0 with wikis, MySpace and blogs. And that's what 'Meetings 2.0' is about - more interaction and ensuring people are active and involved in sharing and co-creating. The organiser sees it as moving from being an information provider into an information broker. They have to move with the times."

'Wiki workshops combine virtual meetings with real meetings'  
Maarten Vanneste



## case notes

Wiki workshop

Organiser/moderator: Maarten Vanneste, Abbit Meeting Support (Belgium)

Venue: Brussels Atomium

Client: Holiday Inn Brussels Airport

Event: Client meeting and dinner for 20 delegates, October 3, 2007



The format of this meeting was unique; it was our first ever Wiki Workshop. Three round tables were set up for dinner and there were also three small standing tables with a laptop.

The wiki was used as a central tool. All you need is a PC with a web browser and an internet connection. No software is needed, no website skills are required.

The home page of a wiki had a menu and delegates could add items to that menu or start their own pages. The wiki home page had a menu with three words - Earth, Wind and Fire - names for each of the teams. Each page had a number of topics, pre-defined by the organiser with space to write for the participants.

The evening had one goal: to gather as many ideas and questions as possible regarding the refurbishing of the hotel as HolidayInn wanted a "bottom-up" education so it could learn from the participants.

Everyone worked together and within the wiki, they could change everyone else's work. The result was an immediate and tangible document which has already been used by the meeting owner and at the architect's briefing for the refurbishment project. It will continue as a note pad for ideas, a sharing point for architect's drawings, pictures of furniture, etc.

The working format for the evening was standing discussions with groups of about nine participants around a laptop, during an informal dinner. Every discussion was based on a question. All ideas from the group work were noted on the designated (Earth, Wind, Fire) wiki page. An on-stage screen displayed the ideas on each page for all to see. Between dinner courses, people got up and worked on another topic - moving

around also helped keep people alert and awake.

Besides the wiki moments, we used other techniques to activate participant's brains and make the "bottom-up-learning" process work.

Firstly, on the bus, heading to the Atomium, a facilitator handed out Post-it notes for participants to write down expectations and "top of the head" suggestions for the evening.

Then we used voting keypads: - a truckload of questions were prepared, most of them were multiple choice. Each individual selected one of the choices as their answer and results were immediately turned into graphs, providing a fast way to process lots of questions.

The last tool encompassed personal notes on specific open ended questions with facilitators distributing booklets containing a question or topic per page with space for note taking. No discussion took place - every individual wrote his or her ideas down after some reflection.

A mix of low tech and high tech, personal choice and discussion output, multiple choice and free text, sit down and standing work ensured plenty of diverse input.

The results were stunning - we achieved 2,400 individual answers on about 120 questions from just 20 participants, over dinner.

Now we face the task of sorting, analysing and reporting these results back to the organisation including participants, a group of architects, the board and a CEO.

The wiki now contains the notes and images. For the next step we'll

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add the voting results and the post-it notes. Then a link and password will be sent to all participants so they can continue from office, hotel room or home, adding ideas, commenting or reviewing pictures.

The group is automatically kept up to date about changes made to the wiki. The wiki also tracks all changes and visitors. A follow up will now encourage and direct additional activity by participants. In that way, the group becomes a small community.

It was good to see some of the regular clients sitting together, working on the wiki and not stopping, not even for the main course... These men normally don't share tables for breakfast, but after tonight that probably will change. A community is born and so too a reason for more meetings. ■

**How do you ensure your delegates attend your meeting in both mind and body?**

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*Wiki fingers: delegates at the Brussels Atomium*

