The background is a light-colored wooden floor with vertical grain. A red dashed line starts from a red footprint in the top right, loops around the title, and ends at another red footprint in the middle. Two more red footprints are at the bottom left.

# Dancing With Digital Natives

**STAYING IN STEP  
WITH THE  
GENERATION  
THAT'S TRANSFORMING  
THE WAY BUSINESS  
IS DONE**

Edited by **Michelle Manafy**  
and **Heidi Gautschi**

# When Facebook Comes to Work: Understanding the Work Practice of the Digital Native

Brynn Evans

The most valuable thing I learned in graduate school is that progress is not linear. It would take me 10 days of hard work before a big insight would come along and give me the equivalent of a week's worth of progress. Although I'm talking in the past tense here, this simple life lesson is true of my current work too—and of the work style of many so-called knowledge workers.

This pattern reveals itself in other domains as well. Imagine that a soccer game is coming down to the wire, tied at 0–0. From an absolute perspective, each team has made zero “progress.” Of course, both teams have played a full game—they're exhausted—but nothing quantifiably distinguishes them from each other. Yet, at the last possible moment, either team could orchestrate a single clever play and score the tie-breaking shot. The game would technically end with a winner and a loser, although a score of one to nothing hardly reflects the deliberate work

that both teams put in throughout the match. Still, what matters is that the winning team finally pulled through.

This perspective is important to keep in mind as you read this chapter. Although digital natives may conduct their work differently, they still recognize the need to pull through and meet the same deadlines. Even if they appear to be progressing slowly, be aware that, in their work too, progress is not linear.

### **Work as a Practice**

This chapter is about the way that digital natives approach work—something that I'll refer to as their *work practice*. We all have a work practice that's unique to us; but if you've been employed in an office setting for more than 10 years, chances are that your work practice revolves around the office. When you're at work, you're working. When you're home, you're not working. This is a mindset (and perhaps a coping strategy) that many people adopt in order to lead a balanced life. Yet it's a work practice that is likely absent among the digital natives at your company, even if you still work in a traditional office environment.

What exactly is a work practice? It's not a matter of what work gets done but rather how it gets done. It's the doing of the work; it's the process of producing; it's a frame of mind for dealing with the mundane as well as the urgent. Included in this frame of mind are habits, standards, expectations, and social norms. For example, a familiar standard is the one-hour lunch break. Additionally, there are certain workplace expectations, which may vary within enterprises (e.g., how quickly to respond to a coworker's email). Finally, basic social norms apply regardless of company culture (e.g., it's rude to be on Facebook during a client meeting).

However, digital natives have a different set of habits, standards, expectations, and social norms that stem from being raised in a culture deeply immersed in technology. While their differences may not always clash with non-natives, their work practice is unique and demands

patience and compromise from non-natives to understand it and make the most of it. It certainly matters that your employees—from whatever generation—get their work done: Business is business. However, if you have a greater appreciation for digital natives' attitudes about working, you will learn better how to coexist productively and appreciate the perspectives and techniques that help them succeed.

## **The Life and Times of a Digital Native**

The following account depicts a young woman, Robin, whose childhood was filled with digital technologies, which were used for both work and play. Today, her behaviors reflect the attributes of a digital native, quite distinct from the attributes of workers from previous generations. As you read the following story, consider how Robin's upbringing might affect her current work practices:

Robin is a 25-year-old technical project manager at Intuit. Growing up in a large family, she needed to jockey for attention with her three younger brothers. She took to video games as a way to compete with them, spending hours on gaming consoles and on the family computer late into the night. She was a natural with computers and even won a programming contest in high school. However, her intellectual passions were history and English.

Her parents sent her to college with a personal laptop. It became her life. She used it for taking notes during class, researching material for writing assignments, and doing homework. It was with her in the dorm, on the front steps of the cafeteria, in the noisy student center, and in off-campus cafes. She never hesitated to call upon the trustworthy machine in the middle of a conversation (even once with the dean of her university) if she thought that Google or

Wikipedia could resolve some pressing issue or embellish an important point.

Her laptop was also her social lifeline. She kept Facebook a click away in an ever-present tab in her web browser. She'd check it during class and when stress caused her to wake up in the middle of the night. Now, only a few years out of college, Robin has more than 1,500 friends on Facebook, from high school, college, and various extracurricular activities. She hasn't spoken directly with many of them in years, but instead maintains a semi-complete awareness of their whereabouts and activities through continuous partial attention to their streams. It's a convenient, lightweight way to stay in touch.

Today, Robin is always connected, always online. It's a fast-paced lifestyle—no longer about gaming and programming but still deeply connected to technology. It's second nature to her. She doesn't know another life.

Unfortunately, her managers at Intuit aren't aware of these past experiences and are often confused by her work practice. She's not at her desk when they walk by at 9 AM on their way to get coffee. She always grabs her iPhone when she steps away from her desk. And she often sends emails to the team very late at night, though she does consistently produce good work on time. In recent months, her managers have noticed some exciting new technical ideas coming from her—not something they expected from a history major. Thus, they have resolved to put up with her “idiosyncrasies,” even if they don't really “get” her.

What appear to Robin's managers as idiosyncrasies are actually the habits and practices of a digital native. This is her work practice, and it's something that she shares with other digital natives across the industry: Her work comes with her anywhere (and everywhere) she goes, and

social activities play a central role in her life. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise if you think about her day-to-day experiences in college: Robin worked wherever her laptop was (and her laptop was always with her), and she was always connected to her friends.

The next section will elaborate on the anywhere–everywhere nature of work and the type of social activities that digital natives engage in to give you an idea of how these approaches help digital natives succeed in their work.

## **The Anywhere–Everywhere Nature of Work**

The nature of “work” has changed a lot over the course of the past few centuries. This is most striking if we think about how our ancestors spent their waking hours just trying to meet their basic needs: finding food, making clothing, securing shelter. Significantly, much of today's work force performs information-based tasks, or knowledge work. Uday Apte and Hiranya Nath noted in their article, “Size, Structure and Growth of the U.S. Information Economy” (*Annals of Information Systems*, vol. 1, 2007: 1–28), that this type of work accounts for almost 70 percent of the U.S. labor force.

What's more, many types of knowledge work can now be done from anywhere and everywhere—across devices and across locations. Robin, for example, checks email on her iPhone first thing every morning. She uses this time to take care of urgent requests, provide her team and managers with status updates, and prepare herself for what's to come during the rest of the day. By starting her workday at home, she gets a head start on her projects, though she inevitably arrives “late” to the office.

Perhaps digital natives embrace this anywhere–everywhere mentality because they treat technology as a trusted partner in life rather than as an irritating mother-in-law. And yet, it's largely simple communication and networking technologies that make possible a distributed workplace. Laptops and netbooks, mobile phones, instant messenger (IM),

Skype, virtual private network (VPN), Gmail, and cloud computing resources like Google Docs all support this networked lifestyle.

One of the characteristics of this work style is what Anne Zelenka from the blog *Web Worker Daily* calls “bursty work.” Instead of working in four-hour continuous blocks, digital natives work in smaller chunks. Dawn Foster writes that she intentionally splits her day into chunks so that she “can be productive for longer periods of time” (“How I Work in Chunks,” posted September 5, 2009, [bit.ly/hiuGke](http://bit.ly/hiuGke)). Although this sounds counterintuitive, there is a rationale and structure behind her segmented work blocks.

Since meetings greatly disrupt her day, Foster has learned to set aside Mondays for meetings so that the rest of the week goes uninterrupted. When this isn’t possible, she makes sure to leave a few solid hours in the morning before her first meeting, in order to complete her important client work first. She further batches her client work into smaller chunks, saving a number of client-related tasks for a continuous block of time, reporting that this “helps to avoid getting projects confused by jumping too quickly between clients.”

On another blog, Paul Graham discusses the difference between a “maker’s schedule” and a “manager’s schedule” (“Maker’s Schedule, Manager’s Schedule,” posted July 2009, [bit.ly/eVtDkI](http://bit.ly/eVtDkI)). As they are younger employees, most digital natives in the work force today are not yet managers. Instead, as makers, they are expected to produce: by making sales, writing code, or submitting deliverables on time. However, their style of work tends to coincide with the “manager’s schedule” of chunking the day into hour-long blocks (although managers often use this time for meetings). What’s critically different, however, is that frequent interruptions and scheduled meetings tend to reduce the maker’s productivity. Thus, even if it appears that digital natives’ work style outwardly conforms to their managers’, makers might do better with a certain amount of autonomy regarding their schedules to find their own balance and accomplish their work.

It's important to note that bursty work is not the same as multitasking. Digital natives who break their work into smaller segments are not performing multiple tasks simultaneously. They're doing more focused work for smaller periods of time. I expect that we've all experienced this at some point, where one hour of dedicated work can be more productive than a workday full of interruptions.

It appears that research supports this notion as well. Joshua Rubinstein, David Meyer, and Jeffrey Evans report in their article, "Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching" (*Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2001), that goal shifting carries a high cognitive burden, especially when shifting to tasks that are novel or unfamiliar. Concentration and cognitive capacity may actually be at their highest during short periods of focused, familiar work.

Other research has found that a certain level of task switching is optimal for productivity in the workplace. In one study of information workers, Sinan Aral, Erik Brynjolfsson, and Marshall Van Alstyne report that employees who have a high capacity for managing several simultaneous projects at once—accomplished only by deliberate and tactful task switching—have greater outputs and year-end revenues. This report, titled "Information, Technology and Information Worker Productivity" (NBER Working Paper No. 13172, 2007), notes that this outcome is not the result of working faster. Sometimes projects last longer than originally projected but result in better quality outcomes in the end.

Furthermore, project-based work benefits the most from bursty work practices, largely because demanding projects often require attention in the "off hours." People are better equipped to deal with an unexpected crisis or a bug in the codebase that can't wait until morning when they have an anywhere—everywhere attitude toward work. In large, distributed organizations, it is becoming more common to coordinate

meeting schedules with international team members very late at night or early in the morning in order to synchronize the project work.

Additionally, time away from a problem often sheds new light on puzzling issues. Workers who segment their work into smaller chunks have the advantage of perspective when they return to a task at a later time. First, the pre-coffee morning perspective is different from the afternoon one. And second, related information may be brought to their attention during those moments when they aren't specifically working on the task. Here is an example:

Daniella is an intern at Microsoft. Most recently, she's been trying to incorporate Flash technologies into Silverlight (a project aimed at creating interoperability between competing products). She successfully drafted an initial proposal for her manager but then felt stuck. Over the next week, she spoke casually with her friends about her project and someone happened to point her to a relevant blog. When she later had a moment to review the blog, she realized that it contained information that was critical for the project. She was able to re-draft her proposal and point her manager to the information resources that she'd discovered in the meantime.

Despite how it may sound, having a bursty work practice with an anywhere—everywhere mindset does not mean that digital natives are constantly working. Leisure time is taken in bursts as well. Digital natives log more hours at their computer (in total) but switch between work and leisure tasks in one sitting. Andrei, a 19-year-old programmer, engages in this very practice:

Andrei's primary task is writing code. He spends most of his time in a debugging tool, but when he gets stuck on a problem, he switches to his web browser to read articles. He does this to take a mental break—something we've all been

known to do when we're stumped. For him, this means checking in with friends on Twitter and Facebook who frequently share interesting articles and tidbits. After he's done snacking on information, he has usually re-worked the problem in his head so that he can tackle it with motivation and a fresh perspective.

Now, you might be wondering why he doesn't just go for a walk or brainstorm his idea on a whiteboard. Walking and whiteboards are common strategies for those in previous generations. Digital natives see technology as a tool that enables them to work or play, which results in their leisure time activities taking place via digital technologies. You're more likely to see them texting, IMing, Facebooking, or browsing the web at their computers in the middle of the workday than see them step out for coffee or take a walk around the block.

There are benefits to taking digital breaks. Dr. Brent Coker from the University of Melbourne observes that “people who surf the internet for fun at work—within a reasonable limit of less than 20 percent of their total time in the office—are more productive by about 9 percent than those who don't” (“Freedom to Surf: Workers More Productive if Allowed to Use the Internet for Leisure,” posted April 2, 2009, [bit.ly/dFRJOH](http://bit.ly/dFRJOH)). Of course, leisure activities must take place in moderation, but they can lead to increased productivity because short breaks help us “zone out” for a while, so that we can return to our tasks with greater concentration afterward. Another benefit to digital breaks is that if your concentration returns or inspiration strikes in the midst of leisure time, you're already at the keyboard ready to capture your insights.

In sum, distributed networking technologies are creating an anywhere—everywhere work practice, leading to bursty work and digital leisure time. Digital natives take advantage of these opportunities to get a head start on their workday, to segment their time into meaningful chunks,

and to gain perspective and reset their concentration after time away from a task.

## **Social Permeance**

Having continuous connectivity with digital devices has both advantages and disadvantages. Receiving a phone call at 5 AM from someone in a different time zone is terribly inopportune. However, texting someone when you're running late for an appointment is wonderfully convenient.

What's really happening here is that these digital devices are creating a type of "social permeance"—an expression that conveys how social activities are beginning to permeate our everyday lives. Daily affairs as mundane as grocery shopping are steeped in social interactions, as the digitally equipped text their friends, tweet about what's happening, and broadcast the GPS coordinates of their locations. And their friends communicate back within minutes, if not seconds. Most of us feel that this trend makes it increasingly hard to separate out the professional from the personal. Digital natives don't think in these terms; instead, they find distinct advantages to this social culture.

Some of the same enablers of the anywhere—everywhere work mentality—advanced networking and mobile technologies—also support the social permeance trend. On social networking sites, people forge and strengthen connections with family and friends as well as acquaintances they've only met once. Texting, IMing, and video chatting with Skype are other popular ways for staying in touch throughout the day. A level of social continuity is maintained; it's this ongoing connection that provides unique benefits.

My former roommate, Angela, demonstrates how this is possible:

Angela is one of the most diligent, hard-working students in her PhD cohort. Upon first impression, she might not even strike you as very social; she rarely goes out to dinner, parties,

or gatherings. Yet she often has as many as eight active IM conversations going on simultaneously; she texts her friends on the bus on the way to school; and she passively, yet continuously, monitors their updates on Facebook. It turns out that her life is filled with momentary, yet frequent, social interactions, which she manages with what Linda Stone calls “continuous partial attention” ([bit.ly/e7hgyF](http://bit.ly/e7hgyF)).

Those digital breaks mentioned earlier are part of what makes continuous partial attention possible today. This is a very common habit and expectation of digital natives, and they don’t consider it to be socially superficial or fake. Instead, it creates just enough of a connection that people begin to feel a sense of ambient intimacy. Clive Thompson of the *New York Times* writes about the significance of this in his article, “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy” (September 5, 2008):

Each little update—each individual bit of social information—is insignificant on its own, even supremely mundane. But taken together, over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends’ and family members’ lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting. This was never before possible, because in the real world, no friend would bother to call you up and detail the sandwiches she was eating. The ambient information becomes like “a type of E.S.P.”

Many non-natives would question the value in maintaining semi-complete accounts of the thousands of friends you’ve ever met. However, it is important to understand that, for the native, it’s not just about the numbers—friends aren’t like collectible trading cards. It’s all about diversity—friends are more like the olive in a martini, infusing your environment with their distinctly flavored perspectives. Having a wide, diverse set of active ties is where the critical advantage lies.

Research has shown that workers with large, diverse social networks who are active in nonoverlapping social groups have more measurable outputs, earn more money, and advance faster in their careers. The simple reason for this is that they are privy to nonredundant information. In other words, these workers bridge so-called structural holes in a communication network. Ron Burt explains this in his book, *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition* (Harvard University Press, 1992). According to Burt, individuals who form “bridges” to neighboring networks connect to people who may have very different ideas from their own. They then absorb these ideas, which gives them access to alternative perspectives and, at times, exclusive knowledge that may only exist in some tangential domain. What they do with this knowledge is up to them, but it often comes in handy down the line, often at unexpected moments. This advantage is illustrated in the following anecdote:

Nathan is particularly social and works full-time as a consultant. He is constantly working but spends a lot of time passively engaged in social media—much like the other digital natives portrayed in this chapter. This usually makes him the first person to have heard about a new study, fact, or website, and at times, these discoveries are highly relevant to a client project. A notable example occurred in October 2008 when he attended an informal conference called BarCamp San Diego—a gathering of social peers rather than a gathering of professionals. He was interested in a session I was leading on “lifetracking,” a method for recording personal data as a way to gain insights about yourself. He attended my session and we spoke at length about it afterwards.

A full nine months later, Nathan received a request from a client to help start a lifetracking project. Although my session never caused him personally to adopt lifetracking, he

remembered many things from that day in San Diego and was able to draft a proposal for his client. Immediately afterwards, he privately asked me for additional tips. We hadn't seen each other face-to-face since BarCamp, but we remained peripherally connected through Twitter and Facebook in that period. I recalled his interest in my session and replied to him immediately.

Digital natives, like Nathan and Angela, who attend social events and hang out with friends online are doing more than just socializing. They are establishing a remarkably diverse set of social peers, which brings value to them—and indirectly to their companies and managers—in at least three distinct ways.

First, it is the network of social ties from different industries, backgrounds, interests, and life stages that confers the nonredundant information advantage. Having a large network of professional contacts is not the same, since professionals within a single industry tend to flock together. In contrast, our first protagonist, Robin, keeps up with friends from high school, college, and beyond nearly every day. Even 15 years and a thousand new colleagues from now, her world will be composed largely of social ties.

Second, it's the act of socializing that helps spread ideas. Anyone can collect a thousand trading cards, but good things only come by actually playing those cards. Knowledge only gets transferred by keeping relationships active and having conversations. At that point, social ties represent both people resources and information resources. For example, Nathan-the-consultant had absorbed enough information from my BarCamp session to draft a lifetracking proposal for his client. Yet, I was also a direct “people” resource in his network, as he turned to me to get additional information.

Third, social interactions may actually improve our cognition. Dr. Oscar Ybarra and colleagues report as much in their article, “Mental

Exercising Through Simple Socializing: Social Interaction Promotes General Cognitive Functioning” (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2008). Their study was simple: 1) Subjects were divided into three groups; (2) each group performed a different, initial exercise; and 3) everyone was then given the same set of standard cognitive tests. The first group initially did a passive social exercise: Subjects sat silently watching an episode of *Seinfeld* (seated next to another subject). The second group did an active social exercise: Two subjects had a conversation together about privacy protection. The third group did an intellectual exercise: Subjects had to solve a crossword puzzle, perform mental rotations, and answer questions about a written passage.

Surprisingly, the researchers found that subjects who began with the active social exercise did just as well on the later cognitive tests as subjects who started with reading comprehension and crossword puzzles. Even more surprising was that merely observing passive social interactions did not improve cognitive performance. These findings suggest that interacting with friends may help us in more ways than one. Their knowledge is infectious and socializing may actually prime parts of our brains to help us with intellectual tasks.

In sum, social permeance is creating a culture of social continuity, in which digital natives maintain large, active networks with a diverse set of social peers. As a result, daily interactions create a sense of ambient intimacy and condition the mind, and represent people and information resources that can prove valuable in the future.

## **Conclusion**

So, how are digital natives transforming the way business is done? It's not just their hip iPhones and contemporary slang (“Facebook me!”) that marks this as a new era. Their work practice is fundamentally changing as they live and breathe this culture of distributed networking and social technologies. It may never be a practice that managers and

previous generations wish to embrace personally—and that’s fine. They will, however, need to recognize and understand this emerging work practice if they wish to maximize the digital native work force.

The goal of this chapter is to describe this emerging work style and highlight the role it plays in digital natives’ success. An anywhere–everywhere mindset means that work is done in chunks, intermixed with leisure time. Leisure activities are often social: staying in touch with old friends and new acquaintances, and sharing intimate tidbits and interesting news stories. These social interactions help to spread ideas and improve problem-solving ability. The end result is that the digital technologies enabling this shift in work practice may actually be imparting a critical cognitive advantage to your employees and simultaneously driving innovation and creativity in your enterprise.

## About the Contributor

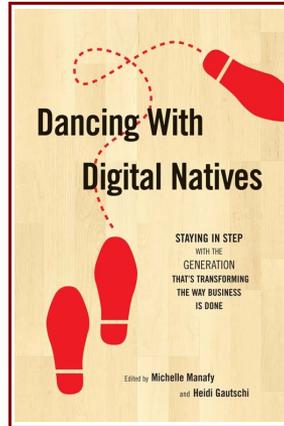
**Brynn Evans** is obsessed with the intersection of social networks and human behavior. At first she shunned social psychology, finding joy in neuroscience and dissecting brains. But after a 6-year stint as a neuropsychologist, she began studying how people interact with and use technology. Three years later, she completed the graduate program in cognitive science at University of California San Diego and moved on to more practical applications of user experience and interaction design. Since then, she’s been a freelance consultant, social interaction designer, and gamestorming facilitator. Today, she’s the chief experience officer at a stealth tech startup in San Francisco.

Brynn is an active speaker and writer, and is involved in community events such as hackathons, workshops, and conferences that bring together designers, developers, and entrepreneurs. She’s also a board member of the Awesome Foundation in San Francisco, which gives out mini-grants to “awesome” local projects every month. Her website is [brynnevans.com](http://brynnevans.com).

## Recommended Reading

- Burt, Ronald S., and Don Ronchi. "Teaching Executives to See Social Capital: Results from a Field Experiment." *Social Science Research* 36 (2007): 1156–1183. [bit.ly/hchIAI](http://bit.ly/hchIAI) (accessed October 18, 2010).
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