We're all digital natives now

Defining the natural habitat of a digital native

Enabling a natural habitat for your digital natives

Evolving habitats for digital natives

Why Computacenter?
To Digital Natives, technology is so natural they don’t even notice it. It just works. That’s how it is at home, and that’s how it must be at work. The challenge is to enable habitats within the enterprise that feel natural – anywhere and everywhere.

**WHO’S DRIVING CHANGE? YOU OR THEM?**
Welcome to our Insight Guide on the concept of Digital Natives and how they can best be accommodated in the workplace.

We brought together four key thinkers from Computacenter to debate the topic of Digital Natives, what implications their emergence is having on how organisations of all kinds work, and whether it’s even valid to base it on age at all.

Their views are refreshing and revealing, and their conclusions will surprise many. Their focus though is clear: it’s time for organisations to cut through the hype and start being proactive so that employees can be as productive, agile and enabled as possible.

**THEY ARE:**
- **Jamie Allender,** Head of Collaboration and Physical Infrastructure
- **Paul Bray,** Chief Technologist, Workplace and Mobile
- **Pete Groushko,** Head of Product Technology Sales
- **Colin Williams,** Chief Technologist, Networking, Security and Digital Collaboration
The term 'Digital Natives' emerged around 2001 when writer and education specialist, Marc Prensky wrote an influential paper called 'Digital Natives / Digital Immigrants.' His idea was a deceptively simple one: anyone born since the late 1980s would have been surrounded by new digital technologies and interacted with them constantly. Those technologies were increasingly embedded in the Digital Native's natural environment. That fact then changed the way their brains worked. Prensky used the concept of 'neuroplasticity' – the idea that our brain structures change in response to changes in our environments – to claim that young people now process information in fundamentally different ways compared to older generations.

The idea caught on within large sections of the media. The rise of new ways of working in Silicon Valley and an array of hi-tech brands like Google and Facebook became benchmarks for how organisations needed to adapt to the needs of Digital Natives. But, recent research showed that the so-called new learning and working styles were not the preserve of the young; that, actually, most 'Digital Immigrants' could harness the power of new technologies just as well as the kids. It wasn’t about age; it was about ‘experience’ the London School of Economics (LSE) researchers said; “Experience is more important... Those who have been on the Internet the longest, whilst they might not have grown up with [it], have been ‘submerged’ in it for the longest period of time.”

Technology, it turns out, does change the way we think and act, and does so because we use it everyday; at home, on the go and at work. When technology becomes a natural part of our environment then it changes the way we ALL think. That means we ALL can become Digital Natives. And that fact has even more profound implications for business: it’s not just the next generation you need to cater for, it’s the ones working for you right now. You can ensure that they are productive, make the best use of their time and are more efficient.

WHAT IS A DIGITAL NATIVE?

“There’s a lot of hype about Digital Natives, but I feel that it gets in the way of thinking about the things that really matter,” says Colin Williams, “Most companies have very diverse workforces with people of all ages, and the idea that only young people really get the digital world is divisive. People who have been using technology for a long time get very proficient, which makes them a ‘native’ user of the technology that already exists and able to cope with new technologies as they come out.”

“But, the new generation is demanding different workplaces,” counters Jamie Allender, “They are users who are re-defining the spaces in which they live and work. They expect technology to deliver a seamless, collaborative experience”. Paul Bray agrees but stresses that “People now are much more willing to adopt new ways of working and bring their experience of social networking – and the technologies that do it – to help them be more productive.”

“Consumerisation is forcing organisations to look at how their people – whatever age they happen to be – are changing the way they live and work,” says Pete Groushko, “They’re not labelling themselves as a ‘Digital Native’ they’re looking for the right environments that allow them to operate in more fluid ways.”

Everyone agrees that an age-based definition of the ‘Digital Native’ is too limiting. “It’s just wrong,” says Colin, “We’re all so used to modern digital technologies now; we’ve adapted to them fast, and I don’t see that there’s a fundamental difference. Sure, attitudes to things like privacy and work-life balance might differ, but even older generations are shifting their views on those things and becoming more open.”

He’s right. A recent Pew Research study shows that the way Digital Natives think about institutions and privacy is having a profound effect on social change. They have less structured views on things like marriage, religion, politics and business. They are using technology to break down distinctions between work, leisure, family and solitude. They are also much more likely to conduct what’s intriguingly called ‘ambient broadcasters’ who share personal information freely across platforms.

2 Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions: Pew Research Center: March 2014
3 Ibid
Jamie is clear about what has really changed the way we all live now: “It’s the impact of digital technology on all our lives at home. Think about how quickly this has evolved: we’re on wireless broadband, and we now expect to download content whenever we want to. We’ve moved quickly from being limited by the TV schedules to creating our own, streaming music on demand and mixing channels every few minutes sometimes, and using multiple devices in multiple rooms. We then are able to take it all with us when we leave the house, keeping that personal hinterland of data and content connections going wherever we are. That’s why we’re all Digital Natives now. It’s also what’s changing the way we work.”

Colin agrees, “I really think that this idea that digital technology divides generations is wrong and it’s not helpful either. Technology should unify generations. Bring them together. If you take the approach that you need to do one thing for the young and another for the not so young, then you’re going to alienate each of the groups instead of getting them to work as one big team. Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants are the same thing – the danger is you turn some people into what you could call ‘digital delinquents’ – that harms your effectiveness as an organisation.”

“Organisations have to treat everyone as if they are a Digital Native and that means providing flexibility, tolerance of different workstyles, and enabling them to be free to choose where and when they work,” adds Paul, who points out that, “The cliché ‘Work is something you do, not a place you go,’ has become so common because it’s true. That’s how many of us work.”

“There are fewer barriers between work and life – and the work-life balance debate is changing. It’s not about rigid times, it’s about choices. If you choose to work at midnight on a Saturday it’s because it suits your work-life balance,” says Colin.

“And it’s important to think about your customers – to have empathy with everyone down the chain, as it were. We need to recognise that everyone is connected, so if they all can interact easily, then work gets done and businesses generate money,” says Pete.

“For me this is a critical point. Organisations have to be able to enable their ultimate customers to get what they need, when and where they need it. That might be online, or in a branch, or being visited at home and so on. Empowering employees with the right tools and environment – whether they’re Digital Natives or not – is a key element in enabling them to do so. It also makes for improved job satisfaction for the employee (helping to attract and retain talent) and a better experience for the end customer.”
DEFINING THE NATURAL HABITAT OF A DIGITAL NATIVE

“It’s a seamless environment in which employees can work whenever they need to and wherever it suits them,” says Jamie.

As mentioned earlier, Digital Natives don’t see the world in terms of hierarchies but in more egalitarian terms. “They see everyone existing on an equal level. They embrace the benefits of sharing things and ideas with each other, and in doing so they cross boundaries. They are driven by values.”4 One researcher described the new ways of working in similar terms to Jamie, “Digital Natives who aren’t in task-based jobs like ‘bursty work’ – they work in smaller chunks, not four hour blocks.”5

“Sure, it’s the technology that’s made it possible for us to slice-up time into chunks and move from one to the other when it suits us,” says Colin, “But we’ve always wanted to do it.

Remember the Filofax? I do. We tried to use it to organise our lives and it always got fatter and fatter and less organised – but now our smartphone does all of that and much more. The technology caught up with the need. So, you have to start with what your people need and build the technology around that. Not the other way around.”

Jamie stresses collaboration, “It’s all about understanding the different engagements at work and how people need to interact and collaborate. Many engagements now cross function in today’s workplace and the traditional fixed link between department and geography is changing. By taking a user centric approach and by understanding how an organisation needs to communicate and collaborate across users, departments and geographies, we can then design and deploy appropriate technology solutions that allow collaboration that transcends those legacy barriers.”

Office spaces are also changing fast to accommodate the Digital Native, and much of the focus is on how spaces are organised and what they look and feel like. “Some people thrive in collaborative spaces like coffee houses; organisations are even integrating spaces like that into their new offices. For instance, Network Rail has a ‘High Street’ to drive a culture of social collaboration in the workplace, and SAP have built an App House office in which all the surfaces can be written on. In this sense technology is complimentary to the environment. It’s an enabler for the culture of the organisation and helps create flexibility of the space that meets the needs of the individuals,” Jamie says.

1 Jeff DeGraff Huffington Post, 7th September 2014
2 Brynn Evans in Dancing with Digital Natives: Staying in Step with the Generation that’s Transforming the way Business is Done 2011
REAL EFFECTS
ON REAL ESTATE

Pete raises the issue of real estate; “It’s a big issue for all kinds of organisations, especially those with big buildings in high-value areas. They’re paying a lot for real estate and so they’re looking to encourage more home-working, so they can reduce the space they pay rent on and also increase productivity. Changing the physical habitat in offices and other spaces, as well as encouraging more working from home means you save money and get a more productive workforce.”

“It’s about releasing talent,” says Jamie, “And to release talent, creating the right environment and providing the right technology is hugely important. If you give people the flexibility to choose how they work and how to interact with their peers and their customers, then you will inevitably increase their productivity. Naturally, the nature of their tasks and goals will dictate their working methods and times to a large extent. But, no matter how much latitude they have, they need the right tools. And they range from smartphones to video conferencing, as well as flexible environments.”

So, how would the team define the perfect natural habitat for our much broader definition of the Digital Native?

“It’s a habitat that is everywhere. An environment that follows you and it’s not necessarily an office. We expect to be connected wherever we are and to be able to access the right information whenever we need it. To do that we need the right tools at home, in the office, in front of customers, on the road, or the station platform,” says Jamie.

“It doesn’t start with the technology – it starts with the outcomes you want to achieve. Define those and then the habitat follows logically,” says Colin.

“Have desks but not just desks. It’s spaces. It’s zones. It’s a dynamic, softer edged space that’s fluid and human,” says Paul, “I think the point is to make the technology all-pervasive but not intrusive. Integrating all these spaces so they’re seamless: that’s key.”

“Make the most of home-working where it’s appropriate – formulate the right policy to make it happen – and ensure people have the right devices and security to be productive,” says Pete.
A lot has changed in the last two decades, but, as Paul says, “There are quite a few organisations that are still starting out on their journey and are focusing on the needs of the IT department rather than the needs of the user.”

“The user experience is vital,” stresses Jamie, “and understanding what users need has to be a starting point. We work with IT departments to engage with the business and the people who look after the organisation’s real estate, to make sure that we don’t start with the technology but with the user experience at the front of their minds.”

“The point is to be human about it,” says Colin, “I come across organisations who worry about trying to choose and then impose a single, company-wide application so that all employees can use it. But, we’re in a task-based world where your users are going to choose from millions of apps to find the ones that suit them. The point is to enable that to happen and ensure that the data they use, share and augment, is cleverly organised, held centrally and always secure. That’s the role of the IT department, not to choose the one big app that suits everyone. Anyway, it doesn’t exist.”

“Timely access to relevant data is important,” agrees Jamie, “Being a Digital Native is all about being able to discuss, connect, access, and share key information and data that you need to be productive and gain important insights, and ultimately to be more effective.”

“Actually, I don’t think it’s the technology that matters,” says Colin, “That might sound strange coming from someone whose job title is Chief Technologist, but it’s true. It’s the data that those technologies generate and the outcomes you can realise from it that’s most important.

You can afford to lose an expensive device but not the data you rely on. So, it’s important to have the right back-up procedures and security policies in place too. I think you have to look at how you can be clever with the information that’s generated and how multiple data sets can be used to create insights.”

In a sense, it’s like trying to do what Facebook does so well. It pulls together multiple streams of data which are flowing in and out of their organisation and unifying it so that it becomes easy to use and provides value to its users. The users of Facebook don’t actually care which technologies make it work; they just want it to work. That sums up the Digital Native approach.
Jamie is clear about where organisations have to start their journey: “Start by examining whether your organisation’s workspaces reflect its culture. Do employees have the freedom to collaborate and work in ways which suit them, or suit the specific tasks they have to carry out?

An organisation’s culture has to be focused on enabling talent so they can serve customers. The physical environments have to be easy to use so people can just get on with their work and IT should enable that to happen. That’s the bottom line in the age of the Digital Native.”

“Create a truly flexible work experience and make it available anywhere and everywhere,” says Pete. Paul adds, “Always remember the social networking – that’s where great ideas come from!”

Your Workspace Should Reflect Your Culture

SO, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN IN PRACTICE?

- Ensure each employee has the right technology to enable them to be productive
- Understand different roles: some are task based, and some are less so – match the technology to the jobs people do
- Enable fixed and portable habitats that offer all the physical and digital tools in a slick and seamless way
- Offer constant, ubiquitous connectivity for both employees and guests
- Ensure that users can interact with customers effectively, whether on-premise or outside
- Create an office space that balances fixed desks with hot desks
- Create zones where different functions can be carried out collaboratively or individually
- Meeting rooms need to be plentiful – so make them smaller. The point is to enable more people to book space without becoming frustrated at the lack of opportunities. No ‘booking rage’ is the goal!

- Enable each meeting room to match the different needs of users: i.e. some have all the audio-visual and conferencing technology available, others don’t
- Make the controls in a meeting room comprehensive so users can use all the technologies easily
- Link meeting room bookings to parking spaces – that stops people arriving late and frazzled because they’ve spent ages trying to park
- Create a reception and booking system that short-circuits all the hassles which delay the start of a meeting and frustrate your people. So, when guests or workers from another site arrive, they’re pre-booked, pre-registered, there’s a badge waiting for them and the wireless access code is instantly available
Marc Prensky responded to the critics of his ‘Digital Natives / Digital Immigrants’ formula a decade after he first wrote about it. He now believes that we’ve already gone beyond those labels to enter an age in which we are becoming the ‘Digitally Wise.’

“In the end, that’s what is important: we need to ensure that technology enables employees, and the organisations they work for are able to make the right decisions, carry out the right tasks, and be effective each and every day,” says Paul. Colin agrees, “Over the next few years we’re going to see the cloud make even more of a difference to the workspaces we take for granted. It’s going to allow access to data and applications that are needed by people both in offices and out working in a wide range of other situations, in both the private and public sectors. People are going to focus on specific tasks whenever they want to, and there won’t be much 9 to 5 anymore. The work-life balance is going to be an hour-by-hour thing that people just do!” he says. That means that the natural habitat for the Digital Native (the term has resilience and will be relevant for quite a while to come despite Prensky’s qualification of it) is still evolving; but it’s evolving fast. “That’s why it’s important to get guidance. It’s easy to get side-tracked by technology and to lose sight of the experience you want to create,” says Jamie.

Jamie again links the changes that are occurring in the workspace to what’s been happening in our homes; “The digitisation of our homes happened really fast. The iPad was only launched in 2010. And the spread of fast wireless broadband is also surprisingly recent. But that domestic digitisation is raising the expectation of every generation of user, when they are in a work environment. Our expectation is the same whether we are in an office, on the high street, on transport or anywhere else. We expect to be always connected.”

THE OFFICE SURVIVES, BUT THE NUMBER OF DEVICES WILL FALL

The future of the office is assured. Though more people are on the move, they need a base where they can collaborate – hence the move towards coffee house style areas in large complex HQs and so on. The technology will develop so that, not so far into future, pop-up offices can be created anywhere using apps chosen by the teams involved.

“The future is going to see us using fewer devices” says Pete, “The rise of the Phablet – that hybrid between a phone and a tablet, is going to create that natural working environment we’ve been talking about. Instead of an average of three screens per person, you’re going to have this one device that will be able to dock with technology in the office, but then connect wirelessly in a coffee shop or on the road. You can add keyboards and screens and a mouse when you need to, but then disconnect it and keep doing what you’re doing. It’s seamless. That’s the future.”

Whatever the actual configuration of the future, the point is to make it all easy to use whilst being secure,” says Jamie, “These developments aren’t going to slow down. The world is only going to get more connected. That’s the challenge that faces us all.”

WHY COMPUTACENTER?

We start by identifying the different kinds of workers and their needs within an organisation and then work out what they need to be more productive and flexible. We then help redesign their environments and ensure they get the right connectivity and security.

We recognise which are the right applications and how they should be applied. We also help support the systems and devices as they’re being used. Most critically, we give our customers confidence that what they’re investing in now will be able to evolve in the short and long-term. We get it right now, but we also deliver a constantly evolving environment. Confidence is key.

BIography

Pete is currently the Head of Product Technology Sales across Computacenter’s UK client base. His responsibility is primarily focussed on addressing customers’ challenges with the sourcing and evaluation of hardware technology in both the enterprise and user space, calling on experience of delivering to both public and corporate organisations.

Pete’s team deliver a vendor agnostic approach to hardware selection, the entire supply chain and lifecycle management whilst addressing technical and commercial customer requirements.

Pete holds a degree in Economics and has retained CIPS membership for last 15 years.

As Chief Technologist for Workplace and Mobile, Paul works closely with our vendor partners, analysts and our technical community to help define and advise on technical strategy, road maps and propositions for Computacenter and our clients. The technical portfolio within Paul’s remit extends from classic user technology through to emerging Mobility and Collaboration technologies, as well as a range of ‘enabling infrastructure’ services.

Paul has 15 years’ experience in the IT industry having worked for a number of leading IT Service providers as a Consultant and Solution Architect. He has experience designing and deploying a range of solutions across a number of technology areas and within a range of industry verticals.

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If you’d like to join the discussion and explore how you can build the right environments for your users to thrive, then talk to us.

We can take away a lot of the pain associated with evolving your habitat. We know what is possible and what will be possible, and so we factor both into our thinking and planning. Then we build the habitats that specifically suit your needs. We’ve learned a lot from our own journey; we’ve walked-the-talk and evolved the habitat we offer Computacenter people. We’ve been on the front-foot in changing the way we work and it’s helped us be better and do more.

**BIography**

Colin’s role as Chief Technologist for networking, security and collaboration evolves his previous practice leader role. With over 20 years’ experience in IT leadership roles working within organisations like Compaq, BT, Morse and Hewlett Packard, Colin has created a reputation as an innovative technology strategist and utilises a unique perspective on the market, vendors and strategy to deliver thought provoking commentary, strategic consulting and market insight.

Colin has an Executive MBA from Hull University is an NLP practitioner and a Situational Leadership Coach.

A firm believer that technology only exists to serve the end user outcome, Colin continues to drive us forward to ensure Computacenter solutions innovate, differentiate but equally are steered by customer’s unique agendas.

We are able to cover networking, unified communications, audio visual, security, workplace technologies and, of course, Enterprise Mobility Solutions.

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We can do all the hard work of finding the right technologies and then implementing them for you. That avoids the situation where you’ve got to deal with four or five different partners to get your mobile and fixed habitats enabled. We look at the entire physical environment as well as the technology and we don’t work in silos: we approach it all as one project.

**BIography**

Jamie graduated with a BA Hons degree in Geography from the University of Nottingham and has over 20 years’ experience in the IT industry.

Having joined Computacenter in 1999 as Cisco Partner Manager, Jamie has gone on to have a broad variety of roles across the business, including Mobile Business Manager, Consultancy Management across both Workplace and Networking, and more recently Professional Services Director.

In his current role as Head of Collaboration and Physical Infrastructure, Jamie is responsible for Unified Communications and Collaboration, Audio Visual and Structured Cabling.
GET IN TOUCH

To discover more about how Computacenter can support your end-to-end cloud computing transformation from the core to the edge, please contact your Computacenter Account Manager.

computacenter.com/DigitalNatives

Enabling users and their business

Computacenter is Europe’s leading independent provider of IT infrastructure services, enabling users and their business. We advise organisations on IT strategy, implement the most appropriate technology, optimise its performance, and manage our customers’ infrastructures. In doing this we help CIOs and IT departments in enterprise and corporate organisations maximise productivity and the business value of IT for internal and external users.