# Becoming a New Economy Manager

There is no single digital divide. The digital divide is not simply a matter of the gap between technology haves and have-nots. Behind this simple description of the rift there are deeper and bleaker gaps in literacy, skill and attitude that few of us see – even in ourselves. While commonly described as a special problem with the lesser-educated older worker in Singapore, these fault lines actually cross the entire spectrum of employment from operator to chief executive, and across the range of organisational forms. Failure to address these gaps will mean failure for workers in the market for employment and it will mean failure for organisations in the market for customers.

The digital divide is usually described as a socio-economic problem. At a global level, it suggests that less developed countries are increasingly being disadvantaged by their lack of access to technology and IT mediated knowledge. In a global economy where a larger and larger share of business is knowledge business, and where even traditional economic activity is being changed through knowledge applications, the cards in the poor country's packs are steadily being depleted... the last one they can play being cheap labour. But supply chain management, increasing demands on "zero defect" quality processes, and IT systems integration along the whole value chain of production, means that even the traditional low-skilled economic activity requires access to infrastructure and human skills beyond the reach of IT-poor countries.

The debate rages on. Some point out that wireless communications technology enables poorer countries to leapfrog large, developed economies, because they have ageing infrastructures to maintain. Wireless internet technology is already here, and the communications backbone is the biggest single barrier to IT development in any economy. Market forces can provide equipment, so long as the environment can support stable knowledge and information flows.

In Singapore during 1999, the lessons of recession, retrenchments and rapid economic change struck home hard. In the closing months of 1999, four ministerial speeches referred to the problem of the digital divide in Singapore. Singapore is currently the fourth most connected economy in the world, and is likely to be number two within two years, and every Singaporean student is being taught IT and internet skills in school. But Mr Lim Swee Say, Minister-of-State for Communications and Information Technology also pointed out that the number of non-

connected Singaporeans outweighs the connected by three to one. A Channel NewsAsia Gallup poll conducted in March this year found that almost half of all Singaporeans were worried about their ability to keep up with technology. Singaporean efforts to overcome these problems are massive, precise, and coordinated, from physical infrastructure to "dot comming" all government services, to training and learning initiatives at every level of the population.
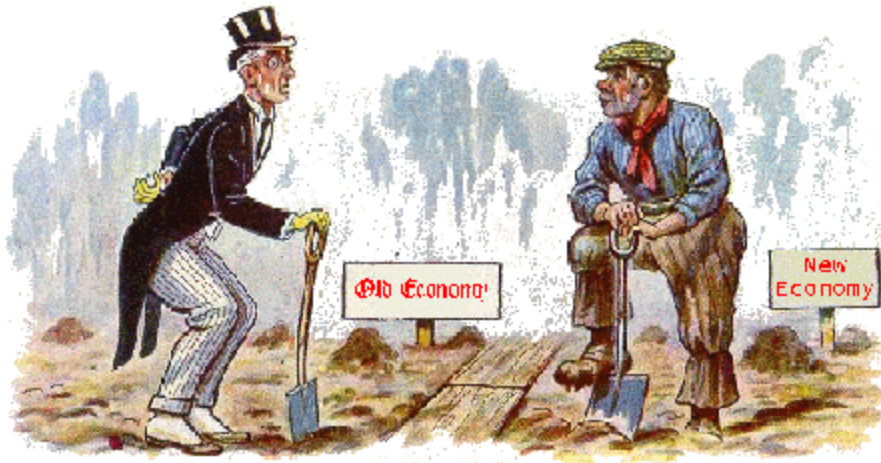
"Digital illiteracy is rampant among leaders in every walk of life..."

The key issue of the digital divide in the Singapore context is seen as the gap between the younger and higher educated workers, versus the older and lower educated workers. These are the key numbers that strike home:

- Three quarters of Singaporeans are not connected to the internet
- Two thirds of the Singapore workforce did not progress beyond secondary education
- Three quarters of the Singapore workforce are above the age of thirty – the vast bulk of their education and work experience and attitudes are pre-internet

What does this mean for business and the workforce? Simple access to IT is only the tip of the problem. The generational divide goes far beyond educational level attained. Here is a key, disturbing fact:

almost all Singaporean senior managers, vice presidents, chief executives, grassroots leaders and senior civil servants are pre-internet in formation and experience. Singapore is not, of course, alone in this – it's a global phenomenon.
Digital illiteracy is rampant among leaders in every walk of life, in every developed economy in the world. Managers are having to work hard to keep up with their juniors. In General Electric's European operations, senior managers have introduced "reverse mentoring" where senior managers can increase their knowledge of the internet and e-commerce by meeting every week with a younger person on their staff who is an expert on the subject. British Prime Minister Tony Blair told a self-deprecating anecdote about himself at the recent Davos Economic Forum. He had decided to overcome his own computer phobia and enrolled for an IT course in his constituency's community centre. At the final examination, he asked a nervous young man next to him if he was so tense because you are next to the PM? "No," replied the youth, "I'm tense because I can do this stuff and I'm unemployed, you can't do it, and you are Prime Minister".

Behind the humour of this story lies a disturbing perception. Working life at every level is seeing the most radical shift since the transition from agricultural economies to factory economies in the industrial revolution – but the impact will be more profound because it is not a physical transition from one type of workplace to another, but a rapid, discontinuous series of shifts within the same physical and organisational space.

The tension between the rising economic power of the digitally literate junior worker, and the increasing irrelevance of the digitally illiterate manager, can only be played out painlessly through entrepreneurial departures from the traditional firm and youth-weighted dot.com ventures. Like an enormous continental shift that must work its way to the surface in seismic shocks, workplaces, companies and entire industries are experiencing the impacts of these discontinuities through manager and employee frustration, poorly understood and poorly implemented change, resistance to change, internal conflict, poor communications. Dot com companies translate these rifts to the marketplace, where the new rules of battle sweep away the old paradigms of doing business.

But it is not a simple matter of throwing away old ideas and picking up new ones. Net generation workers are very different creatures in perception, attitude, skill and competency from pre-net generation workers and leaders.

The Net generation worker typically	The pre-Net generation manager typically
- demands immediacy - ignores boundaries - values independence - values openness and curiosity - interprets 100 emails a day as "being in the loop" - is young, lacks life experience - is intolerant of adversity - throws energy into projects - is prone to attention deficit, multitasks easily, lacks sustained analytical and reflection skills - collaborates indiscriminately - collaborates with peers - values respect from peers above all others - knows how to authenticate people's trustworthiness, gives trust - gives respect based on performance (by own standards) - innovates - values questions - sees self-learning as	- mistrusts haste - relies on boundaries - relies on dependencies - is trained to consider risk, confidentiality, and "need to know" - interprets 100 emails a day as information overload - is experienced, relates to the big picture - has learned how to work with and sometimes leverage on adversity - rations energy - prefers mono-tasking, is dissatisfied with a lack of focus and time to devote sustained attention to issues - collaborates selectively - competes with peers - values respect from superiors above all others - is conditioned against personalising work relationships - gives respect based on status and performance (based on corporate standards)

central • mistrusts and challenges systems • is self-directed	• standardises • values answers • sees self-learning as an add-on • values and defends systems • looks to superiors for direction

Some aspects of this can be ascribed to every generational gap between the young Turks and the old hands since time began, and like all generalisations, there are counter-examples in both camps. You can have self-directed creative managers and you can have risk averse Net-generation workers. However, even the most cursory comparison of internet relay chat discussions with corporate small-talk points up key differences in generational attitudes towards innovation, relationships, communication and personal values. Understanding the differences throws a new light on the workplace experiences of many managers and employees.

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