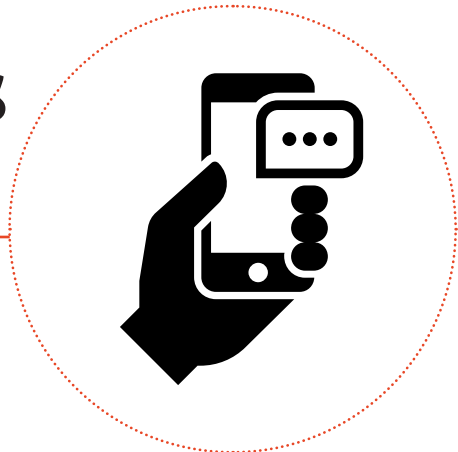


# Digital Natives



## Intro

For many people, using computers and related technologies feels like learning another language. In fact, computer code itself is written in many languages! And as with languages, there are people with native proficiency and people who have learned to use technology later in life. In 2001, Marc Prensky proposed that 'digital natives' who grew up with digital computing

technologies have a different brain structure to 'digital immigrants', who learned to use digital technology later in life. Consider how intuitive it is for a 3-year-old to pick up an iPad and navigate: could your grandmother do the same? Perhaps not with the same comfort: Prensky would say she's a digital immigrant. This has profound implications for the way we work and deliver training. Prensky argued that

digital immigrants learn in a completely different way – analogue, slow, focused – whereas digital natives are able to multitask and split their focus across several screens, tabs, and applications. Accordingly, it's important for us to design work (and training) around these different capabilities... or is it?

## What's the evidence?

Much of Prensky's original work in support of the digital natives hypothesis is based on assumption and anecdote, with some reference to neuroplasticity research. However, by 2011 he had started to walk back the suggestion he had made between 2001 and 2005 that digital natives' brains had physically changed. Instead, Prensky has argued that the 'digital natives'

immigrants' metaphor is simply a useful tool for thinking about how people are socialised into online cultures. More recently, as digital technology has become ubiquitous and routinely part of daily life, the idea of the digital native has become redundant: most people in the workforce today are very comfortable with digital technologies. Recent research has

challenged the idea that digital natives exist at all, suggesting that designing training with assumptions around multitasking in mind can hinder learning<sup>1</sup>.

## Why unlearn digital natives?

If we could stick to the idea that 'digital natives' is just a metaphor, it might be a harmless management wisdom. After all, acknowledging that some people aren't as comfortable with technology might spark conversations about how to build those skills. But that shouldn't extend to how we develop training or assign

work. Human brains look the same now as they have done for about 10,000 years – what has changed are our cultural practices. Work cultures that embrace multitasking and distraction because 'digital natives' can handle it are likely to prevent deep work and focus. There is also a risk that hiring practices become biased and discriminatory

if managers seek to hire based on age as a proxy for experience with digital technologies. The idea of 'digital natives' implies that there is a generational divide in the use of these technologies, however the ability to use digital tech is something that anybody can learn and it cuts across all age groups.

## Want to know more?

<https://www.nature.com/articles/547380a>

EVIDENCE BASE  
**Weak**

HARM LEVEL  
**Low**

ADAPTABILITY  
**Moderate**