

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## Addressing the Tech-Savvy Stereotype

In a 2001 article, educator Marc Prensky coined two terms that have become ubiquitous in the past decade: digital natives and digital immigrants.



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According to Prensky, digital natives are those who “spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age.” In shorthand, they are those born after 1980 and easily correlate with the millennial generation and later cohorts. Digital immigrants, on the other hand, are those born before 1980, forced to adapt to a digital environment to which they were not native-born and in which they will always retain a foot in the past.

In the past several months, I have heard at least half-a-dozen legal industry speakers refer to themselves as digital immigrants, and use this term to explain why they are unable to adapt to new technologies. I heard a partner explain how her associates were “just born” tech-capable and how she was too old to learn their new tricks. I heard legal industry panelists call themselves “inept” when discussing their abilities to learn the new technologies available at their firm, and how thankful they were that the younger employees could use them. I even saw a keynote speaker, after a young attorney spoke about new online platforms for client access, throw his hands up in the air and despair at what “all these kids” were talking about.

These incidents all led to easy chuckles from their audiences, which is what they were intended to do. However, they mask a dangerous assumption: that the digital immigrants are never going to be as good as the digital natives, and everyone is just fine with that.

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As a millennial, I find this assumption both frustrating and counter-productive. Millennials are adopters as much as anyone else in the workplace. Even the youngest millennial attorneys didn't grow up with e-discovery platforms or cloud-based servers. Is it easier for those who grew up with keyboards and joysticks to use touchscreens and smartphones? Perhaps. But we're not native speakers of it; we had to learn, just like everyone else.

Prensky's definition of digital natives also ignores the many millennials who did not grow up with access to the technology. Several surveys have demonstrated that ease of technological adaptation is a matter of affluence, not age. Moreover, even those who did grow up with that technology may

not be as digitally savvy as others. As Eszter Hargittai, a Communications Studies Professor at Northwestern University, wrote for *The Huffington Post* last year, “While it is certainly the case that most children and young adults have grown up surrounded by technology and indeed spend considerable time using digital media, it is wrong to equate hours spent on such devices with automatic savvy.”

Unfortunately that’s not the assumption that many older workers have about their younger colleagues. The assumption often is that we know exactly how it works. In many cases that’s only because we have repeatedly tried and failed and tried again, and also, because we know to quickly use Help files, YouTube and Google to find an answer to a question. Rather than attempting these options, the older employee finds that it is much faster to ask the millennial the next cubicle over to solve the issue.

But this leads to a second conundrum — the many millennials in the workplace who spend large portions of their workday serving as free tech support for their older peers. In her book, *You Raised Us — Now Work With Us*, author Lauren Stiller Riklen reports that many of the millennials she surveyed complained that they spend far too much of their already busy workday assisting older employees with technology. As one respondent reported: “When I previously worked at a firm, I often had to teach the secretaries how to create forms ... I had a similar experience with regard to older workers and keyboard shortcuts. It often end[ed] up that younger, well-educated workers were doing menial tasks, just because they were able to do them quicker.”

When millennials are repeatedly asked to help others save to the cloud or navigate Outlook, their own work will inevitably suffer. They may find themselves having to put extra time in to make up for that time lost. And for attorneys in particular, the time they spend helping an older colleague isn’t necessarily time they can bill. Just because millennials can do it faster and better, doesn’t necessarily mean they should be the ones doing it in the first place.

Rather than allowing this status quo to continue, managers should take active steps to address the underlying issue. The reality is that many millennial employees can utilize technology more efficiently than their older colleagues; however, that should not excuse older employees from learning the same technology. Managers should also recognize that not all millennials are created equal — some are digital natives, while others are immigrants much like everyone else.

Additionally, managers should realize that allowing a system where millennials offer tech support for free can not only lead to resentment, but will also result in older employees never truly learning the technology that is supposed to make their workdays easier. If there is tech support in the company, managers should encourage all employees to utilize that support and get training as needed. If, as is likely to happen, older employees continue to rely on millennials for assistance, managers should acknowledge that and compensate millennials for time spent; even just public acknowledgment and recognition might be enough.

Finally, managers should incorporate millennials into their technology decision-making. It is very likely that millennials are not the ones deciding a company’s policies, software and vendors. However, to the extent that there are digital natives who can easily understand and utilize these new technologies, and ones who will likely be assisting other employees in using them, the firm should involve them in the decision process when determining which new technologies to adopt.

The divide between digital natives and digital immigrants is not as large or as insurmountable as many may think. Effective management can reduce difficulties on both sides. There are enough

people out there trying to portray the workplace as an arena where generations battle each other for supremacy. Instead of perpetuating that myth, let's do what we can to ensure that younger and older employees, natives and immigrants alike, all feel that they are working together to navigate the new frontier of modern technology.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Michelle Silverthorn** is the Diversity and Education Director for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Through the Commission's online platform, *2Civility*, Silverthorn works on blog posts, social networking sites, and online discussion groups focusing on legal education, diversity and young lawyers. She also works with law schools, law students and other legal groups, developing education courses and workshops.

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