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Media-Savvy Workers: A New Front in the War for Talent

by Tony DiRomualdo

A new front in the War for Talent is opening up. Tens of millions of people adept at using interactive technology and media are set to join, or are already in, the workforce – bringing expectations, skills, and ways of working that will revolutionize the workplace. Those organizations that can inspire the passion and harness the skills of these “media-savvy” workers will have an edge over their competitors. Here’s why.

Until recently, workers of all levels could gain access to the most powerful computers, the fastest network connections, and the most sophisticated applications of information technology only at work.

No more.

Now, a large and growing number of people across the age, gender, and socio-economic spectrum own or have access to all manner of gadgets, gizmos, and Internet services that far exceeds, in variety and sophistication, much of the technology they use at work. Increasingly, it is these experiences using technology outside of work – e.g., playing online games, engaging in social networking, collaborating on projects – that are shaping the standards of what workers expect to use on the job.

The good news is that the knowledge and skills that workers are gaining outside of work can be put to good use on the job. The bad news is that few organizations yet recognize, or are doing anything to engage and leverage, the skills of media-savvy workers.

Research recently conducted by a team of researchers and thought leaders brought together by [QuestG](#) suggests that the emergence of the media-savvy workforce may be a golden opportunity to transform organizational culture and performance that many companies seem to be missing so far.

Ready or Not, Here They Are

QuestG has just published the findings of a year-long research study called the “Media-Savvy Workforce and Learning Project.” It links together two often-discussed but rarely associated trends - the changing demographics of the workforce and the growing proliferation and use of interactive media such as social networking services like [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) and on-line role playing platforms like [World of Warcraft](#) and [Second Life](#).

The QuestG study collected comprehensive data on the workplace expectations, learning habits, and personal technology usage of close to 3000 workers. Analysis of this data strongly suggests that the exploding use of interactive media and dramatic differences in the attitudes and technology skills of these workers are combining to create the conditions for the transformation of business and work as we know it.

“Media-savvy” individuals were identified from this global respondent base by measuring how frequently they used over thirty different personal technologies and Internet applications. A majority demonstrated at least moderate media-savvy skills (regularly using 11-15 different technologies and applications), while almost a third were classified as “high media-savvy” (regularly using 16 or more different technologies and applications).

Sending Up the Stereotypes

Our research identified some significant and rather counter-intuitive findings about media-savvy workers:

It’s not only the young that are media-savvy.

Nearly half of respondents under 30 years old were high media-savvy – no surprise there. But here’s the shocker: one third of respondents 30-45 years old and one fifth of those over 45 placed in the same high category. This is a very important finding because it challenges the conventional wisdom that only the young are adept at using the new technologies. And it means that a significant number of media-savvy workers are already in the workplace.

Media-savvy workers are more learning-oriented.

Media-savvy workers spend up to 80% more time than their low media-savvy co-workers on different types of learning activities in and outside of work; and up to three times as many find electronically-enabled ways of learning like Internet searches, computer simulations, and on-line courses valuable. They are also more likely to want their learning to be fun and entertaining; to choose what, when, and where they learn; and to favor learning through experimentation.

Interactive games are setting a higher standard for corporate e-learning experiences. The study showed strong parallels between what people say the characteristics of their best learning experiences at work are, and what they value most from playing online role playing games. These factors included interaction with others to share experiences, interactive content, engaging challenges, immediate feedback, learning from peers, learning by doing, and immersion into an environment via role playing.

Corporate learning executives have a huge opportunity to harness the power of interactive media and the unconventional learning styles of media-savvy. This means making e-learning offerings as engaging and interactive as electronic games. Standard e-learning approaches are a total turnoff for this group.

Media-savvy workers are the least happy with the IT they use to do their jobs.

Depending on age, they are up to three times more likely to believe their job performance is inhibited due to a lack of suitable technology, with the youngest the most dissatisfied with the IT they use at work. Many also believe their technology at home is superior, and they often choose to work there to circumvent hardware, software, and security restrictions.

This finding suggests that IT departments need to rethink their IT design, provisioning, and access policies. Does this mean letting workers use and do whatever they want? Of course not – but many IT executives and staff need to stop viewing media-savvy users as nuisances, and even enemies, and start proactively forging close working relationships with them. The media-

savvy represent a core group of “lead users” that can be a valuable resource in identifying innovative and productive ways of using new interactive technology for the benefit of the entire business.

The media-savvy are also some of the organization’s most performance- and learning-oriented workers. Understanding how technology can be used to enhance their productivity stands to reap large bottom-line benefits and can pave the way for more effective uses of IT to increase the productivity of the whole organization. Improving knowledge worker performance is now critical in the current business cycle, where the productivity of high-value intangible assets – especially people – is a key business performance measure and success factor.

Senior Leaders Take Note

The double whammy of increasingly powerful and pervasive interactive media and changing workforce skills and attitudes challenges corporate leaders to adopt new business and management models that harness the power of the new technology and the advanced capabilities of workers. The responsibility for dealing with these changes goes beyond just IT and learning organizations.

Victory in this new theater of the talent war requires a total organizational commitment. HR leaders will need to direct the redesign of the entire work experience to better match the workplace preferences, learning styles, and performance needs of media-savvy workers. And business unit heads and CEOs will need to champion the transformation of their business and organizational models to attract, leverage and retain this high performing, motivated and skilled segment of the workforce.

As usual, your comments and reactions are more than welcome. And as always, please send your thoughts to us at comments@thefutureofwork.net.

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About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

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