

Future Avoiders, Migrants and Natives

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Digital Natives and Migrants

Among the useful generational distinctions has been that of the digital native versus the digital migrant.¹ The digital migrant was born in a world without computers but overtime learned how to use digital environment. He or she grew up with typewriters and later moved to word processing and finally to the internet. In contrast digital natives have grown up in a digital milieu – sms, the internet, blogging, gaming, AI. The computer is not considered a mere tool but a fact of life, indeed, for many the most beautiful thing in life.

While some imagine endless computer growth in speech, digital natives do not think in those terms, rather they see computers disappearing, becoming like air, a foundational but invisible part of life. Their disappearance makes them ubiquitous.

This analogy of digital migrant and native is central to understanding the future of the future.² We can also conceive of future migrants and future natives. But before we come to this distinction, there is a pre-steps, that of the future-avoider, and as I develop, the bicultural or bi-temporal, who understands the migrant and the native.

Future Avoiders

Future avoiders are easy to spot. They, first of all, believe at a gut level in the short-term. They are convinced that tomorrow will be like today. They do not

believe paradigm changes are necessary, as change is, and always has been, incremental. When they do think of the future, they think in terms of quick trends that help them profit. They wait and watch others experiment with new technologies, and then when convinced of their strategic importance, they adopt. But most of all they do not see the need for the big picture, for the long-term, for the vision, the reasons behind it all. The future is epiphenomena, capital and power are real.

Future Migrants

Future migrants are different from avoiders in that as much as they would like to avoid they future, they cannot. They have been thrust into a world where the future is staring at them. Whether it is the fall of communism, the wrenching affects of globalization, the birth of the web, new waves and forms of terrorism, the mapping of the human genome, space exploration, research on meditation and intelligence, or new methods such as scenario planning, emerging issues analysis, the future is here. They cannot run away from it, even if they wish too. They understand that organizations that do not map out their future, that do not follow a vision, that do not allow ideas from the margin to prosper, that are unaware of their foundational myths, will die. They understand that organizations have clear choices – stay in the status quo, die, adapt or transform. Future migrants must move to the new world.

Future Natives

Future natives are different, indeed, dramatically different. Future natives are born at a time where change – technological, cultural, spiritual, global – are endemic. Crisis no longer are local but have the capacity to alter the future of the planet, indeed, human evolution or devolution. Problems cannot be solved at the level in which they are perceived. A change in awareness is necessary.

Future natives have the following qualities.

1. They are early adaptors of new technology.
2. They constantly question not just their values and empirical positions about the nature of the world, but the paradigms that inform their positions.
3. They take complex positions on issues, that is, eschew single variable explanations and solutions (only technology will solve the day, or only values change will solve current problems) but rather take into considerable multiple variables in complex (meaning from lower to higher order) interaction.
4. They are integrated, seeing the links between the external world and the internal world, individual and society.
5. Their ideas are layered, distinguishing between the visible future, the systems that uphold the future, the worldviews that give it meaning, and the founding myths that define the possible.
6. They have a well informed theory of social change in which 1. change is considered possible, that is, agency is possible. 2. the future is optimistic, that is, good futures can be created.
7. They see the future not just as a one shot event but as a process of learning, and learning about learning.
8. They have a clear vision of the future, but see the future as evolving and thus continuously explore alternative futures, and link these futures to strategy and day to day outcomes.
9. They not only study the future, give

research expertise to others, but create the future.

Implications and Strategy

The first implication is strategic.³ Future avoiders will remain so, attempting to transform them is a waste of time. They represent tradition and have a role to play in the future, lest transformation is too sudden. Future avoiders should be quarantined so that their fears do not spread to the other groups. The second implication relates to future migrants. Strategically, they need to be made to feel safe. If the implications of change are too deep, they will move toward avoidance. However, if they can be shown the benefits of moving to the future – economic, cultural, political, technological – then they can be seduced to entering the future world. But without clear benefits, they will not understand the future, it will remain a strange land to them. For future natives, the key is to ensure that they understand the utility of the past, and that they carry others with them. If they are too far into the future, then the problem of translation will be paramount. The foreigners (migrants) will not understand their ways. Thus, they need to be just enough into the future where others will move with them. However, in their hearts and visions, they truly may be a thousand years ahead, but perhaps this is shared with other natives, and not with the full tribe, lest they be feared, and the future brought to crash into the world of weights, resistance and fear.

In University environments, one can expect far more avoiders and resisters than future natives. University jobs attract those who seek security, clear rules and regulations, vertical knowledge structures. They have a difficult time understanding changes in knowledge paradigms or changes in pedagogy. They search for consistency and stability and are shocked by the dramatic changes the university is undergoing. For future natives, who embrace change, who live on the new, who seek to transform, who imagine other worlds, who know that other futures are possible, this seems fearful behavior.

However, the native needs to allow the

avoider to feel safe, so that he or she can perform the tasks that he or she does best. But it is with the migrant that there is hope for systemic and paradigm change. For this group, the native can offer experiments, case studies, new approaches, and hope that one of them inspires, gives a glimpse of the future that can be.

Without this link to the migrant, the future native will be overwhelmed as well, and find that instead of deep change, it is a return to the imagined past that is real. And that past will not have the openness of the desired future, but the exclusion of the other – technology and culture will be resisted. And instead of transformation or adaptive behavior to new conditions, death and status quo may result.

Ultimately what may help the native best is a fourth type – that of the bi-cultural,⁴ the sandwich culture, the third culture kid.⁵ He or she understands the native and the migrant and can help bridge the gap between the future and the present and even the future and the past. They can live in traditional bureaucracies and help slowly transform them. While they thrive on the ideas of the natives, they prefer reform to the visioning heat of the futures native. But most importantly they can translate the ideas and language of the native to that of the migrant, and provide protection from the avoider. It is an alliance of the bi-cultural or the bi-temporal and the native that can help appropriate the past and create a virtuous spiral into the future.

Conclusion

The future native thus needs to identify who in the organization are the avoiders, the migrants and those that are bi-cultural, bi-temporal. He or she should quarantine the avoiders, make alliances with those that are bi-cultural and use their skills to inspire the migrants to explore alternative futures, and transform themselves and society.

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Notes

1. www.marcprensky.com for work on digital natives and migrants
2. While one could argue that the digital native/migrant analogy is inappropriately compared to the future native and migrant, since we are all migrants to the future, however, we all carry the future in our minds and behavior. The future already exists within us.
3. I am indebted to Jenny Brice for this way of thinking. See her essay, Jenny Brice, *The Virus Analogy*. *Journal of Futures Studies*, November 2004.
4. Yogesh Atal and Elenora Masini, *The Futures of Asian cultures*. Bangkok, Unesco, 1993.
5. www.tckworld.com

