



## Reflections on the Future

### The Future of KM? Ask a Digital Native

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If you want to see the future of knowledge management (KM), look no further than the university classrooms, the WhatsApp groups, the TikTok videos and the Black Lives Matter rallies. There you will find Millennials, GenYs and GenZs, unfettered by the KM definitions and formulae of my generation. The younger generation — “Digital Natives” — are both sceptical and creative, unfettered by the role-boundaries and technical limitations that constrained the BBGX<sup>[1]</sup>.

According to [Deloitte’s Global Millennial Survey 2019](#)<sup>[2]</sup>, the experience of today’s 20-30-somethings has been bleak, and no less so with Covid-19 economy. Writes Deloitte in late 2019, “Unlike the post-war 1950s – which were characterized by international cooperation, a baby boom, and economic expansion that benefited most—the past decade has been marked by a steep rise in economic inequality, a reduction in societal safety nets, insular and dysfunctional governments, increased tribalism fuelled by social media, radical changes in the contract between employers and employees, Industry 4.0 technologies that are redefining the workplace, and personal technologies that make people both more connected and more isolated.”

I see the optimism for KM in these last four motifs: re-defining workplaces, shifting contracts, digitalizing products and connecting communities. For the last ten years I have had the opportunity to work closely with the Digital Natives, as manager, professor, program leader and fellow Board member. Digital Natives want to use knowledge to collaborate broadly, to innovate, to inform and to make the world a better place. But that’s not enough. They see knowledge as a public good and its veracity a social contract — one all too often broken in the hyper-partisan social media-distorted digital fray. The five observations on the Future of KM attempt to define a new KM, that welcomes Digital Natives’ interests, skills and concerns.

#### Five observations on the future of KM with Digital Natives in charge

1. **Consumerism drives digital experiences.** KM for the Digital Natives is not just about intranets and productivity-boosting repositories. It is also about bringing data-immediacy and consumerism to every experience. Just this past week I heard Lara Caimi, Chief Strategy Officer of ServiceNow, say “Automating and knowledge-enabling processes [formerly the Nirvana of KM], are table stakes.” She added, “You need to make it feel like an iPhone.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Threading this needle seems natural to the new generations, who learned to read a GPS before they knew how to drive. Digital Natives expect vital content to be a search-box or Siri command away. While they appreciate firewalls and IP ownership (see below), they expect interfaces inside and outside the organization to have the same flair. We are now so accustomed to experiencing the world on our mobile devices, that we expect it all to be a menu away. (“Hamburgers,” “kebabs,” and “meatballs” will never more be a carnivore’s delicacies.)

*What does this mean for KM? KM’ers should be digital “producers,” exposing vital knowledge resources inside and outside the organization’s boundaries.*

2. **Counting is a sport, no matter who.** With Covid-19, many researchers and organizations are counting how happy their employees are as they collaborate, endure their virtual isolation, and build their social capital. Tools like Microsoft Workplace Analytics and Polinode’s social network analysis abound. While my generation (and most of the Europeans) try to hold fast to GDPR, fearing a soviet-style Big Brother state, many young people don’t feel it’s black and white. They have a healthy discernment between good and bad data sharing. (You are the kids who had babyCams, right? No wonder your babies have microchips in your diapers.) Notes my nephew, “I want to give [Garmin] my heart rate and I don’t mind them having my workouts. Maybe they will make a better algorithm.”

*What does this mean for KM? KM’ers will need to be the keepers of transparency — content mappers, dashboard producers, and truth tellers about what’s there, but about who’s there, and how it’s adding value.*

3. **Out there, knowledge is suspect, but respect is coveted.** They grew up on Google and Wikipedia, with millions of answers, generously (or passively) crowdsourced just ripe for the taking. But, when it comes to data being “free,” they have a nuanced view. If taxpayer money pays for data, it should be open, they argue. “Free” has limits. Digital Natives respect the work involved in telling a story from data. This new generation learns about data acquisition, artificial intelligence, and information visualization in school. Notably, many are aware of the heavy lift involved with data collection and preparation. They are concerned that there is too much “free” data on social media. They read rants and are sceptical that they’re being manipulated. They worry about how people are forming opinions from opinions — the blight of social media — without “good” research. Where they, themselves, have well-formed opinions and expertise, they want some guarantee that that expertise will be respected. All too frequently in our corporate hierarchies their internal work goes unnoticed. Many go outside to join communities, like open source software communities, getting their accolades from the denizens of Instagram, Etsy or GitHub.

*What does this mean for KM? Don’t expect Digital Natives to engage in communities (e.g., with enterprise social media) without validation, structure, and occasional applause. Create opportunities for them to showcase their external work.*

- 4. We're all KM experts.** All too often knowledge aggregation and curation can emerge into a powerful business, like Yelp and TripAdvisor, where enterprising entrepreneurs improvise outside the canon of KM. Perhaps this is our modern Horacio Alger myth in the US. (We've got ads where a guy rescues someone from a building and the Mayor applauds them. Then guy says, "I'm not in the special forces, but I stayed in a Holiday Inn Express!") Despite the Digital Natives' social media publishing concerns in our last section, the ease of curation is seductive. And, in that seduction, it presents some risk for KM programs. Young knowledge workers often assume they know all there is to know about KM. Recently, two CKO friends mentioned that KM'ers initiated renegade platforms, signalling that the existing KM program and governance were dispensable. This makes BBGX'ers worry about fragmented metadata, abandoned searches, reinvented wheels and zombie platforms. But for the younger generation, working with knowledge is as natural as buying an oat milk latte. And, in some respects, it is, thanks to modern turnkey platforms. What's dangerous, however, is Digital Natives' faith that data-volume will shake down the truth. For most, search trumps navigating, and there is a belief that metadata will arise out of natural language processing engines. The issue is proportion: Most organizations, even big ones, are meaning-rich and data-poor, so supervising collaboration, curation and search is non-negotiable.

*What does this mean for KM? KM programs need to be more iterative, transparent and democratic. KM designers should invest in consumer-like experiences. We all need to collaborate wholeheartedly, bridging old and new terminology, assumptions, and success criteria.*

- 5. Virtual work, community and serendipity need a reset.** Harvard Business School researchers, reporting on social networks during our hyper-remote Covid-19 experience, warned that "weak ties are vanishing."<sup>[4]</sup> The researchers bemoaned the loss of water coolers. (Given what we understand about human brains and empathetic resonance, those water cooler ties were not that "weak.") Regardless of the language, virtual is given, and serendipity's hurling people together, as happened in the Apple and MIT Building 60 offices,<sup>[5]</sup> is increasingly rare. We have a lot to learn from the Digital Natives about how to make virtual work. They are the generation who scheduled each lunch and study group via text, rarely jumping into the company of strangers. We see this as Digital Natives' controlling their time and interactions to the exclusion of new lenses and insights. After all, don't they want real-time answers, people or bots? On the contrary, while they control their digital spaces, they consume content from many different sources and devices at once, even carrying on personal interactions with faceless stranger-friends who teach them about new cultures and ideas. The issue is a loss of spontaneous, human-to-human conversation at the speed of thought —and the knowledge co-creation that conversation fosters.

*What does this mean for KM'ers? To Digital Natives, communities and ad hoc innovation programs can feel like intrusion. Use structures like leadership rotations, lively meetings, incentives and roadmaps to engage them as active community leaders. More importantly, reintroduce digital conversation skills of respect, inclusion, and content activation.<sup>[6]</sup>*

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These five observations are far-reaching and, admittedly, a bit irreverent. I see them as full of hope and pragmatism. Whereas profitability and employee satisfaction were the ruler BBGXs used to measure KM impact, for Digital Natives, the ruler is outside: customer experience, carbon footprint, and corporate fairness. When we started this thing we call “knowledge management” in the ‘90s, we championed corporate knowledge as the fabric of our work and the source of our product value. This we agree on. This new generation will call on us to shift the focus to ubiquity, customer value and societal impact.

## Notes:

[1] For the purpose of this article, we are calling the three groups: Millennials, GenY and GenZ “Digital Natives.” The elders occupying the KM space are the Baby-boomers and GenX’ers. For short, we call this latter group the “BBGXs.”

[2] Deloitte (2019). The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/deloitte-2019-millennial-survey.pdf>

[3] Columbia University Information and Knowledge Strategy Proseminar on the Future of Work: An Evening with ServiceNow, July 23, 2020.

[4] Berstein, Blunden et al (2020) The Implications of Working without an Office. Harvard Business Review, July 15, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2020/07/the-implications-of-working-without-an-office>

[5] Leher, Jonah (2012): GroupThink: the Brainstorming Myth, The New Yorker, January 25, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/30/groupthink>

[6] I write about the four discussion disciplines for digital conversation in “In the Digital Fray, Don’t Just Converse. Collaborate!” (2020) LinkedIn Pulse, March 31, 2020.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/digital-fray-dont-just-converse-collaborate-katrina-kate-pugh>

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Katrina (Kate) Pugh has taught in the Information and Knowledge Strategy (IKNS) Master's program at Columbia University since 2011. She was Academic Director for program 2012-2017, and she led IKNS to become a business transformation leadership degree — combining the strategy, digital transformation, collaboration, and change disciplines.

Currently, she is President of AlignConsulting, where she specializes in business planning and knowledge-based digital transformation. Pugh held leadership positions with Intel Corporation, JPMorgan, and Fidelity. In addition to AlignConsulting, Pugh was part of EY, Monitor-Deloitte, OliverWyman, PwC, and Dialogos, Inc. Pugh has worked in the international development, healthcare, energy, information technology, and financial services sectors.

She is on the Board of LYRASIS, a non-profit supporting the library, archive, digital heritage and museum sectors with cooperative buying, open source technologies, and digital hosting services.

Pugh is the author of several books, including *Smarter Innovation* (Ark Group, 2014) and *Sharing Hidden Know-How* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2011). She has published in the *Harvard Business Review*, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *The Huffington Post*, *Ivey Business Journal*, *NASA Ask Magazine*, *Journal of Digital Media Management*, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, and *KM World Magazine*. She has lectured or workshopped at AIIM, NASA, MIT Sloan School of Management, Babson College, Boston University, Knowledge Management Institute and *KM World*.

Pugh holds certificates in dialogue, facilitation, mediation, and project management. She is a LEAN Six Sigma Black Belt. She is a member of SIKM Leaders (International and Boston Chapter).