Article

Decidiphobia: Getting Today's Digital Natives to Think for Themselves

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Let's face it. Advances in technology have always been a mixed blessing. It is no different with today's digital applications. On one hand, they save us hours and energy on the tasks that used to require manual labor. On the other, they delay, impair and degrade the development of complex reasoning skills. This is especially true among the so-called digital natives, those who have come of age immersed in electronic messaging, work-type applications, and non-stop entertainment.

While some may protest this gross characterization, there is ample evidence to support it. Scientists have been able to replicate these effects in a variety of settings. Educators observe it among their students. Employers complain about it in the workplace. The result of all this is what I call "decidiphobia," a fear of making decisions when outside a menu-driven environment. Most of those with decidiphobia don't display this behavior in obvious ways. It is not apparent to passers-by. No one seeks federal assistance because they are afflicted with this terrible disease. But it lurks in the minds of those around us.

What does it look like? Here are few examples:

Endless questions – When the "parade" in your office gets out of hand, you can probably attribute it to decidiphobia. After all, the first inclination of a person who fears making a mistake is to ask the individual in charge for assistance.

Expecting to see options for all decisions – When you learn to navigate through the day with your thumbs, mouse and screen, it is only natural that you would expect a menu of choices for every decision. But making judgments in ambiguous situations can be downright debilitating.

Difficulty with extrapolation – For those who learned through trial and error, figuring out the process of "if this, then that" comes easy. When the development of this type of reasoning is delayed due to a reliance on menu-driven options, young adults struggle to deduce what appears to be common sense to others. Some may argue that learning to

use software requires trial and error technique as well. But it's not the same when there's no escape key.

Absence of situational awareness – Employers wonder why some young people simply stop when they've completed an assigned task, rather than looking around for other things to do. But for those who have gotten used to having all instructions and possible answers presented, the urge to look outside of the immediate focus does not occur to them. Besides, they need to check Facebook™.

Does decidiphobia afflict all digital natives? No. There are lots of individuals who have learned to thrive outside of the digital environment. This may be due to upbringing, culture, a lack of available technology and other factors. Unfortunately, the increasing pervasiveness of this technology is inculcating many people under 30 with a belief that all answers can and should be found on a screen.

Is decidiphobia a matter of intelligence? Definitely not. Brokers at Wall Street firms tell of Ivy League graduates pestering them for specific instructions on routine matters. Teachers complain of common grammar and syntax errors because of a reliance on SpellCheck™. Supervisors express surprise that young professionals get stuck when they can't find what they need on-line. Business owners wonder why the young tech whizzes they hired can't think through everyday conundrums on their own.

Whose fault is all this? Everyone's. Digital natives are a product of the culture in which they come of age. As society has embraced the lure and convenience of digital applications, the emerging generation has been immersed in this technology almost from birth. Numerous studies have demonstrated the ease with which young people assimilate to the intuitive nature of software. From this, they have learned to manipulate information at lightning speed, but only within the realm of technology. While all this wizardry requires judgment, most of the decisions involved are retractable through the escape, back, and undo keys. No so with choices outside of the computer environment. Is it any wonder then, that decisions with permanence can intimidate them? Technology is not the only culprit in this equation, but it is certainly a major contributor.

So what's the cure? How can employers instill an orientation of self-assured decision making within their workplace? Here are several practical strategies:

Teach them to solve problems. No kidding! It is ironic that few in society are ever taught a framework for problem solving. Instead, we are left to "figure it out" as we come of age. That served so-called digital immigrants well in the era prior to menu-driven

software. But the lure and distraction of these applications have misled digital natives into assuming that anything worth knowing can be found on-line or through a text to their friends. When it comes to discerning ambiguous situations and making decisions that have impact on those around them however, the solutions cannot be found on a screen. Consider your environment and initiate a discussion about how decisions can be made effectively. Simply having this kind of ongoing conversation can begin the process of developing confident problem solvers.

Employ think-alouds. A favorite strategy of educators, this means asking those posing questions to think through their problem out loud in front of you. This accomplishes three objectives: 1) It allows you to reinforce and praise what the person is doing well; 2) It provides an opportunity for you to correct mistakes in their thinking or assumptions; 3) It forces them to think all the way thought the issue rather than relying on someone else to provide an answer. While you may find this to be awkward at first, those asking endless questions will learn to adapt quickly.

Always have a list. This would seem to reinforce the habit of asking endless questions. But in an effort to manage time wisely, inform those you supervise of what other tasks can always be completed. In the process, you teach them to make choices and reduce the office parade at the same time.

Explain the big picture. The more people understand how they contribute to the overall effort, they more they will infer what needs to be done and how to resolve routine problems. Show them how the organization functions financially. Teach them the ins and outs of how individual products are designed, created and sold. Explain the concept of overhead and its impact on profits. Ask them to critique the work they are assigned and how it fits into the big picture. You may find that they have some ideas for efficiency, but were hesitant to speak up.

Withdraw your support. Sometimes it's just easier to give someone the answer. Do this enough however and you will have fostered an overreliance on your judgment and instructions. Use the other strategies in this article to stem this behavior.

Process the decisions made. With most workdays a blur of activity, it is difficult to find time to evaluate outcomes. But this is especially important for those who may be less than confident in their decisions. Even two minutes worth of reflection about the result of their actions can help a digital native better understand how to evaluate situations in the future. Besides, this can present the perfect time for a non-threatening "teaching moment."

Provide specific praise and feedback. Like it or not, digital natives have come of age inundated with feedback from video games, digital instruction, over-protective parents and the like. Couple with this with the impatient world we've created and you can understand their demand for ongoing evaluation and reinforcement. You may find that you have to manage these expectations. But the fact that they are hungry for feedback is a positive sign.

The nature of workplace decision making is evolving due to digital influences. We need to be vigilant in marrying the strengths of trial-and-error thinking with the menu-driven processes now before us.

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