

Gen X: The Cro-Magnon of Digital Natives

By Tom Kamber

How a generation came to embrace—and realign with—the lure of technology.

I grew up in Asbury Park, New Jersey, which happens to be the epicenter of American boardwalk life. It's home to Bruce Springsteen, street racer muscle cars, second-tier mobsters, and saltwater taffy. It is also the place where, during my high school years in the early 1980s, video games got their start. Asteroids came first, a giant boxy console wedged among the pinball machines where one drove a little pinwheeling spaceship through an asteroid field and shot the rocks to bits with tiny blips of laser fire. The spaceship controls were tricky—a little too much throttle would send the player careening into a boulder—and the graphics were primitive, but there was something magical about standing there working a joystick and a few buttons to control a television screen.

Asbury back then had a lot of compelling distractions to occupy a 15-year-old kid: tanned lovelies roller-skating down the boardwalk, the Pagans brawling with rival bikers at Mrs. Jay's, and Chief Jay Strongbow and Andre the Giant wrestling at the Convention Hall. But the lure of the arcade was strong enough to hold my friends and me inside for hours looking for that new high score on the video games, which got better

with each advance made in processing speed and graphics. We played Galaxian and Zaxxon and Pac-Man with relentless focus, slowly migrating away from the pinball machines and Skee Ball chutes toward this irresistible new digital world.

We were ready when computers came out at the end of our high school years, and especially during college when Apple released the first mouse-controlled graphic user interface. By this time, my friends and I had already spent hundreds of hours with joysticks in our hands and were primed to learn the new world of the mouse and icons and drag-and-drop. Everyone got computers in high school or college and we were pretty much off and running in the new Digital Age.

You might want to call us “digital natives”—but you would be wrong. A digital native is someone who grew up with digital culture and never knew a time before phones had screens. Digital immigrants, in contrast, had to learn technology as adults and adjust to a world changing beneath their feet. The Gen Xers (born roughly between 1965 and 1981), however, experienced seismic technology shifts as teenagers. We are a

→**abstract** As members of the generation that straddles the inventions of the personal computer, video games, and the Internet, Gen Xers have a unique perspective on technology—comfortable using digital tools, while being aware of their limitations. Gen X evolved from uncritical optimism about technology to a more nuanced, outcomes-based understanding of its uses and value. This progression mirrors the development of strategies employed by Gen X nonprofit leaders as they have sought to apply technology solutions to challenges of aging and other social purposes. The work of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) is highlighted as an example of these trends. | **key words:** *Gen X, technology, technology and aging, OATS*

strange hybrid of digital users who are extremely comfortable with technology but still remember a time when things were a bit more primitive. We are the Cro-Magnons of the digital age, and this is our story.

Gen Xers—Using Tech for the Greater Good

Digital dual citizenship has infused Gen Xers with distinctive ideas about the role technology plays in our world, what it makes possible, and what it destroys. From a personal standpoint, these issues became a major theme in my professional life. In 2004, I started a nonprofit organization, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), which has helped tens of thousands of older adults get online. Over the years, our strategic thinking at OATS has evolved through several stages that in many ways mirror the development of Gen X thinking about technology. These progressions have marked a changing view of what makes for good or useful technology, reflecting an increasing sophistication in how we use technology, and especially how we use it for socially beneficial purposes.

If Gen X and the Digital Revolution had a honeymoon period, it was in the 1990s, and was as fervent and doe-eyed as any Hollywood romantic pairing. Moore's law (i.e., the processing power of a microchip would double approximately every eighteen months) was in full swing, hardware was shrinking, and "mobile" was becoming more than a dream. I remember a late night in 1993 in the Times Square office of a political campaign when my boss, the campaign manager (another Gen Xer), was unpacking some newly delivered Gateway 486 desktops from their cowhide-themed boxes and, awestruck, kept repeating, "I can't believe they can fit all that power into such a little box."

Alta Vista launched the first real search engine in 1994, and soon the World Wide Web was instantly accessible. Digital content, mobile phones, viral video—it all seemed so powerful and the pace of advancement was breathtaking. The editors of *Wired* magazine were treated like

rock stars, and the bestselling "new economy" strategist Kevin Kelly was telling corporate leaders to rethink their balance sheets in light of a new physics of business development, where giving away services to millions of customers for free could be the linchpin of market domination.

For a few years it seemed that Gen X was the group that best understood what was happening. The Baby Boomer elders were still playing tech catch-up, and the Millennials were kids who thought technology was just part of the natural world. We understood the power of these new technologies and how they might be put to work solving long-standing problems like inequality, poor education, and joblessness. In the world of social change, this soon took the form of a movement on behalf of Community Technology Centers (CTC), which were stand-alone centers providing technology access and programs for underserved communities. The CTC movement looked quite a bit like its predecessor, Community Development Corporations, which aimed to bring affordable housing and programs to underserved communities. Funded primarily by Microsoft's "Power Up!" corporate philanthropy initiative, CTCs sprang up in hundreds of locations around the country but eventually lost momentum as schools and libraries began offering similar resources and programs in the same neighborhoods, and dedicated funding streams never developed at scale.

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For much of the 1990s and early 2000s, Gen Xers combined a starry-eyed optimism about technology with a comparatively stodgy approach to program and institution-building. I was a pretty good example of this when I started OATS in 2004: a technology evangelist who was building bridges with traditional institutions like housing projects, senior centers, and nursing

homes. But the two sides to this equation were never an easy fit. Leaders of traditional institutions were unenthusiastic about incorporating technology into their systems and approaches, and eventually some of that starry-eyed optimism began wearing off—even for enthusiasts like myself.

The Open-Source Movement Changes Minds

For many of my peers, intellectual property was the pivot point for a change in our thinking about technology. The open-source software movement accelerated in the late 1990s with the launch of the Open Source Initiative, and the advent in 2001 of Wikipedia heralded a new awareness of the potential for crowdsourcing and free resources online. These developments shaped our strategy at OATS when in 2006 we abandoned plans for creating a highly structured digital resource guide for older adults (think Dewey Decimal System) in favor of a new program to teach them to build a wiki-based, open-source guide to which anyone could contribute. Dissatisfied with the increasingly confusing interfaces of Microsoft Office, we began experimenting with Open Office, a free alternative that promised word-processing and spreadsheet capabilities without the expense and corporate bloat of previous platforms.

We wanted to do our part to support the egalitarian strain of the digital revolution, but soon learned that open source and wikis were not the solutions we had been expecting. The wiki format, which had worked so well for a global project of encyclopedia writing, was a flop for our 70-year-old participants in Brooklyn and the Bronx, and only a handful stuck with the training and workshops long enough to post and share substantive articles. Open Office turned out to be full of file-sharing problems and software bugs and we soon returned to Microsoft for our word-processing classes.

At the same time, as Stanford Professor Lawrence Lessig brilliantly argued in *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected*

World (2002), traditional content companies like Disney were busily leveraging ownership rights and legislative clout to lock down a wide swath of cultural reference sources—books, movies, music, art—that fueled many of these developments in the first place. The wiki “revolution” fizzled. Personally, I was becoming increasingly critical of the shortcomings of some of these new technologies, and my favorite viral video at the time was a hilarious *Onion* newscast about Sony allegedly releasing “its new stupid piece of &%@ that doesn’t do the #!& thing it’s &^#%\$ supposed to do.”

From 2005 to 2010, the staff at OATS was becoming increasingly aware that many of the community technology environments where we worked—in senior centers, housing developments, nursing homes, etc.—were struggling to integrate these new technologies. Computer labs were locked up and participants were required to ask the security desk for a key to use the equipment. New “senior-friendly” programs and devices were installed that, while putting a simplified face on technology, often further isolated older users from the mainstream by giving them reduced functionality on non-standard devices and interfaces. Public policymakers, approached to support this emerging need on behalf of older adults looking for computer training, cited decades-old regulations restricting funding availability, and asked if we could serve lunch in the computer classes.

Tech Takes a Back Seat to Mission

For Gen Xers like me, the mid 2000s were a realignment period when we progressively developed a critical perspective on technology, while rediscovering the importance of mission. As Rob Salkowitz, author of *Generation Blend: Managing Across the Technology Gap* (2008), explained to me, “We were discovering that there’s a big difference between some kid who can use AutoCAD like a wizard, and a person who, whatever their technology skills, understands design, spatial volume, and proportion.”

At OATS, these issues came to a head during a strategic plan that we completed in 2010, which de-emphasized the technology aspects of our mission and reframed our program activities into five impact areas affecting older adults: social isolation, health, finances, advocacy, and lifelong learning. These shifts reflected a new awareness of the limitations of technology itself, and a desire to re-focus our thinking and energy on developing a deep understanding of the perspective and life processes of older adults, and on creating solutions that integrate technology with smartly designed program activities and environments to achieve transformational outcomes. As it turned out, this had a lot less to do with technology than it did with considerations like staffing, training methodology, and design thinking.

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As “digital Cro-Magnons,” we were uniquely positioned to understand these trends and build new initiatives based on long-held values, while still incorporating technology as needed. I found myself dusting off Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001), which celebrates the “social capital” that comes from face-to-face contact in voluntary organizations like bowling leagues and civic organizations, and looking for ways to incorporate its messages into our work at OATS.

One successful initiative involved giving iPads to older adult volunteers in Washington, D.C., and training them to deliver social engagement courses to isolated, low-income older adults (who also received free iPads from AARP and reduced-cost Internet at home from Comcast). This new, “realigned” approach placed an increased emphasis on social processes and outcomes, while relegating technology to a more tactical level. The program even took an entire

week off from using the iPads to simply role-play communications scenarios that helped the older adults practice using language that would build stronger social bonds, skills that would come in handy as they began using email in the following class sessions.

Other organizations (also run, not coincidentally, by Gen Xers) were pursuing parallel strategies. Power My Learning, a national education nonprofit, was training parents to be more active partners in their children’s learning, and giving them free computers to use as tools in this process. Byte Back, in Washington D.C., developed an impressive series of workforce development trainings to help unemployed young adults use technology to train and find jobs. In San Francisco, Self-Help for the Elderly created groundbreaking programs to use technology to help integrate new immigrants into American society. In all of these cases, technology took a back seat to mission and impact, playing a supporting role for social change organizations that had powerful strategies for helping people.

A Realignment Toward Real-World Outcomes

I believe a lot of us underwent a “Gen X Realignment” from 2000 to 2010, training a newly critical eye on technology while re-awakening our commitments to real-world, practical outcomes. Our generational frame of reference originates in the memory of a highly functioning analog world—eclectic used bookstores, neighborhood video shops (always staffed by a hypnotically knowledgeable movie nerd), live shows where musicians played actual instruments, and social relationships where physical proximity was the rule. So when we try to find a movie on Netflix and realize the lineup is inferior to every Kim’s Video we ever visited, or think it’s sad that our Millennial friends don’t own bookshelves, or can’t figure out why the DJ Zedd is a star because all he does is mix signals on a console, we’re questioning the comparative advantage of the Digital Age.

I run a technology nonprofit and have been to the Consumer Electronics Show so many times that they gave me a special ribbon for my conference badge, but I am continually annoyed by badly designed technology tools and interfaces that interfere with my life and work. I notice my younger friends just shrug these things off, but my generation carries a vestigial memory of an age when things were different and we could simply “pop the hood” and mess with something until we got it working.

This questioning process accelerated at the same time that many of us Gen Xers reached an age where we were increasingly drawn into positions of authority within our companies and organizations. We found ourselves in charge of mission stewardship at the same time that we saw technology as an increasingly poor substitute for a clear theory of change, a talented and motivated staff, and an effective operational model. For many activists who saw technology as a piece of the puzzle, the Recovery Act of 2009, which dedicated \$7 billion to technology solutions related to broadband and community facilities, was a watershed.

At OATS, we were able to secure a \$3 million allocation to create Senior Planet, the country’s first technology-themed community center, and launch a content website that has reached more than a million visitors and is helping to change the dialogue about aging in America. The result? We have 15,000 visitors per year coming in to reinvent what it means to be aging in America. There are people starting businesses, writing plays, managing immigration applications, planning trips, making art, getting healthy, and sharing their passion for life—and the average age is 74. All of this activity reflects a healthy new focus on creating high-functioning institutions and systems that can shape our lives in profound ways, at scale and over time.

The new emphasis on outcomes has accompanied a shift in thinking about technology itself. We have evolved from the days of community technology centers, which were typically rows of

computers facing a whiteboard, to a state of affairs today where a multitude of devices and interfaces are being deployed in more contextual formats. At OATS, the Senior Planet Center represented the first chance to make that change, and we added telepresence robots, gaming consoles, iPads, e-readers, and video-conferencing to the site’s capabilities. More recently, we have been experimenting with digital media “pods” in rural areas of upstate New York, installing a large wall unit at a senior center; the unit includes all of these devices but adds health input devices, a charging station for a mobile classroom, a drone, Sonos, Amazon Echo, and a Mac laptop. The idea is for the community access environment to integrate a wide range of devices and platforms so users can experiment, explore, and see how something fits their own needs and objectives.

‘Cultural identity gets wrapped up in our relationship with the emerging digital tools of information-processing.’

As Gen Xers are employing more caution and skepticism about new technologies, these multi-use technology environments enable a more robust exploration of the ways in which digital tools can advance particular outcomes, such as in groups of older adults using on-loan Fitbits to track their exercise activities.

Broadband data guru and Pew Research Center senior researcher John Horrigan, a Gen Xer, has urged policy makers to begin making a shift in emphasis from broadband adoption to broadband utilization, making the case that we should be just as concerned with what people are doing once they go online as we are about inequities in the overall patterns of technology adoption. This approach underscores the impact pivot, the renewed focus on outcomes and measurable results, that has taken place for Gen X, and for the agencies and organizations they lead that have a stake in public interest technol-

ogy. A transformation has taken place, from a way of thinking that assumes technology is an irreducible good, to one that incorporates technology as an often flawed tool for harnessing strategic interventions implemented by high-capacity organizations.

Technology: A Generational, Often Ambivalent, Love Affair

What makes Gen X different from a technology standpoint? To begin with, we're young enough to appreciate the power of technology and we have an intuitive understanding of how it can potentially improve the world, but also we have seen its limitations and destructive potential. Pew Research Center statistics show double-digit gaps in technology adoption between Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, while adoption rates by Millennials are nearly universal from the pre-teen years.

Gen Xers stand somewhere in the middle—adept users of information and communications technology, characterized by a persistent awareness of the contradictions of the Digital Age. For the most part, we use technology like our younger counterparts in the Millennial generation. We communicate using email, text, and Facebook. We share photos on Instagram. We use Yelp to figure out where to take the dates we met on Tinder. We manage information across multiple platforms—searching, scanning, sharing, and storing. But to the extent that there is a tension between technology skill and subject matter expertise, we are on the side of the latter.

The tech bubble of the 1990s was a searing and formative experience for many Gen Xers; we bought fully into the idea that a new physics was at hand, that technology and networks and instant universal access to all information had changed the playing field. For a few years, it seemed like it was more important to know where to search for expertise than it was to actually possess it. Then things fell apart, badly, in the dot-com crash of 2000. I was working in a New York advertising agency at the time and

Enron was one of our clients, so I observed the crash happening in real time.

As our generation matured into positions of leadership in commerce and the public and nonprofit sectors, our “dual citizenship” approach to technology has framed a larger pattern of thinking about organizations and impact. At OATS and other social-impact technology organizations run by Gen Xers, this experience of “being burned” by technology fostered a renewed appreciation for the importance of mission, customer-centric design, metrics, and institution-building.

Finally, what does this mean for older adults, many of whom are still digitally disengaged? To begin with, it may mean they have to deal with two younger generations with different ideas about technology. Millennials will likely be baffled by elders' reluctance to adopt new technologies, and will see a technology gap as an opportunity to get people learning and using digital tools. In this way, they share similarities with the early champions of community technology—focused on digital literacy and access as irreducible goals.


Gen Xers, on the other hand, are likely to think about aging as a distinct set of challenges and opportunities, and be looking for ways that technology can support strategies for successful outcomes. Low-tech solutions that solve important problems (such as the iPod lending model championed by the nonprofit Music & Memory) are more exciting than a technology-intensive “solution” that may reinforce ageist stereotypes or be simply irrelevant to older adults.

Technology, for people whose life spans straddle the invention of the computer, is a generational affair where cultural identity gets wrapped up in our relationship with the emerging digital tools of information-processing. For Gen Xers, that has meant a subordination of the technology agenda to one that privileges themes like human-centered design and mission-related outcomes. In the coming years, this may form the basis for a new model of aging to be collab-

oratively developed between Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, as we innovate ways to integrate technology into homes and community centers and senior living residences, combining an appreciation of the power of technology with an awareness of its limitations.

Policy makers seeking new, cost-effective ways to improve models of aging might well look to these technology collaborations for promising ideas. Recent initiatives have found new applications for technology in improving health, inter-generational learning, cultural development, social engagement, rural services, and entrepreneurship by older adults. Funding limitations should add a note of caution, as new dollars for social programs are now extremely scarce, but technology partnerships have also demonstrated an impressive track record of attracting resources from non-traditional corporate and philanthropic

entities, in effect expanding the total pool of funding available for older adults.

As these collaborations mature, and partner organizations increase their capacity to work together and achieve outcomes, momentum may start building toward a new paradigm of older adult programs and environments, one that benefits from the “always on” social and economic patterns of the modern age, but also retains a clear commitment to the values of choice and dignity that make this work so vitally important. 

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