

Connection Generation

*How connection determines our place
in society and business*

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INTRODUCTION

On July 12, 2008, the world's oldest internet user at the time, Olive Riley, passed away at a nursing home in a suburb of Sydney, Australia—she was 108. She maintained a web log or blog, which she jokingly referred to as a “blob.” She shared her daily musings and her rich life's experiences, which included raising three children as a single parent, surviving two world wars and the Depression, and working as a station cook in rural Queensland and as a Sydney barmaid. She posted more than seventy entries while boasting an international readership numbering thousands. In her final post, dated June 26, 2008, Olive noted that although she couldn't “shake off that bad cough,” she had “... read a whole swag of e-mail messages and comments from my internet friends today and...was so pleased to hear from you. Thank you, one and all.” She logged off at 108 years old.

Six days earlier, my father, Felix, turned seventy-eight years of age. He is of Spanish/Swiss heritage and was born in the Philippines. To maintain contact with friends and relatives in those countries, he set himself up with Instant Messenger (IM) software on his computer. The application allowed him to communicate to friends and relatives who were “online” at the same time by typing short messages to his family and friends at any time of day in real time on his computer keyboard. He was a proficient typist and an avid speller, having learned on a touch-type typewriter during his school days. It is exactly the same action of typing words on a keyboard—just like he used when he wrote letters to his family using his Olivetti typewriter many years ago. The difference is that this technology has an instant response and interactive component where family members type back on their computers over the internet as they receive the words—instantaneously. No waiting weeks and months for return letters and having to respond back the same way. He has since installed a web camera on his computer that allows him to see and speak to his family friends in real time over the internet as clearly as he can see people on his beloved television. He recently asked me what I knew about another emerging technology called Skype. He is seventy-eight years old.

In August 2009, I'll turn forty-eight—four days after United States President Barack Obama expects to reach the same milestone. Over the past thirteen years, I've searched for information, corresponded with friends, messaged family, shopped for goods and services, booked travel and entertainment, and made payments through my bank to energy, water, and telecommunications suppliers—all over the internet. Two years ago, I decided to travel to Asia with my family. I renewed my Australian passport in minutes by downloading a form on a web site. I also registered my physical whereabouts on the Australian government web site when I visited Bintan, a remote island in Indonesia, so that the authorities knew where I was in case something happened to us. In the past, I would've had to travel to a post office or call an administrative office to mail the necessary forms to me, reaching me in seven to ten days.

Almost a year ago, I reconnected with a person I used to work with while on a company assignment in Tokyo, Japan, in 1998 by using an online networking application called LinkedIn. Since then I've found many more past contacts and made some new ones along the way. At the time of publication, I had over four thousand direct connections on LinkedIn and over thirteen million indirect connections. I also use the more social online networking site called Facebook, where I've connected to over seven hundred “friends.” I was born in 1961, and the social behaviorists say that at my age I'm not supposed to use “new” technology as pervasively as I do.

I woke up one morning and found my eighteen-year-old son, Andrew—thirty years my junior—playing the popular online card game *Texas hold 'em poker* with people from Norway, Canada, and Spain. The night before, he completed a clean sweep of three online gamers from Singapore, South Africa, and Argentina while playing against them using online game FIFA 2009, a football/soccer game, on his Sony Playstation3. All the while, his mobile phone was by his side and at the ready in case he got a call or text message from his friends or his boss (in the event that he forgot that he was rostered to work). Most people expect this behavior from the average eighteen-year-old.

Due to the rapid adoption of these technologies, especially in the twentieth century, it is thought that generations—defined by the year in which one was born—determine certain attitudinal characteristics and behavioral tendencies toward society and business. Although there is no agreement among researchers as to the definitive generations of the last century, the most common generations are the pre-boomer (pre-1945), baby boomers (1946–1960), Generation X (1961–1981), and Generation Y (1982–2002). During my research for this book, I also found a traditional definition of the term generation is “the average interval of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring,” which makes a generation an average of around thirty years in length.

This prompted my thinking on the adoption of communication technology by generation and led me to ask how four people, all chronologically thirty years apart in age and from completely different generations, have a direct connection to people, places, and information using today’s technology. To begin with, it is generally agreed that anyone between eighteen and thirty-five years of age is probably very proficient and comfortable with internet and mobile technology, having been brought up in the era of the personal computer and the beginnings of the internet revolution. It could also be argued that because this forty-eight-year-old spent most of his working life in the information technology industry he is by default “tech savvy” enough to understand and manage these modern technologies. Although the fact is, he is in the minority of people his age.

But should a seventy-eight-year-old really be expected to learn and master current information technologies and applications like instant messaging and web cameras, let alone spell IT? And surely anyone over one hundred years old has no place anywhere near a computer, let alone be proficient at blogging—an online activity a portion of the population still has no idea about. So what happened?

We’re all connected. We always have been. We also know that some of us are more connected than others, which makes us realize that our degree of connectedness will have a profound impact on our social and business lives in an increasingly connected world. Whether you believe that a supreme being created life or that it was the result of a big bang that consequently led to our evolution from sea creatures to the people who roam the planet today, we all have a connection to each other. This connection manifests itself through physical attributes such as blood relations and places of origins. In John Guare’s 1991 play *Six Degrees of Separation* one of the main characters, Ousa, muses to her daughter that:

“Everybody on this planet is separated by only six other people. Six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet. The president of the United States. A gondolier in Venice...It’s not just the big names. It’s anyone. A native in a rain forest. A Tierra del Fuegan.

An Eskimo. I am bound to everyone on this planet by a trail of six people. It's a profound thought...How every person is a new door opening up into other worlds."

Apart from the connections among billions of people in the world, we also have connections to information, objects, and concepts. As we trek through the journey of life, we gather items of value and experience that are the mementoes of our lives on earth. A prime example comes from the moment we start life. It is one of those common things we share as human beings. It's not just birth—but a "birth-day." Each society has a range of rituals that signify these life events. Along the way, not only are the events and experiences remembered and recorded, but also objects and concepts are retained as symbols of our existence and subsequent connection. Most importantly, we know this because they're communicated through time via verbal or written reports and stories.

This has been the case for many generations across many cultures. The difference has been the diversity of retention of the connection and network records over time and their visibility and accessibility. For many cultures, there is a reliance on people's memories and the communication of the connection stories that link people, information, ideas, and experiences together. Over many years, humans developed tools and applications that facilitated the recording and storage of this information. First came painting, language, and the written word, which were mostly used to state and record facts but also to express and interpret events, experiences, and concepts. Subsequently, photography, the typewriter, the telephone, radio, film, and television enhanced media technologies and sparked a communication revolution like no other.

With each advance in communication technology, humans became more familiar with the need to use a variety of tools, devices, and applications to make them more effective. And as each technology evolved, the basic precepts behind the function of devices remained the same, although the complexity of their usage increased. For example, the first functional typewriter built by Remington in 1873 bore little resemblance to the more sophisticated IBM electronic version in 1973. Interestingly, the typewriter was the precursor to today's personal computer.

The world is now familiar with the *tipping point* concept introduced by Malcolm Gladwell in his book of the same name. He maintains that collective behavior, combined with factors such as connectors, stickiness, and context—at a given point in time—could combine to create a "social epidemic," which is commonly known as a trend. Connection technology tipped in the mid to late 1990s. Large masses adopted internet and mobile technology faster than any other previous technology. How? Firstly, we already knew about the power of connections—it was in our DNA. The structural importance of family, community, and company formed the basis of twentieth-century existence across societies, cultures, and businesses. Secondly, connectivity vehicles combined elements of previously tried-and-tested technologies such as print, mail, the telephone, the typewriter, radio, and television. This convergence allowed the rapid adoption of e-mail on a personal computer, mobile phone technology, the World Wide Web, and other media devices such as the iPod and PlayStation in very short spaces of time. Lastly, technology vendors cracked the code to provide access and search capability over the internet to what search engine maestros at Google called "people, places, and things." This combination revolutionized the way people connected to others and to information.

And it didn't matter when people were born or what generation—pre-boomer, boomer, Gen X, or Gen Y—they belonged to. If they were alive during this time, had direct or indirect access to a connection device and the relevant application—or someone who had one—they were

connected. This is the *Connection Generation*. It's a generation that had previously experienced social and business connections primarily through face-to-face relationships. They had a familiarity with input and output devices such as telephones and computers to communicate. They now found a more cost-effective and time-efficient method through an instant, easy-to-access global connection technology platform to acquire and retain connections. It is the generation that caught the online bug and developed an appetite to stay connected ever since. This book profiles the *Connection Generation*—their evolution based on the convergence of communication and connection technologies. It explains their attitudinal, behavioral, and capability profiles both as individuals and in groups. It reveals a methodology to manage connected individuals via a PLAN and connected groups by being OPEN. It discusses societal and business considerations and implications and outlines some of the challenges and opportunities for managing, dealing with, and relating to the *Connect Generation*.