G+M Nov 11/99

Talking 'bout two generations



E-BIZ

JIM CARROLL

The explosive growth of the Internet and E-commerce can be viewed as the ultimate clash of two generations.

The current cadre of senior management, primarily baby boomers and even older people, are in charge of the economy. Many still don't appreciate the extensive economic restructuring brought on by the Internet era.

And it's no wonder — many executives have a dispassionate and distant relationship with technology. Quite a few still struggle at the computer keyboard, secretly damning the device for its intrusion into their business life.

Many have not come to grips with the concepts of the Internet and E-commerce. They're more comfortable with the paper-based economy around them. They run organizations that navigate a flood of paper purchase orders, invoices, monthly statements, letters and faxes.

But these executives don't realize that E-commerce is about the inevitable migration of an economy once based on the exchange of paper to one based on the exchange of digital bits. The pressure for this change is coming from the newer, more technology-adept generation that has recently entered the work force.

Throughout the economy, we are seeing the impact of the first generation raised with computers. Accustomed to the lightning-quick exchange of ideas and information via E-mail, they see many big companies bound by massive levels of hierarchy and bureaucracy, still seemingly dedicated to pushing paper.

Having grown up in a Nintendo-speed world, they are repelled by organizations that don't acknowledge that instant Web-based business transactions can provide significant cost savings.

Masters of their technological universe, they don't understand why senior executives aren't embracing new ways of doing business. Many struggle in silent isolation in their cubicle, frustrated by the lack of wired business concepts within their organization.

Others are voting with their feet, and have set upon the Internet startup as a way of reshaping the economy.

Here's the challenge that arises from this state of affairs: The technology generation often doesn't possess the seasoned business knowledge of their older contemporaries. They don't have the same ability to provide the leadership and strategic thinking that is found with those who have been working for 30 or 40 years.

The best strategy for many organizations in dealing with E-commerce is to ensure there is a successful blending of the skills and talents of the two generations.

Companies that carefully match the strategic talents of the older generation with the technology skills and enthusiasm of the younger crowd will be able to assess and act upon the opportunities of the E-commerce era.

Jim Carroll is co-author of Selling Online: How to be a Successful E-Commerce Merchant in Canada, *and can be reached by E-mail at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*