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## Back to the [New] Future

by  
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The surprising impact that Baby Boomers and Generation Y are about to have on the world of work

*An edited transcript of the keynote presentation at the Amdocs InTouch event in Miami Beach, 17 May 2011*



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*1985: the starting point for going back to the future*

Come back with me to 1985. This was a very significant year in popular culture: it was the year in which we realized we could go “back to the future”. 1985 was when the first of the massive blockbuster hits “Back to the future” was launched. At the end of Part 1, Doc Emmett Brown returns from the future to tell Marty McFly that “something has gone wrong with his kids”, and whisks him off to the future.

I wonder if any of you can remember where they were going to? Which year did they set out to from 1985? The film buffs will know the answer precisely: 21 October 2015. That date is coming up soon. And I for one am really looking forward to the hover boards.



That movie was interesting vision of 30 years ahead - interesting what people 30 years ago thought it would be like today. It hasn't quite worked out as they envisaged, of course. But one thing they did seem to get spot on: “there’s a problem with your children”.

The children that were born from 1985 onwards have turned out a little bit differently. Those of you who are parents might even be wondering if there is a genetic link between you and them because they’re so very different. What happened? Very simply: the world changed. Not just from a technology perspective, but in every way it changed. And interestingly, we didn't have to wait for 30 years for that change. Just a few years after 1985 the world changed dramatically. It's almost too much for us to remember what the world felt like just before all of these events.

Here's a quick snapshot of some key events that took place when the “1985 kids” were just a few years old:

- Tiananmen Square in China: 5 June 1989
- Iranian Ayatollah died, with near revolutionary chaos on the streets of Tehran at his funeral: 6 June 1989 (yes, the very next day!)
- Latvia, Lithuanian, Estonia and the Baltic Way, as more than a million people stood in a unbroken human chain: 23 August 1989 (yes, you spotted the theme - it's 1989!)

1989: The year that  
rocked the world

- Berlin Wall comes down: 9 November 1989 (Europe's 9/11)
- Velvet Revolution in Prague: 17 November 1989
- Nicolae Ceaușescu is dragged out of his palace in Romania and shot dead: Christmas Day 1989
- Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the Communist Party was banned in Russia the very next day: 26 December 1989
- Nelson Mandela released from jail in South Africa: 11 February 1990
- Augusto Pinochet stepped down from power in Chile: 11 March 1990

This is just a nine month period in human history. Sometimes everything can change all at once everywhere. 1989: The world changed. By the way, it was also the year in which Tim Berners-Lee invented HTML, the basis of webpages as we know them.

My 12 year old daughter was also impressed that Harry Potter's lead actor, Daniel Radcliff, was born in 1989 (on 23 July). As far as she is concerned it is therefore the greatest year in human history - fact! It is a significant change point shared across the world by nations on every continent.

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history

This links into a theory that was written up just a few years after 1989, called the *generational theory*. Written first in "Generations" (Strauss and Howe, 1991, ISBN 0-688-11912-3) it looked at cycles in history. It looked at the history of America from a European perspective, and in 500 years of modern history, the authors noticed a very discernable pattern of highs and lows in our experience as human beings. The theory suggests that this cycle is a repeating pattern of about 80 years and you can go back into history and see the pattern.

What does this mean for us? The era in which you were born actually shapes you just as much as your religion, your culture and your gender. All the people who study people will all agree that the first 10 to 15 years of our lives are essential in shaping who we become - and the era in which we were born is especially significant in this shaping process. If we think of this cycle as a set of seasons, you've got winter, spring, the high of the summer, the autumn as we head back to a winter low. The cycle takes about 80 years to complete.

### **The Boomers: visionary children of promise and hope**

When were you born in that cycle? If you were born in the 1950's and 60's then you fit into a category that sociologists call the Baby Boomers: a generation born as the world was putting itself back together after a crisis low of the Great Depression and World War II. The Boomers are a generation who believe that anything is possible. We put a man on the moon; we can do it. Anything. All we need is a vision.

The boomers are now in their 50's and 60's and we should be expecting them to slow down soon... well, only if you've never met any of them. This is a generation that is about to reach 65 and they're not even close to finishing yet. They're not going to retire. Instead, they'll come back to their old industries, work mornings only at double the hourly rate and be "consultants". We know many of them already.

## **Generation X: pragmatic children of uncertainty and chaos**

There is another generation that was being born in the 1970's and early 80's. This was an era of turbulence. Gone were the 50's and 60's and we can do anything. In came Vietnam and oil embargos and the cold war and the threat of nuclear holocaust. There were all sorts of collapses - space shuttles blowing up and Chernobyl going off - which indicated that maybe we couldn't do everything we thought we could. A generation of young people growing up in the 1970's and 80's developed during a time of uncertainty. They grew up during a time of asking their parents: "what's going on". Their parents said to them: "we have no idea. Let's just see what happens". This generation grew up being more pragmatic, go with the flow. They have a one word war cry: "whatever". (Not very inspiring is it?)

## **Generation Y: confident children of change and technology**

The next generation was the 1985 generation of "Back to the future", born as the world changed and moved into the heady 1990s. The oldest of them were born in about 1984 - so defined because they graduated high school in new millennium. They've been called the Millennial generation or Generation Y.



So, what's the problem with the children? The big issue is that they are different (not wrong, not strange - just different). It is vitally important for us to understand that the world that has shaped these young people is different: it's driven by technology and globalization, by 24 access to news and information, by the ability to multitask and engage in so many different ways. Because the world looks so different after 1989, because of the turbulence of the financial markets, because of the environmental collapse. Because of changes in government policy around education and social care, because the world map has been re-drawn in their life times - this generation is different. And they're going to stay different. They are not just younger versions of you. You can't grit your teeth and wait for them to grow up become like you.

For the sake of time, I want to highlight just four key characteristics of this new generation:

## 1. This generation is very tech-savvy

They are a confident generation. Part of their confidence comes from the fact that they are the first generation in history of the world who have grown up feeling that their parents need a lot of help. From as young as they can remember they have been the chief technology officers of their homes. They pity their parents who can't watch DVD's unless their kids are at home. It's not that they don't know how to use the remote control, its worse - they don't even know which remote is for the DVD. When you get a new mobile phone - do you read the manual? They don't even give them out anymore, because nobody reads them - you've got to find an 11 year old to help you work out how to use it.

It's not just that they're technology savvy - it's the confidence that that tech-savvy gives them as they enter the world. Their ability to engage with the technology and to discard it when they realise that it is inferior. They are very discerning from a tech perspective.

**Implications:** Their technology enables connection. Too many adults are saying they are always on-screen, they never connect. But what is it that parents think young people are doing online and on their phones? They are comfortable using technology to help them connect. Any technology that does not help them to connect is not technology they are interested in. That is why they use it.

And that's why social media has taken off. Social media has not taken off because people want to know what each other had for breakfast. It hasn't taken off because people only think in 140 characters at a time. It's taken off because this is a generation that has a deep desire to belong - a deep desire to be part of a group, something bigger. Today's young people find themselves in a moment in history where technology is actually enabling that connection. We cannot just write off social media as a fad or as something that gets done in our spare time. The number of companies that block social media is ridiculous. It's blocking a connection.

*Social media is about connection, collaboration, conversation, involvement, and engagement... it's not about what you had for breakfast today.*

Social media fulfills a vital role with the younger generation of helping them to connect and collaborate and be involved and engaged. That's how they want to connect with each other and with you. We have to learn how to do this from a management and leadership perspective. We have to learn how to do this from a marketing perspective. That's where the power is, the power of the community, the power of the tribe. That's what Gen Y is going to be teaching us over the next few years. Yes, we will need to learn how to monetize all of this, but we are realising if it is important people are prepared to pay.



## 2. They are family and friends focused

Their focus is on their personal lives, specifically on their relationships. They do connect with their parents. If they have families of their own, their focus is on their families or their close friendship circles. This has huge implications in the work place because you as an employer are nowhere near the top of their priority. If you're a baby boomer and your boss needed you to work late, you did. No questions. If you're a Gen Y then sometimes you'll say, "no, I can't..." - they put their family ahead. They saw their boomer parents doing the opposite and they saw the reward they got for it: Baby boomers are the most divorced generation of all time. Many of them are estranged from their children because they weren't there. Many of this generation have vowed to never make the same mistake.

*Their priorities are very different - they don't put employers first*

It doesn't make them lazy. It just means their priorities are different and you have to understand their priorities. If their priority is to get a promotion as a manager, they will work longer and harder than you could ever imagine. But if their priority is to live a balanced life, their priority is to be with their children, there is nothing you can offer them or do that will keep them at the office after their contractual time is done. It's a massive mindset shift that we are only just beginning to come to grips with.

Instead of work life balance - how about work life integration. It's about integrating our lives and that's happening already - and it's being driven by technology. So "thanks" for my Blackberry - now I can receive emails on a Saturday. And if I answer those mails on a Saturday evening, can I go and watch my son play football on a Tuesday afternoon? If not, why not? Work is integrating into private lives (mainly through technology). Private lives should be able to integrate into work life.

Flexibility is an important concept for this generation. Not new forms of contracts, just flexibility: not every Tuesday for football, just this week. I don't want to work every weekend, but I will do it every now and again. All of this leads into the environment into which many of these young people currently live, especially because they realize they are going to be more unemployed than other young people in the history of the world. A fact. This generation are going to become entrepreneurs, realising you can create a portfolio of jobs, doing 3 or 4 things, powered by websites like e-lance.com and other sites.

*This might not be new information, but it's often just talk. How much change are you actually instituting in your workplace right now?*

A lot of this is not new to us. In fact I hope that none of this is big news to you and that what I am saying is just a reminder of the big themes of the workplace of the last few years. But don't write it off just because you've **heard** it before, or even because you've **talked** about it before. Only ignore if you're already **doing** all these things.

Up isn't the only direction for these young people. Sometimes they go down to go up and sideways to go out, and so on. Sometimes it's out, sometimes it's volunteering. The most important thing you can do for these young people is mentor them and coach them. That is one of the secrets of keeping them in your organisation. Providing them with on-going betterment opportunities and engage with them and connect them with the gurus in your industry.

### 3. This is a generation who has a very global mindset

They see themselves as global citizens. I have spoken to many 20 something people in the last 3 to 4 years who have sent their CVs to potential employers all over the world - in Moscow, Sao Paolo, New York, London. They talk about this as if it is normal. This is everyone - from MBA graduates to no qualifications at all, they just see themselves as citizens of the world.



Generation theory itself is also international. It is happening across the world. This is affecting China, Japan, the Philippines, Romania, Russia, Australia, America, Vietnam, Nigeria - again, it is technology that makes the driving forces global and pervasive.

*For more information on the different generations, see our white library at <http://tinyurl.com/genarchive>*

They also share the value of diversity. For them, having a diverse team of people that they work with is definitely something that they are looking for. They don't want everyone to look the same, dress the same and talk the same. They have a deep desire for diversity and difference. And they have a deep desire for change. This is a generation that loves change. If they don't get change they will make change. For some older people, constant change can feel a little like chaos. The problem is therefore that this generation loves chaos. And if they don't get chaos, they make chaos.

### 4. They need to know why

This is probably the best piece of management advice I can give you. If you are managing a team, or a parent of Gen Y, tell them "why". Boomers grew up with "because I said so". Now that's not good enough for this generation. Our problem is that we are happy to tell people **what** to do, we are happy to tell them **when** to do it by as well as **how** to do it and with **whom**. Gen Y also need to know **why**. The context, the bigger picture. They get a flood of information coming through their minds every single day and if they don't know where to hook that information it just drifts past



*Tell them "why"*

them. Tell them why if they do it that way it will work. Tell them why they were selected to do the work. It will make all the difference. Also find out why they are working for you.

## Back to a [new] future - one that includes the Boomers too...

It's nearly 2015 and there is a problem with the kids, they're not like us. But the surprising news right now is that what they are looking for in the work place of the next 2 to 3 years is strangely similar to what the Boomers want too. Boomers are not planning to re-tire, they are planning to re-tyre. So all the things that we might want to do out of duress because those young snot Gen Y kids are demanding them, Boomers could do with them too.

Flexibility. Boomers want to work - but not 6 days a week. Give them the opportunity to mentor and be mentored - give them new skills. This is a generation that will definitely need and use technology that makes their lives easier. They are also going to be entrepreneurs. I think we are going to see a rash of 70+ business owners with start up businesses over the next few years.

Boomers will use any technology that is easy to use. As long as it makes their lives easier they will devour technology. Boomers have most of the world's money. Three quarters of the world's disposable income belongs to people aged 45 to 65. So you don't just want to have a youth program or a youth marketing approach.

It will impact everything. Pharmaceuticals. Two of biggest selling drugs in the world aimed at Boomers: Prozac and Viagra. It will affect things like retirement planning. It's going to affect travel. And telecoms. We cannot ignore the boomers, they will not be ignored. They will change and shape our lives. We need to humanize our technology so that it connects with them and the young people.

The barometer is set for change. We have seen more change since 1985 than we could have imagined and the next few years are going to just keep accelerating. Yes there is a problem with the kids, but it also presents an amazing array of opportunities. Back to a new future in 2015. As you look ahead to the next few years, remember that an old and a young generation are looking for very similar things in their lives, offices and in their homes - and technology is what is going to enable it.

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*Dr Graeme Codrington is an author, presenter and thought leader on the future of work, and attracting, retaining and engaging talented staff and clients, across the generations.*

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*Prepare yourself for  
70+ year old  
entrepreneurs and  
consultants flooding  
the marketplace*



## About TomorrowToday

TomorrowToday is a consulting company focused on the new world of work. We use keynote presentations, workshops, training, consulting and the provision of resources to help our clients understand the key trends shaping the world, and show them the keys to success in four critically important areas:

- Strategy development and execution
- Leadership and team development
- Attracting, retaining & engaging talented staff
- Improving customer experience and retention

Our core skill is our ability to track trends and map the world of tomorrow, especially trends related to people - their needs, desires and expectations, and how they will shape the new world of work. Our core business is to help our clients gain tomorrow's competitive advantage today, by understanding the drivers of people's behaviour and attitudes and showing them how to influence others.

People are central to business success, but often the connection between management and staff or customers falters. We have processes that strengthen the connection that companies have with people and are able to deliver immediate value and performance improvement.

With ten years experience in these areas we can show you how to get more from less - more productivity, more sales, more profitability.

Please contact us to request an appointment with us - we'd love to meet with you and tell you more about who we are and what we do.

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