

IT MATTERS



BUSINESSES MUST PREPARE TO WELCOME GENERATION ALPHA

By BILL MAGEE

FAR-SIGHTED companies are investing now in Generation Alpha even though the first full batch of tomorrow's digital workforce will not be available for upwards of a decade.

GenAlphas, categorised as born since 2010 and until 2025 and nicknamed "Millennials on steroids", are increasingly being recognised by the more enlightened organisations as special due to their potential technological ingenuity.

Like BT and Skyscanner who view the "twens" tech kids as nascent gold dust when it comes to their future commercial acumen. In the knowledge that the years ahead surviving in the digital world is likely to become more – not less – challenging.

When information technology skill sets incorporating data science, IT engineers, product designers, mobile and software developers, are

in greater demand and more essential than ever. But there's a rub.

Cyber-psychologist **Monica Whitty** gave a conference keynote speech in Edinburgh. She warns that

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Monica Whitty, cyber-psychologist (below)

a "digital divide" currently exists, where adults and adolescents each give "a very different understanding and experience of such technologies".

Delegates at the Edinburgh-staged Forum of Incident Response and Security Teams (FIRST) global conference heard: "The internet has increased the opportunity for



learning through elimination of time-and-place constraints to enable flexible and innovative channels for interaction."

However things can get problematic: "Children and teens, compared to adults, have in some ways a very different understanding and experience of digital technologies."

Whitty points out that grown-ups have known a world before the net but for children and adolescents the impact is more profound.

"They have grown up with a range of technologies, used to educate them, build friendships and with which they learn about their identities.

She spells out the implications: "It makes it difficult for parents to advise young people, in an informed way, about potential dangers they might encounter in cyberspace."

Alphas fully integrate tech very much as second nature into their young lives. Deeply interacting and

immersing themselves, as they screen swipe and click in and out of apps and scroll icons and pictures like there's no tomorrow.

Forbes.com labels them the "children of Millennials" interested in everything and anything via internet and mobile, although anxieties persist over their ultra-short attention span and sensory overload.

They'll be the first ones publicly sporting virtual reality headsets in numbers, wondering about aimlessly bumping into you and me. When they're not in their autonomous vehicle. They are also acquiring their first smartphone earlier.

The upside of all of this is it's helping stimulate an exponential rise in school computer-coding starter classes, as marketplace demand for IT-grounded talented individuals grows by the day.

Lately, such school time backed up by extracurricular science, technology, engineering and mathematics related project work has accelerated to include more weighty topics like robotics, app and game design plus Internet of Things (IoT).

It is all aimed at developing youngsters' undoubted digital prowess but beyond being mere Minecraft megastars, onto formalising their functional online skills for the digital road ahead.

On the bright side, the **Digital Xtra Fund**, a charity and Scotland's first body dedicated towards nurturing a generation that appears to have unlimited creativity, gives an idea of how young participants can be.

It confirmed more funds are being committed from the marketplace in greater numbers. Helping it to run a free online code club network @ FutureLearn and it may come as a surprise to some business owners to learn STEM is being included in child learning experiences as young as three.

It is not as outlandish as it seems. Just think of those grandkids, still in nappies, crawling around clutching their favourite tablet. Woe betide any attempts to prise it out of their sticky mitts.

Kraig Brown, the fund's partnerships and development manager, pinpoints ages three to seven as key, integral to one goal: "For all young people across Scotland to have access to digital activities and understand the near-limitless

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Kirsty Scott, University of Dundee (below)

possibilities these skills will provide."

The organisation expects more than 9,000 young people, including over 5,000 girls and young women, throughout Scotland will benefit from their support in 2019.

Cranfield University's Joe Nellis, professor of global economy, claims this presents a challenge to business: "Alphas will be the wealthiest, the most intensely educated and most dynamic generation ever.

"They're born into technology, not as a new development, an experiment and stumbling innovation, a toy to grapple with, but as a fully-fledged service.

"An IT-enhanced life mediating everyday roles and demands via a digital device is already the norm for them.



"Companies will be confronted with the most demanding employees and customers...expecting speed, responsiveness and customisation as standard."

The pay off is Alphas, more than any previous generation, will be able to deal with such complexity thrown up by all the multiple inputs from digital sources.

"Translating that complexity into what's simple and essential with the ability to process larger amounts of data.

"Not bogged down in the detail and work with what is important will be a fundamental Alpha quality."

Kirsty Scott, in charge of industrial liaison at **University of Dundee**, urges: "Nurturing tomorrow's workforce must engage all interested parties – employers, educational institutions, politicians."

The market – in her case technology industries – must plan ahead: "Knowing what to focus their resources on can be hard to predict."

Alphas are central to a drive based on overcoming challenges they are facing: "Whether it is the need to address a skills gap...or an infrastructure issue preventing growth development," Scott adds.

However, the jury remains out as regards the psychological impact of such enhanced digital lives: how to balance a relentless immersion involving innumerable tech devices with an expected lack of face-to-face contact.

Author Thomas Georges in his book *Digital Soul* hopes for such a balance. Tech devices might not necessarily have gained the capacity for autonomous decision-making or emotional responses (yet?).

"At the moment, we seem largely in control... yet in many ways, this control is slipping away as we leave more and more decisions to machines." Worth serious thought in this digital age.

From a business perspective it must be all about getting the absolute best from Alphas, whilst helping them to avoid the dangers of sensory overload. Stronger mentoring processes is one solution. If such a generation of supra techno geeks can be persuaded to agree to that rare occasion of downtime from smartphone apps-swiping.

Or how about combining the tech with leisure activities, like providing a real swimming pool and real bike riding. But definitely not via VR. ■