TEENAGERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE:

ONLINE PRESENCE FOR FUTURE PATHWAYS?

KATHRYN TAYLOR

"I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots." Whether Albert Einstein said this or not may be disputed. However, if he did, he was unaware of the potential scope of positive impact technology would bring to our social framework and global culture. When it comes to teenagers, so much of the discussion around technology use is negative, fearing the damaging face of cyber bullying and predators. While these concerns are valid and a reality in a digital society, they are countered by amazing possibilities for our youth to attain otherwise out-of-reach insights.

For generations, youth have sought to rebel, challenge and push boundaries. This is not different with technology; the mental maturity to manage the volume of access is often a challenge. Focusing on constructive use of technology with teenagers is essential for currency and response to a new tech-savvy world and generations growing up with technology as their norm. Commonly we place a high degree of emphasis on the impact technology has on social interactions, the understanding that we can engage, or disengage for that matter, with others online. Controlled connection with others, including friends, teachers, professionals and tools, improves our social network and that reach is beneficial in many facets of teenagers' lives. Managing these tools requires attention, as does managing face-to-face interactions with peers, team work in class and damaging relationships, albeit more complex and requiring a greater degree of both confidence and control which are developing throughout the teen years.

An area of great benefit to youth, in terms of online engagement, is the vast content and capacity of technology to contribute to thinking and decision making around future pathways. The insight, information and opportunity provided through online sites and resources for those assessing or undertaking career change or progression is both immense and invaluable. There are multiple uses for online presence in future planning. Below are seven steps for constructive engagement.

1. CREATE YOUR PERSONAL BRAND

Sense of self is an evolving concept in adolescence. The core focus of education is around knowledge and content, so deep thinking about self and, most importantly, the value of who you are and what strengths you possess and use to benefit yoursel and others is frequently placed as a secondary focus. An online identity positions youth to claim themselves, clarify how they wish to be viewed and what messages they seek to project. Reflecting o common imagery within media assists teens in recognising the impact of a brand and the associated assumptions and decisions based on these assumptions. Creating a personal brand highlighting self-value and aspirations assists in building a positive self-concept that can guide future pathways.

2. CONNECTIVITY

In having greater clarity of self, youth are better positioned to reach out to others to support understanding, improvement or extension of this aspirational self to work towards long-term goals. This support works by aligning social status and interactions, which are valued highly during teenage years. The importance of positive connections is critical to promote wellbeing and productive frameworks to help teens:

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- respond to times of difficult with great control
- maintain meaningful connections with positive friends and family who have moved or live beyond their immediate reach
- seek educated assistance to resolve personal conflic
- continue to develop optimistic self-worth through purposeful contact.

We do need our teenagers to create opportunities for separation and self-discovery to truly own their vision of themselves and their journey to life beyond school. Connection online can be of value for those with passions not embraced in their learning environment, heightened sense of responsibility and/ or advanced ethical drive or to create focused interactions with established associations to assist them in facing issues.

3. MARKETPLACE KNOWLEDGE

As teenagers have a greater concept of self they are able to easily gather market and industry information to support various pathways under consideration. There are an extensive range of providers, businesses and associations sharing relevant industry activities, opportunities for students and job trends and changes. Youth and adults alike have varying methods of interaction; some prefer to work behind the screen via webinars and chat rooms whilst others prefer a face-to-face forum or experience. These opportunities are available through websites and social media channels from:

- Universities and private colleges
- Apprenticeship or traineeship centres and TAFE
- Industry bodies and associations
- Prominent companies, particularly with high volume of recruiting
- Government bodies and advisory groups
- Recruitment agencies.

4. GLOBAL ACCESS

The sense of global reach is now standard in the workplace and is becoming more embedded into education through formal and informal structures. In terms of future pathways, teenagers are regularly seeking interstate and international opportunities for study and work experience. The 'gap year' was previously questioned in terms of value. It is now recognised that immersion tours and practical experience within different cultures and communities have demonstrated an individual's capacity to empathise, be resilient, react to immediate needs, grow out of their comfort zone and work with others in a range of settings. Teenagers are regularly seeking information and opportunities from a global online community to assist them with:

- studies and scholarship opportunities
- internships and international work experience
- volunteer work and community programs in underprivileged societies
- working holiday opportunities bridging travel and finance
- application of their studies in a global content, for example nursing or teaching abroad
- future industry trends, for example in technology or fashion.

5. DATA AND EVIDENCE

When it comes to future pathways there is a barrage of information and insights. Resume writing and interview skills are two areas where we see a multitude of articles and information and many of these are incorrect or tainted by an individual's experience. Credible sites and reputable publishers are able to provide youth with evidence-based information validated by data and research into the specific field. Diffusing the noise to create alignment and tangible resources helps teenagers to better understand where to go for additional information and discussion.

6. EXAMPLES AND EXPERIENCE

One of the most difficult areas for youth in planning for their future and
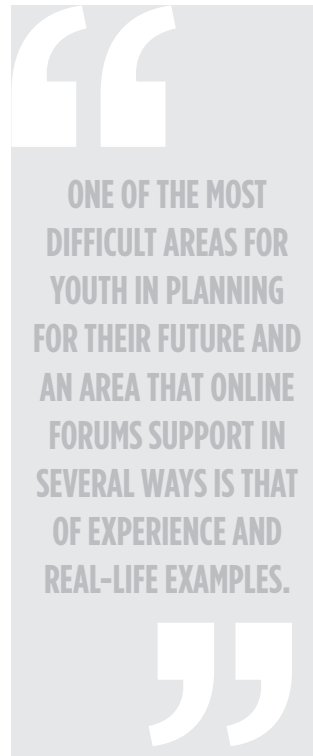
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an area that online forums support in several ways is that of experience and real-life examples. Whilst this is essential for all ages to access, it must also be shared with the understanding that experiences are subjective and impacted by many factors including:

- personality, theirs and that of other parties involved
- previous experience, personally and professionally
- circumstances out of their control
- company regulation and expectations
- the element of showmanship in storytelling.

In sharing and reading these stories a grounded adult with the maturity to decipher relevance will be able to filter the essential and potential irrelevant aspects of others' stories and experiences. Where we access this content and how it is shared is vital. There are fabulous resources from employees in a range of sectors sharing their workforces' experiences outlining their position and the company which hold greater validity than those on some informal forums.

7. CURRENT VACANCIES

When it comes to the reality of seeking work, be it casual whilst at school or following formal studies, online tools are the go-to for accessing job opportunities. Gone are the days of searching through reams of paper on the weekend to find your pe fect job. The immediacy of seeking committed employees and the emphasis of global company branding has changed the face of the hiring manager. Roles and vacancies, voluntary, casual, contract and permanent, are promoted through a range of media, most commonly:

- company career pages
- social media (many casual roles are advertised through company pages)
- professional online community (LinkedIn)
- online job boards for both corporate and not-for-profi
- networks and contacts in the individual's social media network.

Overall, the positive impact of technology is in assisting teenagers to access information and support on flexible te ms to respond to their needs, knowledge gaps and areas of inquiry while building their identity. It must be recognised that there is a need for support to develop the skills of management and self-esteem to ensure there are techniques to respond to negative forces on a teenager's social expectations, mental health and demand for immediacy. Engaging in discussions and interactions around the areas above will add depth to a teenager's internal thinking to build systems to support improved self-confidence and reac through clarity of personal value. ∎

Kathryn Taylor is the Director of Turning Point Consulting, a Centre of Excellence: Leadership, Change & Wellbeing Services (ACPi Pty Ltd). In addition to sitting on the Wellbeing Australia Board as an expert in Education & Wellbeing for ACPi, Kathryn holds numerous qualifications including a BEd (Sec) Grad. Cert. Career Dev. Prac. CAHRI MACE HFTGN.