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What's in store for Generation Z?

Douglas Coupland discusses privacy, the new infinity, the barbarity of the nine-to-five job, and how to future-proof Generation Z

Posted by Hannah Vickers | April 19, 2017 | People

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Generation X, Douglas Coupland's wry and thought-provoking pre-internet novel written nearly 30 years ago, offers a snapshot of a time when the 'McJob' as he called it, had become a feature.

The rise of the gig economy, zero hours contracts and technology has produced shifts in the way we all work that 20 years ago

would have been difficult to foresee. With the advent of artificial intelligence, Coupland envisages changes in the workplace that will be far reaching. If it is in any way possible to prepare, how can educators and parents help Generation Z choose their careers and help them operate in the future workplace?

Coupland used to say he missed his pre-internet brain, but not anymore. Of course, children of today won't have experienced any time without the internet as the web is woven into their everyday lives. He says: "A 20th-century brain is not much use in the 21st century [where] anywhere is everywhere."

Technology has fundamentally changed our experience of ourselves and our private lives today online. Now, he says: "We want to be forgotten and we want to be remembered... It is not possible to be forgotten. Privacy as we once knew it is over."

In his presentation at a Konica Minolta launch event in Berlin, Coupland says of tech that we already have so much content online, but only a finite audience so "the cloud is the new infinity [and] the next massive new technology is already on the way, we just don't know what it is."

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When Coupland spoke, he hinted about possibilities for the workplace: "Your new office is actually you." The future is even more of a seismic shift than the changes we have already seen. The nature of work, according to Coupland, will fundamentally change, implying a shift even more profound than that which has happened over the past three decades, as "keeping people occupied is the new full-time work" and we will all need to prepare for the possibility that there will be less to do.

The barbarism of the nine-to-five job, only a feature of human life for the past five generations or so, will become a thing of the past. This could, to put it mildly, cause problems. Coupland observes: "Doing nothing is delightful; having nothing to do is horrific."

Coupland is from Canada, where he is asked to speak at students' convocations. Parents do ask him how to future-proof their child's careers. He answers: "Well do they know what they like doing? Most people never learn what they like doing. I honestly think that there should be a class in school called 'there has to be something you like doing...' sounds so elemental...anything you can do to prevent late life regret."

The winners will be those with an actual skill.

Coupland says he was very good at organic chemistry, but luckily found his true calling early enough to make a difference. He made the decision to switch from sciences in his late teens to arts, and talks of the importance of teachers as authority figures, and their potential to spark inspiration and change: "There are moments when you can treat children like adults and it accelerates the maturing process." He speaks with fondness of his former English teacher and says: "I'm a terrible teacher, no patience, which makes me respect teachers even more."

The characters in Generation X tell each other stories. What stories do Generation Z need to make sense of their world? Most children have parents who read stories to them, says Coupland.

"I didn't have that," he says, but the stories he wishes he had were science fiction, fitting for a world where technology is likely to feature in a big way.

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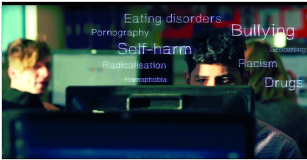
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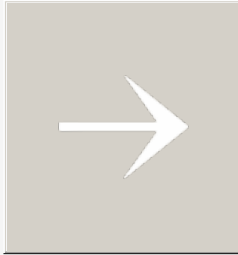
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