I like to think that 30 years isn’t a particularly long time. Maybe that’s because I was born exactly that many years ago, as were millions of my cohorts in the first class of Generation Y, otherwise known as “Millennials.” In its first 30 years, my generation has experienced firsthand the advent and evolution of the Internet.

Over the next 30 years, our generation will have an ever-increasing impact on the economy, the workplace, and the way we conduct business. We don’t know much about how the world will look in 2042, but we have plenty of ideas about how we, as a Generation, want to shape it.

**MILLENIALS IN 2042**

**WHAT THEY WILL BE**

Just six years ago, I launched my own Internet-based company just as Facebook took off. What my company and Facebook have in common is that they were both founded by Millennials and rely heavily on a workforce that, like us, is digitally native. We tapped our cohort to help us think differently and build a different kind of company. We aren’t alone in taking such actions as more of us are building a similar future.

**BY LESLIE BRADSHAW**
What are the actual idiosyncrasies that define Generation Y and will continue to do so over the next 30 years? To borrow a wonderfully perceptive phrase from the McLuhanite media scholar John Culkin, “We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us.” Like every other generation, the technologies we’ve grown up with have made us who we really are, and who we’ll always be. Television was the breeding ground for Baby Boomer culture, giving that generation its collective consciousness of both social awareness and consumerist individualism.

Gen X was raised on personal computers, video games, and cable TV, and subsequently developed a penchant for interaction and cultural heterogeneity.

We Millennials were the first to grow up with home Internet, smartphones, and constant, real-time digital connectivity, and these are the tools that have shaped us.

We’re a tech-savvy generation. In a 2010 Pew/Edelman study, when Millennials were asked what makes their generation unique, the number one response was “technology use.” In MTV’s Millennials survey, 85% of Millennials said their tech expertise made them faster than older coworkers; 76% said their bosses could learn a lot from them, and two-thirds thought they should be mentoring older co-workers on technology.

It’s nothing new for the youngest adult generation of an era to be substantially more adept with the latest technology than their parents. In 1970, Alvin Toffler penned *Future Shock*, describing the rapid pace of technological and societal change and the struggles of older generations to keep up with “information overload.” Millennials, the “digital natives” that we are, happen to be better at managing the always-on connectivity of modern life than our Boomer parents, who were better at navigating mass media than their parents, and so on.

What sets us apart, though, is that we’re the first generation to see multiple massive technological shifts within our lifetimes. Consider how long it took for certain game-changing 20th-century technologies to go from 10% adoption rates in American households to 60%: the telephone took roughly 45 years; the automobile did in 15; color TV in 10 years; and Internet and mobile phones were adopted by a majority within five years. Facebook, which didn’t even exist at the start of 2004, recently reached its billionth user worldwide.

Take a look at the digital tools at our disposal: Wikis, social media, Web 2.0, the Internet of Things (objects embedded with data, sensors, or microchips that allow them to be networked), mobile Internet. Then look at all the form factors we can use to consume them: desktops, laptops, smartphones, tablets, gaming consoles, TVs—even cars now. These things have all shaped Generation Y, not only in how we’ve managed to move quickly from one thing to the next, but also how we’ve learned to use all of them at once.
These tools haven’t rewired our brains, but they’ve changed the ways we communicate, access information, and manage our lives. Millennials, more than any other generation, behave like nodes in networks—interacting and filtering and sharing across myriad social, familial, community, and commercial pathways—rather than terminals that simply get information beamed at them and are occasionally expected to beam something back. We’ve seen it change the face of marketing: 48% of Millennials say word-of-mouth influences their product purchases; only 17% say TV ads do. Over the next 30 years, we’ll see it change the face of business.

Why do 76% of Millennials think their bosses could learn a lot from them? Part of it is the ethos of social technologies (e.g., social media, Web 2.0, and collaboration platforms): everybody has a voice, even if no one else is listening. Among the many lessons of Twitter, we’ve learned that Millennials don’t mind communicating without the expectation of being heard, but in such situations we communicate with the hope that if what we say resonates somewhere, it will be duly noted.

The other part is the efficiency of social technologies and Millennials’ understanding of how to get the most out of them. According to a July 2012 McKinsey report, social technologies, if fully implemented in American businesses, could improve productivity to the tune of $1.04 to $1.13 trillion in value, a savings of up to 12.3% of the total cost of employment and a 7.5% boost to U.S. GDP.

While our tools-of-choice provide this boon to existing businesses, Millennials will also be thinking ahead to the next wave of enterprise—our own. We’re already entrepreneurs in spirit, if not yet in practice. More than half of Millennials, including 64% of Latinos and 63% of African Americans, say they want to start a business. Among our ranks, 8% of us have already launched companies, outnumbering the 7% of their peers currently working for Fortune 500 companies.

“Owner” is the fifth-most-popular job title for Millennials. Over a third of recent college graduates have started a side business in addition to their primary job. These are all positive signs for the economy, considering startups generate almost 20% of gross job creation despite accounting for only 3% of total employment.

There’s a big difference between starting a business selling hand-knitted socks on Etsy and starting Etsy itself, and the latter type calls for mentorship from Boomers and Generation Xers who have been there and done that. As skilled as Millennials are at leveraging social and digital capital, our impact over the next 30 years depends on the intergenerational transfer of knowhow to manage real and organizational capital.

SO HOW DOES THIS SHAPE THE NEXT 30 YEARS?

Prediction 1: The speed of business will increase, as more things happen in real time, but workers will be able to slow down as they delegate more tasks to technologies.

We can’t predict with any kind of certainty what the next few waves of new technologies will look like or how they will be implemented in the workplace, but we will most likely be able to automate more processes, and automation means speed. We do know that younger workers generally understand technology
better and older workers generally understand organizational strategy better, so intergenerational collaboration is key. Today Millennials are on one end of that collaboration; in 30 years they’ll be on the opposite end.

Prediction 2: Technology will increasingly blur the boundaries between locations and the tasks we associate with them. Millennials will have to choose between blending work, home, school, and social life together at all times or establishing new unwritten social rules to keep them separate.

Prediction 3: Telecommuting and remote collaboration will become easier, but will only become more widespread if they provide substantial benefits for workers and employers alike. Increased and improved productivity, effective collaboration, and work/life balance are the benefits to watch.

As stated earlier, we know that Millennials value collaboration and networks, and see themselves as nodes rather than terminals, which means they place a high value on being engaged in their work. We also know that Millennials are skilled at collaborating remotely, as native users of instant messaging, multiplayer online gaming, Google Docs, Basecamp, Skype, and such—but they are also skilled at collaborating in person, having grown up with emphasis on play groups and team sports.

What makes this development so difficult to predict is that Millennials are communication-agnostic: they don’t inherently prefer either digital or face-to-face communication; they simply prefer whatever is fastest and most efficient.

This means that Millennials won’t necessarily trend toward staying closer to home via telecommuting or...
satellite micro-offices unless those are actually more efficient. We may see work move closer to home, but we’re just as likely to see home move closer to work (i.e. urbanization).

**SO HOW DO WE GET THERE?**

**Prescription 1: Plant the seeds for STEM growth.**

We know that Millennials are deft technology adopters and eager businesspeople, but in order to capitalize on the full potential of this generation to grow the U.S. economy and maintain global competitiveness, we need to steer the best and brightest toward the domains where they can innovate the most: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Roughly one-third of U.S. college students’ first degrees are in one of these fields, compared to more than half in Japan and China. Engineering is particularly dismal by comparison, comprising 4% of all bachelor’s degrees in the United States and 31% in China.

To close this gap, we need to increase the sheer numbers of students in STEM programs. One way to do so is to guide more women into the field. Overall, female graduates in the United States outnumber males 3 to 2, and they earn a majority of life science, chemistry, and math degrees as well. However, only 1 out of every 5 degrees in physics, engineering, and computer science is awarded to a female, a figure that has been more or less steady since the mid ‘80s, even though the ratio of boys to girls in the top .01% of SAT math scores has fallen from 13:1 to 3:1 over that time.

Both the White House and Congress have declared and funded STEM education as a national priority. It’s not enough to throw tax dollars at the problem or to
simply open doors. We need our nation’s current crop of innovators to be waiting with open arms on the other side of those doors.

One potentially successful model for STEM in higher education can be found at Stanford University. Nationwide, the most popular undergraduate major is business. The most popular major declared in the past year at Stanford, on the other hand, was computer science. Part of the program’s popularity is likely due to its location in Silicon Valley, surrounded by high-profile companies like Apple and Google. Department chair Jennifer Widom credits Stanford’s revamped curriculum, which highlights the synergy between computer science and other fields in the real world.

Younger Millennials clearly show a strong interest in the application of technology, but in order to bring them into the workplace as innovators in every field, we need to connect them with business leaders and their chief scientists, technologists, and engineers, who can mentor them on the importance of developing STEM skills. Silicon Valley may have unique advantages as a high-tech community, but I believe every major community in the United States has enterprises and leaders who, while they may not be building high tech themselves, are nonetheless using it for critical functions and can teach youngsters about their value.

**Prescription 2: Make the new internship the two-way internship.**

The aforementioned educational pairing doesn’t have to be a one-way street and it doesn’t have to be informal either. Students and young professionals, while learning the ins and outs of business and management from experienced professionals, can in turn offer lessons on newer technologies and the proper mindset for using them. It’s absolutely critical to understand the mental model for technology use: it won’t do any good to install a powerful piece of software that no one in your organization knows how to use effectively or create an account on a social media platform without actually engaging anyone through it. Unless the pace of technological change slows to the point where it no longer creates generation gaps, we will forever need these kinds of two-way internships and mentorships to bridge those gaps.

**WHILE OUR TOOLS-OF-CHOICE PROVIDE THIS BOON TO EXISTING BUSINESSES, MILLENNIALS WILL ALSO BE THINKING AHEAD TO THE NEXT WAVE OF ENTERPRISE—OUR OWN.**

We can do better—we have to do better—so that today’s Generation Y can spend the next 30 years developing in America the tools on which our next generation of “spoiled-brat technophiles” will be raised and change the rules again.

Leslie Bradshaw is a Fellow at the National Chamber Foundation as well as serves as the President, COO, and Co-founder of JESS3, a creative interactive agency specializing in data visualization, UX, social strategy and visual storytelling. Bradshaw was named one of the top five female executives in the technology industry by Fast Company and one of the top 30 entrepreneurs under 30 by Inc. Magazine. Read her full biography on page 59.