The online school of millennials

Young professionals are finding new ways to educate themselves

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When Lucky Gautam decided to take the Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (GATE) during his final year as a BTech student at Amity University in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, he was worried about the stiff competition he would face from students of India’s premier engineering institutions. On a friend’s suggestion, he signed up with the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), an online platform that offers free courses (but charges a minimal fee for an exam for certification), to brush up on topics like analogue circuits and the principles of signals and systems.

A government-funded initiative by seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), NPTEL helped Gautam earn an all-India rank of 58 in GATE and a job offer from Indian Oil Corporation.

“Sometimes books and a library just aren’t enough. With this platform, I could learn from the country’s top faculty at my own pace,” says the 25-year-old.

The formulaic framework of online courses or webinars can be a millennial’s best friend. “Millennials have an intrinsic trust and connect with technological
tools and advances, adapting to new technology rapidly,” says Andrew Thangaraj, professor, electrical engineering department, IIT, Madras, and NPTEL coordinator.

Cognitive computing, automation and globalization are impacting the nature of jobs and the skills required. One needs to be a lifelong learner to stay relevant. “We can’t afford to stop learning and still expect to grow in our careers. Online platforms are the most accessible for this purpose,” says Raghav Gupta, director for the India and Asia-Pacific region, Coursera. Other than providing high-quality content in high-demand fields, online courses are affordable and flexible, and therefore easier to access.

“If you take an offline course, it costs Rs 30,000-50,000 for enrolment and might not be the right one for you,” says Manisha Raghunath, a Bengaluru-based photographer, who says online courses usually are one-tenth the cost.

Having changed tracks twice in her four-year career, the 27-year-old says the low cost has encouraged her to learn skills for new professions. After graduating with a master’s degree in communication in 2014, Raghunath took an online course to become a social media marketer. She also took a couple of courses from Udemy, an online learning and teaching marketplace, to upskill in photography. “I’ll take online courses as learning of any kind interests me,” she says. She’s currently considering a course in psychology.

Alphonse Reddy used video tutorials to set up a business. Photo: Hemant Mishra/Mint

Gautam liked the fact that learning through video streaming meant he could pause a video, rewatch it, or even break for a nap while learning something. He has since taken courses on economics and world history on YouTube and completed a course in organizational behaviour from Instituto de Estudios Superiores de la Empresa (IESE) Business School in Spain (through Coursera). At present, he is learning from free physics video lectures put up by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

While paid online courses are one route, millennials are using several other channels to continue learning and grow. Whenever Bengaluru-based entrepreneur and former private equity manager Alphonse Reddy needs a solution, he heads to Google, where you can find “video tutorials on pretty much anything you can name,” says the 38-year-old. Reddy, who floated premium mattress start-up Sunday Mattress in 2015, had no knowledge of e-commerce or the mattress business. “I researched on Google regarding somnologists, mattress materials, trade fairs, etc,” he says.

Indore-based Jaydeep Hora turned to YouTube, as well as audio and video tutorials, to pursue his love for beatboxing. “I’m the most productive when
I’m alone in a room, with the internet,” says the 24-year-old, who spent hours watching videos of beatboxers from across the world, slowing the videos down so he could practise.

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From beatboxing, Hora has now moved into music production, having completed a formal course in Mumbai. “There are social media groups, forums and global music production start-ups that I follow on Twitter to keep my knowledge up to date,” he says.

But while social media networks help people to connect for knowledge and advice, the benefits of old-fashioned networking are not lost on this generation. Reddy, for instance, relies on the alumni network of his management school, Insead (European Institute of Business Administration), in Paris, for entrepreneurial advice.

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