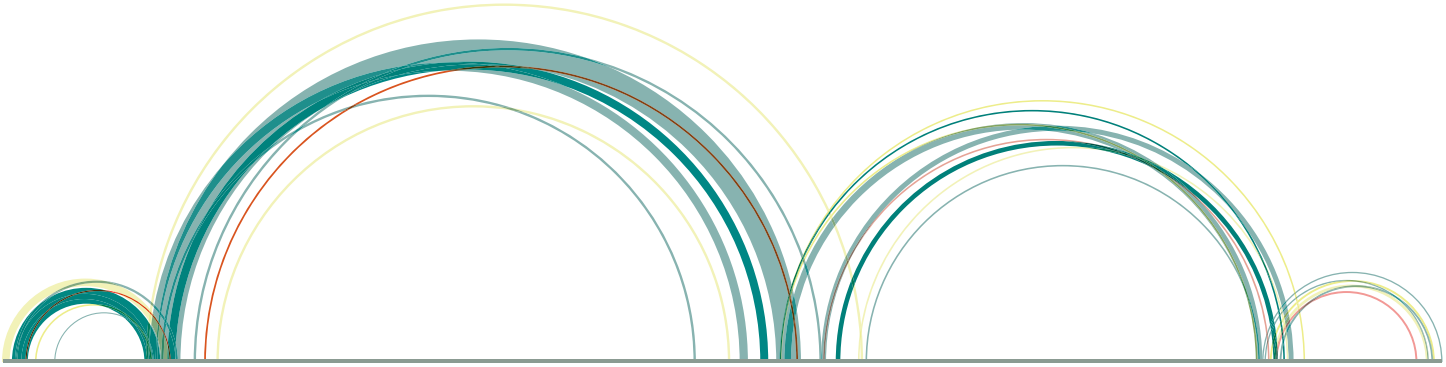
DESIGNING ACROSS GENERATIONS

HAWORTH®

GENERATIONS SUMMARY



TRADITIONALISTS	BABY BOOMERS	GENERATION X	GENERATION Y
Before 1946	1946 - 1964	1965 - 1979	1980 - 2000
10%	44%	34%	12%

GENERATION TYPE
Year of Birth
Share of Workforce in 2009

CAN GEN-Y MULTI-TASK BETTER THAN OTHER GENERATIONS?

With simple, well-known tasks, perhaps.
With complex tasks that require learning, probably not.

Today's workplaces are comprised of members of Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and Traditionalists. (Crocker, 2007; Cowell, 2009) Of course, people of multiple generations have always worked together. But unlike past generations—such as the farming families of the Dark Ages—the current workforce's older and younger members' life experiences and worldviews have little in common.

This has raised the question of whether Gen-Y workers need different workspaces than their older colleagues.

A "myth of multi-tasking" has grown up around Generation Y, suggesting that they process information differently than older workers, and don't need privacy because they can ignore distractions within more open office environments. This has been used as an excuse to put more people in less space to reduce overhead. Younger workers monitor more information sources than older workers; however, their proficiency with complex tasks while paying attention to several things at once has probably not improved.

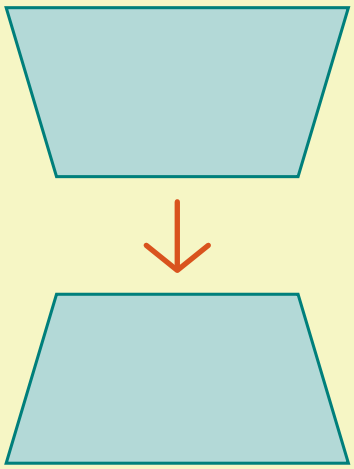
In fact, this continuous partial attention, to borrow Linda Stone's phrase, may have some negative side effects, including lower primary task performance, techno-brain burnout, and reduced sensitivity to face-to-face social cues (Small & Vorgan, 2008). In considering theories about controlled versus automatic processing and whether Gen-Y brains operate differently from their older counterparts, we've found that for lower-level, unconscious mental operations, younger people may have learned to divide their attention across several sources of information (see Payne et al., 1994; Schumacher et al., 2001). But for complex tasks, distractions interfere with performance just as they do for older employees (see Hans Korteling, 1994; Pashler, 1994).

What's more, because any workspace is likely to include members of the three most heavily represented generations, it must accommodate the needs of a wide range of ages.

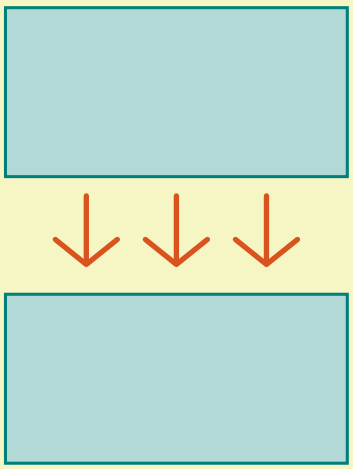
You can learn to ignore meaningless stimuli (such as background noise in a café), but you cannot ignore stimuli in the form of your native language. It is an automatic reaction and, by definition, distracting.

TWO VIEWS OF ATTENTION

To some extent, practical experience can 'move' some task components from requiring serial to allowing parallel processing



BOTTLENECK:
sequential; controlled; voluntary



MODULAR:
simultaneous;
automatic; involuntary

HOW DO THE GENERATIONS DIFFER?

Research shows that Baby Boomers feel their hard work should be rewarded (Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2008) with amenities such as enhanced workplaces and onsite fitness facilities. They are the last generation to remember when floor-to-ceiling walls and true doors were standard, and those offices are the benchmark against which they compare current workspaces.

Gen-Xers, on the other hand, treasure their off-duty lives (Conger, 2001). They work well in spaces designed to be efficient and welcome attributes that maintain their work-life balance.

Finally, Gen-Y workers tend to be ambitious, technologically sophisticated, and more apt to work in groups (Sweeny, 2005; Tapscott, 2009). And although Generation Y has a reputation for being the age group most familiar with technology, new and useful technologies quickly spread through the entire working population.

In the end, knowledge workers from all generations need approximately the same physical design conditions and a variety of spaces to support concentrative as well as collaborative work. Workplaces and workspaces must be designed so that they are appropriate for the work that is done within them, no matter what the generation of the workers involved.

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