

# Along with Generation Gaps: Misconceptions in Learning Abilities

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**Abstract:** There's a misconception that younger people are inherently tech-savvy; however, don't let this idea influence your choices as information science professionals.

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**Keywords:** *technology, software, learning, misconceptions, stereotypes*



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There are many misconceptions about learning gaps between generations, and one is that Millennials and Generation Z are going to be naturally tech-savvy, especially when compared to preceding generations. While it is likely that younger generations have spent more of their developing years working with computers and technology, it is a persistent stereotype that younger people will instinctively be better with technology.

Within the information sciences field, I have met many older generation librarians and information professionals who are nervous about learning new or “advanced” technical skills because of this perceived learning gap. These professionals believed that they could not learn website development or computer programming skills because it would be inherently beyond their ability. The truth is, every generation of professionals can learn these skills, and can be as proficient as the next person. There are more factors than just age when it comes to learning technological skills. I believe that by addressing and dispelling this stereotype, more professionals will feel comfortable learning new tech skills in library and information sciences.

Whenever any user begins using a new tool, there is going to be a learning curve. If a younger information professional is given a new piece of technology or software they will not become a master in the first minute. In your life, the frequency with which you interact with technology will likely affect your speed working with it, but this alone is not the deciding factor for technological comprehension. I’ve heard older generations of professionals tell younger generations, “You’re young, so you just know how to use technology.” The truth is that younger librarians, and younger people generally, are not born knowing how to use computers nor should it be taken for granted that they will necessarily learn such skills more quickly than older professionals. One of the factors that determines one’s proficiency is how many hours a day that person spends using a computer. Those professionals who use

computers at home for multiple hours a night will likely be faster with computers than those who rarely use them in their leisure time. In addition to time spent online or with technology, there are also factors outside of every user's control, such as the usability and functionality of the products themselves.

As a User Experience Researcher and Librarian, I am constantly thinking about what factors influence humans and their interactions with digital products. I have tested products that would not make sense to the majority of users, regardless of generation and general skill. There are differences in how people react to these frustrating interfaces. Would you blame yourself for not being competent when you're struggling with software? Would you ever think, "Maybe this software was poorly designed and is difficult for all the users who try it?" Sometimes it makes more sense to say, "This software is terrible and not intuitive, and the fact that I am struggling has nothing to do with my skill level."

Another factor that I believe is important to consider is confidence. I have had librarians tell me that they don't think they could ever learn how to code, use Adobe Illustrator, or set up a website. You can! I promise, if you are determined, you can learn how to do all these things and more. You could build a computer if you really wanted. You could look up instructions, tutorials, and a list of parts. There are thousands of videos and forums that explain the process. You could even follow step by step instructions, plugging in pieces and setting it up exactly as it's explained. It seems to me that a lot of stress with new technology involves psychological factors or thoughts, such as "I don't know how to do this. I'm not going to be able to do this. Other people are probably figuring this out right away and I'm the only one who can't do it." I strongly believe that your personal perceived ability to succeed, before you've even begun, will affect how you learn.

Younger generations can be absolutely terrible with software and technology. Older generations can be geniuses with software and technology. We are held back by the idea that all younger generations of professionals will be better and all older generations of professionals will be worse, especially in a profession where we are already battling archaic stereotypes. This column contains my personal thoughts and beliefs, and if you disagree, that is completely understandable. In posing the assertion that one's ability to use technology is not predetermined by age alone, my overarching goal is to challenge readers, encouraging them to consider the degree to which they may hold misconceptions about ability as related to age. My desire is that readers will consider the full spectrum of variables involved in developing new skills and proficiencies, regardless of whether the learner was born in 1960 or 1990.