Introduction

The broad adoption of digital media and social networking combined with the increasing amount of sensitive data stored online is making personal computer security more important than ever. But do different generations understand this problem and protect their systems while online? Does the younger, more tech-savvy generation manage computer security more effectively, or do more mature individuals who are often more guarded with their personal data protect themselves better?

The following report, sponsored by ZoneAlarm (Check Point Software Technologies’ consumer business), presents the results of a global survey of 1,245 PC users conducted in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia during March 2012. The goal of this study was to quantify generational differences towards personal computer security. In this report, “Gen Y” is defined as 18- to 25-year-olds, and “Baby Boomers” refers to 56- to 65-year olds.

Key Findings

• **Computer security increases in priority with age**
  - Only 31% of Gen Y participants rank security as the most important consideration when making decisions about their computers compared to 58% of Baby Boomers
  - Gen Y is more likely to prioritize entertainment and community above security
  - Approximately 36% of Baby Boomers are “very concerned” about security and privacy compared to only 20% of Gen Y
  - Baby Boomers are more concerned about email attacks; Gen Y is more concerned about attacks through social networks and P2P file-sharing networks

• **Gen Y is overconfident in its security knowledge**
  - 63% of Gen Y claims to be knowledgeable about security compared to 59% of Baby Boomers
  - Yet, 50% of Gen Y respondents have had security issues in the past two years compared to only 42% of Baby Boomers

• **Gen Y has less sophisticated security due to cost and technical barriers**
  - Gen Y is less likely to use paid antivirus, 3rd-party firewalls, or integrated security suites than Baby Boomers
  - 45% of Gen Y participants say security software is too expensive compared to 37% of Baby Boomers

• **Sensitive data is stored on computers yet participants, especially Gen Y, ignore security best practices**
  - 84% of people keep sensitive data, such as tax records, financial info, and passwords on their computers
  - Among participants of all generations, 71% do not follow security best practices of supplementing antivirus software with a firewall
  - 78% of Gen Y do not follow security best practices compared to 53% of Baby Boomers
Detailed Findings

Importance of computer security increases with age

Participants were asked to rate the relative importance of different computer-related activities when making decisions about their computers and the applications used, including:

- **Security**: Confidence that personal information is safe and systems are secure
- **Productivity**: Quick access to applications such as Microsoft Office, email, calendars, to-do lists
- **Entertainment**: The organization and use of music, video, and games
- **Information**: Access to news, product research, and online personal accounts
- **Community**: Interaction via social media, instant messaging, Internet calls, and video chat

Among all participants, almost half (48%) ranked security as the most important of these activities. However, there was a clear trend that younger participants were much less likely to rank security as their most important consideration than older participants.

Gen Y prioritizes entertainment and community

Gen Y was 27% less likely (31% vs. 58%) to rank security as its top priority compared to Baby Boomers. Instead, Gen Y participants were much more likely to put a higher priority on entertainment and community. Gen Y participants were 18% more likely (22% vs. 4%) to indicate entertainment was their top priority and 14% more likely (18% vs. 4%) to indicate community was most important compared to Baby Boomers.
Baby Boomers more concerned about security and privacy

While 28% of all survey participants reported being “very concerned” about security and privacy when using their computers, Baby Boomers were much more likely, 36%, to describe themselves this way than younger generations. In comparison, only 20% of Gen Y participants indicated that they were “very concerned” about security.

Generational differences in concerns about security attacks

Both Gen Y and Baby Boomers were most concerned about the potential security threat from infected websites. However, there were distinct differences in the types of security attacks that caused concern among the different age groups. Baby Boomers were much more concerned about attacks coming through email, (35% vs. 18%) whereas Gen Y indicated greater concern (24% vs. 9%) about attacks originating from social networks or P2P file-sharing networks.
Gen Y is overconfident about security knowledge

Gen Y participants described themselves as slightly more knowledgeable about security with 63% indicating that they were knowledgeable about security threats compared to 59% of Baby Boomers.

However, Gen Y participants reported that they actually experienced more security problems than Baby Boomers. Half (50%) of all Gen Y participants indicated that they have had computer security issues in the past two years compared to only 42% of Baby Boomers.

In particular, Gen Y reported more virus infections (42%) compared to Baby Boomers (35%).
Gen Y less likely to use additional security software

Gen Y is less likely to use additional security software beyond the basics that come with the Windows operating system. These participants reported using fewer paid antivirus, 3rd-party firewalls, and integrated security suites that include both a firewall and antivirus.

Cost and technical issues create barrier to greater use of security software

Gen Y has greater cost sensitivity than Baby Boomers, which is a barrier to using more paid security software. More Gen Y respondents, 45%, claimed that one of the reasons they do not use more security software is because it is too expensive. This compares to only 37% of Baby Boomers citing the same issue.
Agreement among generations that security software should be free
While there were many differences between generations in this study, the opinion that security software should be free was commonly shared across all ages. Approximately half of all participants, 48%, indicated that “free” is the price they expect to pay for security software.

All generations keep sensitive data on their computers
The difference in attitudes towards security was unrelated to the amount of personal information stored on their computers. Across all age groups, most participants (84%) kept sensitive personal data such as tax records, financial information, and passwords on their computers.
Participants, especially Gen Y, do not follow security best practices

A generally accepted best practice among all personal computing security experts is that each computer should have a two-way firewall in addition to antivirus software. Given these guidelines, we evaluated how many participants were following these best practices. In general, 71% of all survey participants do not follow these security best practices. Baby Boomers did a much better job than any other generation with almost half following these best practices. Gen Y was the least protected with 78% not following these best practices.

Survey Methodology

In March 2012, independent groups of PC users were invited to participate in a Web survey on the topic of personal computer security sponsored by ZoneAlarm. A total of 1,245 respondents across the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia completed the survey, all of whom had responsibility for purchasing and maintaining their personal desktop or laptop computer.
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