

Do Metaprograms Evolve With Age?

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A common conception in the business world is that older people are less useful for the organization. Often this is explained by presupposing that older people become slower to react, are more stubborn and tend to live more into the past. But how can we know for sure? In order to check whether there was some truth in these generalizations, we analyzed whether age has a clear effect on metaprogram patterns. But even if age differences show up for certain metaprogram patterns, the question still remains whether these differences are due to a lifecycle explanation (a change because of growing older) or a generational explanation.

To get our preliminary data, the parameters of the basic profile (BP1-BP8) were cross-referenced with age¹. There is indeed a slight trend, and using linear regression we could create a curve. However, the age factor only explains 2 to 4 percent of the variance of the dependent metaprogram. We did the same analysis for the parameter “sorting for past,” for which high scores would indicate someone who is highly focused on past events (TP1). That generated the formula: $TP1 = 0.135 \text{ Year of Birth}$ with an adjusted R square (R^2) of 0.018². These first findings did not confirm the generalizations, so we did not do the analysis for the remaining metaprograms.

In other words, we cannot prove that “getting older” is a determining factor for these metaprograms³. Even if metaprograms change slightly with age, the degree that they do does not justify creating separate standard groups. Age just doesn’t seem to be an especially important factor. As far as attitudes and motivations are concerned, the government probably is right when it forbids recruiters to discriminate based on age.

Another possibility is that metaprogram preferences change with the generations. For instance, it well known that just after World War II it was preferred to be the person the organization needed, while today a more entrepreneurial attitude is expected of people. Since that generation is now mostly retired, this cannot be shown with our data. Also, many managers complain that “today’s youth” no longer understands what it means to work in an organization. To test these supposed differences in generations, we divided the case database into 4 categories that were roughly equal in sample size ($526 < n < 544$). The first group includes people born between 1940 and 1955, a second group includes people born from 1956 to 1965, the third group includes those born from 1966 to 1972, and the final group consisted of those born after 1973.

¹ We did this using the population born between 1940 and 1984 in the jobEQ database on May 28, 2002 (the sample is too small for the persons born before 1940). Given that the age of some persons in the database is unknown, we withheld 2,138 cases for this particular study.

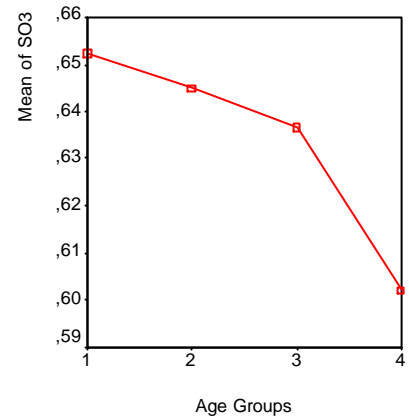
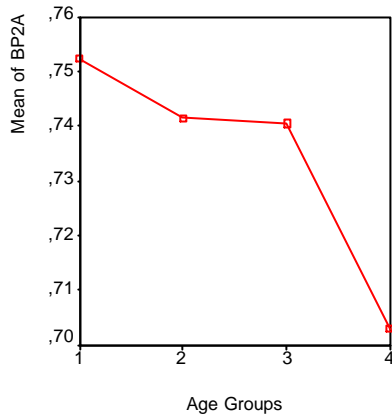
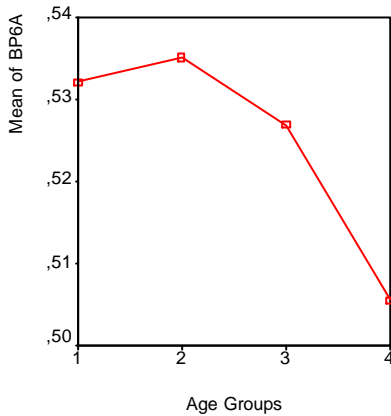
² A second linear regression limited to the Belgian subjects from the sample was computed in order to factor out the eventual influence of culture. The quality of this second linear regression was even less impressive ($R^2=0.004$; $n=630$)

³ A word of caution: given that iWAM needs to be filled out on a PC, over an internet connection, it may be that this causes a bias in the population tested. The reasoning goes as follows: Whereas one expects younger people to be more educated when it comes to computer use, this may not be less the case for older persons. Thus, maybe the fact that an older person is able to fill out iWAM helped to equalize age differences in metaprograms.

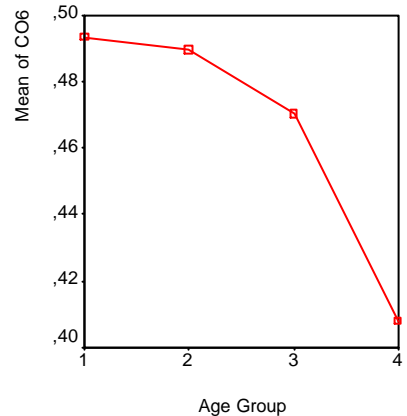


For several parameters, we find that the youngest generation indeed shows some cultural findings which correspond with its reputation.⁴

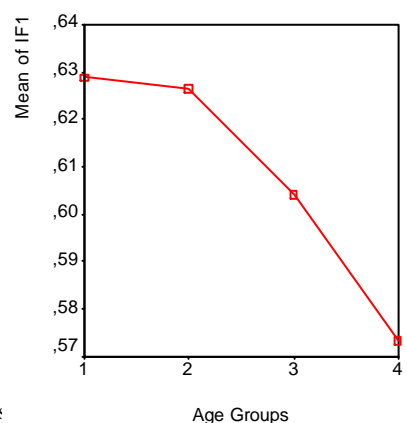
For instance, the “Internet generation” is less focused on non-verbal communication (BP6) – for them, chat rooms and e-mail are part of the lifestyle, and the lack of non-verbal elements seems to bother them less than other age groups. Some say that young people don’t know what they want. Well, as shown in the chart for Action Direction (BP2), they are certainly less goal-oriented than other age groups.



A third hypothesis is that ads promoting “new things” may have less effect on them. Compared to other age groups, they are significantly less motivated by change (So3). This finding seems counter-intuitive, given many people think that young persons have more preference for new things. However, given that the iWAM questionnaire is set in a work context, it may also be that this is indeed a factor that changes with age and that the desire for change increases because people get fed up with the way things work. Also, what may be “new” to us may be part of the way of life to younger people. People older than 35 remember such a thing as the “Internet revolution.” Younger people may not consider those things as new at all.



Another factor that shows a significant change is the automatic convincer strategy (Co6). Apparently the younger generation is more skeptical, they will take longer to convince. This finding is confirmed by the graphs for the other convincer in interpretation patterns (Co5, Co7 and Co8, not depicted here) which indicate that the younger population will want more examples, more consistency and more time to get fully convinced (and to remain convinced).

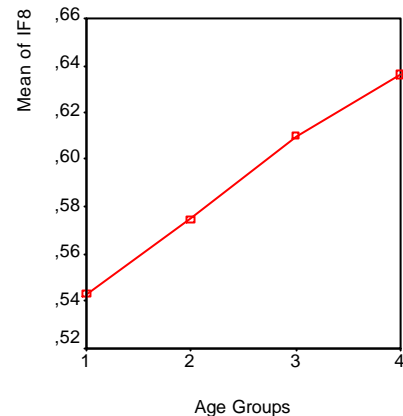


⁴ Based on the analysis of differences between countries, next to the criterion of statistical significance, a difference in mean score of at least 4 to 5 percent is needed before it will be really “remarked” by persons from other cultural groups.



The next factor for which the youngest age group differs significantly from the 3 other groups is “filtering for people” (IF1). Working with other people is less important to young employees. With this pattern, we again have a significant correlation with age, but the linear regression doesn’t result in a model which can explain causality.

A final cultural pattern suggests that the world becomes more action-oriented with younger people. The graphic implies that there might be a relation between filtering for action (IF8) and age. Unfortunately, when calculating the linear regression, looking for the relationship between age and filtering for action, again the model has a very poor fit ($R^2=0,031$). Thus the pattern that is at play is probably more of cultural nature than age dependent.



Conclusion

As a conclusion we can say that, from several perspectives, the generation Y has a different way to look at life. At this moment there is no evidence that they will become like the rest of the working population. It may take a major event to change them deeply, such as a mid-life crisis or some social trauma. Even if wisdom rises with age, generation Y may end up with completely different wisdom.

This following table is added because the analysis of iWAM data shows that large cultural differences exist⁵. The discussion above presumes that the influence of the variance in the origin of the persons is limited and does not explain the differences between the four age groups. The table provides details on the country distribution for the database sample for which the previous discussion was held.

Country \ Age	1		2		3		4		total*	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Belgium	139	26.4%	168	31.8%	180	33.3%	143	26.3%	684	28.3%
U.S.	152	28.8%	91	17.2%	85	15.7%	115	21.2%	482	20.0%
U.K.	79	15.0%	83	15.7%	73	13.5%	57	10.5%	329	13.6%
France	28	5.3%	41	7.8%	24	4.4%	69	12.7%	238	9.9%
Canada	36	6.8%	16	3.0%	18	3.3%	29	5.3%	107	4.4%
other	54	10.2%	80	15.2%	92	17.0%	86	15.8%	365	15.1%
unknown	39	7.4%	49	9.3%	68	12.6%	44	8.1%	211	8.7%
total	527	100.0%	528	100.0%	540	100.0%	543	100.0%	2416	100.0%

* = for 278 cases either the age is missing or the person was born before 1941 or after 1984

When looking at the data subsets for specific countries, similar age differences as those discussed above show up, but extra differences may appear as well: for instance: 30 years ago the “interest for people” (IF1) in Belgium was much lower than in the U.S., something that changed in the 70s. So the curves will have different forms from one country to another. But what is remarkable (and consistent) is that most countries show the largest difference between the youngest group (group 4) and the 3 other groups.

⁵ For the same reason data discussing the distribution of the gender for the different age groups was omitted, as gender differences are much smaller than cultural differences.

