

Does Learning Agility Decline with Age?

Is it true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks? Or that acting your age means admitting you don't have the energy level at 65 years old that you did at 25?

And what do these idioms have to do with learning agility?

Learning agility is finding yourself in a situation in which you have never been before, not knowing what to do and figuring it out.

With regard to "old dogs" - does it mean the older you get, the less likely you are to be in a brand-new situation and have to figure out what to do?

Speaking for myself - and I am over 65 years old - I have been in more than 100 new situations in the last five years in which I had to apply one or more of the nine dimensions of learning agility, as defined in the Burke Learning Agility Inventory®. My wife and I moved to **a new city (Wilmington), where we didn't know anyone and, initially, we were not very familiar with the city** (both are instances requiring the dimension of Flexibility). I established my business in Wilmington and greater North Carolina (Performance Risk Taking). We found and bought a house (Information Gathering).

We joined clubs and engaged in various activities through them (Interpersonal Risk Taking and Collaborating). We had to process different input and advice we received from people as we adjusted to a new city and determined what made the most sense for us (Reflecting). Sometimes, we asked other people for their opinion (Feedback Seeking).

The other statement that I mentioned in the opening of this article had to do with energy. If you think of energy, motivation or drive, the overall capacity tends to decline somewhat over time, but the fire, desire and passion are all still **there**. **It's just that my stamina or ability to draw on that motivation is not as limitless as it once seemed; it needs to be recharged more often.**

Does that mean that learning agility declines with age? Absolutely not.

Our information on the topic of learning agility and age to date is anecdotal rather than data-driven. We would need a longitudinal study in which we measured learning agility at T1 (25 years of age) and again at T2 (65 years of age) to see if those scores have changed.

If someone had been working on certain dimensions, you would expect those scores to increase over time. If the person did nothing over the 40 years, you would expect they would stay about the same but not necessarily decline (information gathering seems to be the **exception...I am curious to see the correlation, but on average, it seems to me that those later in their career, having gained institutional knowledge, business acumen and expertise in their own industry are going out to seek formal educational opportunities to learn a bit**

less than those just starting out). We need to be clear that these are simply hypotheses though and not grounded in theory or research.

Other aspects of our being, like cognitive ability and personality, are fixed earlier in life and tend to be relatively stable over a lifetime. Most psychologists and educators believe that cognitive ability, or Intelligence Quotient (IQ), tends to be fixed by late adolescence or early **adulthood and remains pretty stable for the rest of a person's life.**

Similarly, personality - as measured by an accepted test, like the Jackson or Hogan Personality Test - sees personality as pretty much determined within a similar period. It then **tends to be stable over the rest of a person's life.**

To summarize, intelligence and personality **are established relatively early in life and don't change much over the rest of a person's life. Learning agility, which is the combination of skill and motivation, is also something a person begins to learn early in life, and we believe that it doesn't decline over time... but it can also be increased.**

Everyone needs a certain amount of learning *ability* (smarts) but after that minimum or threshold, greater intelligence does not increase learning *agility*. The other thing that affects learning agility is motivation. How important is it for you to put yourself in new **situations in which you don't know what to do and figure it out?**

For some people that drive or passion may never decrease with time. For others, there may **be a decrease in the importance of learning agility. That person's capability in a particular dimension will likely not decrease, but their motivation to seek to improve could.**

Learning agility is like a muscle - if you choose not to use it, it is still there, but it will be **more difficult to access. Maintaining or increasing one's level of learning agility is a choice** and not an inevitable function of chronological age.

About the Author

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