Individual and Organisational Values Through the Lens of Ikigai

A Cross-National Analysis and Adaptation for Young Adults

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PART 1: KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

1 Introduction

Ikigai roughly translates as "a reason for being". The idea was studied in depth by the Japanese psychiatrist Mieko Kamiya in *Ikigai ni tsuite*[1], and later popularised in the West, most famously as a Venn diagram of four overlapping circles. The leadership tool used in this project, based on Brueck's *IKIGAI for Leaders and Organisations*[2], applies the same four dimensions to people and organisations:

- **What We Love to Do:** the values that give work personal meaning, such as Passion, Independence and Enjoying Work Life.
- **What We Are Good At:** capability and expertise, such as Intelligence, Strategic Thinking and Competence.
- **What the World Needs:** ethical and social values, such as Benevolence, Honesty and Protection of the Environment.
- **What We Need for the Market:** the traits that drive commercial success, such as Authority, Daring Attitude and Performance Orientation.

It's an appealing idea, but what's rarely investigated is whether the thing those circles claim to measure actually behaves the way people assume it does.

As part of my Laidlaw research project, I worked with a dataset of 2,365 working adults who rated themselves – and, separately, their employer – on 40 values derived from the four Ikigai dimensions, such as Creativity, Authority, Peacefulness, Honesty and Daring Attitude. Each value was rated twice on a six-point scale: how far the respondent applies it in their own behaviour at work, and how far it is "collectively lived" in their company.

The main finding surprised me. Of the seven background factors I tested – age, education, work experience, leadership, company size, industry and country of work – country was the strongest predictor by a significant margin. Career facts mattered, but culture and context mattered more.

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[1]Kamiya, M. (1966). *Ikigai ni tsuite* [On the meaning of life]. Misuzu Shobo.

[2]Brueck, F. (2020). *IKIGAI for leaders and organisations: The way to individual and collective purpose and meaning*. Lulu Press.

2 Method

Ordinal demographics (age, education, work experience, leadership, company size) were tested against all 40 traits using Spearman's rank correlation. Industry and country were tested with one-way ANOVA, using eta-squared as the effect size and restricting country comparisons to samples of 15 or more. Because this meant 40 simultaneous tests per demographic, a Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) correction was applied throughout. Because ratings take only seven possible values, trait-level country and industry differences were confirmed with Kruskal–Wallis tests (effect size ε^2). A result is treated as significant only where its FDR-adjusted p-value (q) is below 0.05. Patterns that were not formally tested, such as where a trend dips or levels off, are described as tendencies rather than definite results. Most significant effects are small ($|\rho|$ below 0.2), so they describe tendencies across a large sample rather than sharp differences between individuals.

3 Sample

The dataset holds 2,365 responses, but around 680 contain no demographic or rating data. Of the rest, about 1,680 completed the self-ratings and 1,520 the organisational ratings; as not everyone answered every question, sample sizes vary between analyses. 53% of respondents were women.

Country. Respondents worked in over 80 countries, most with very few respondents, so country comparisons used only countries with at least 15–20 respondents (16–21 countries, depending on the test). The United Kingdom was by far the largest group (n = 504), followed by Hong Kong (113), Switzerland (96) and Bulgaria (95).

Industry and education. Financial Services made up 46% of respondents, followed by the service industry (10%) and commerce and retail (8%). The sample was highly educated: 65% held a Master's degree and 29% a Bachelor's, while high-school and diploma groups were small.

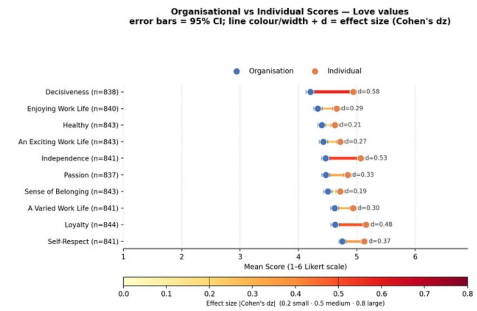
Leadership. Of 1,687 respondents, 512 led no one; the rest led teams from up to 10 people (671) to over 100 (173).

Age, experience and company size. Two-thirds were aged 30–50, with 16% under 30 and 17% over 50. Work experience ranged from under 5 to over 25 years. 62% worked in companies with over 2,000 employees and 7% in companies of 1–10.

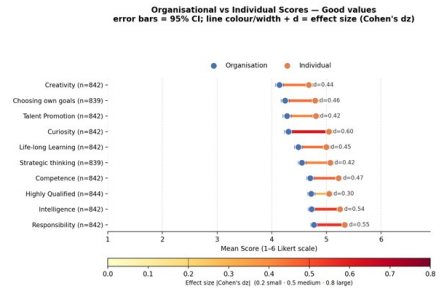
The sample leans towards highly educated, UK-based professionals in finance, so the findings may not generalise to all working adults.

4 Individual vs. Organisational Scores

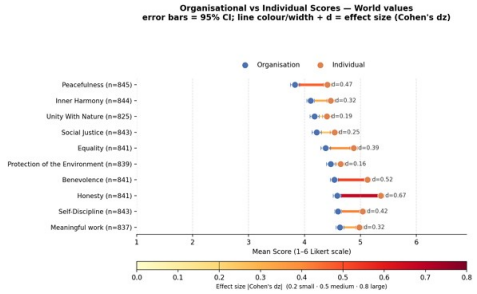
Across all four dimensions (Love, Good At, World Needs and Market) people rate themselves higher than their organisation on 37 of the 39 comparable traits, with the largest gaps for Honesty and Curiosity. The exceptions are Preserving Public Image and Materialism, which people rate higher for their organisation. (One item cannot be compared: the organisational survey asks about Customer Orientation, the personal survey about Professional Orientation.)



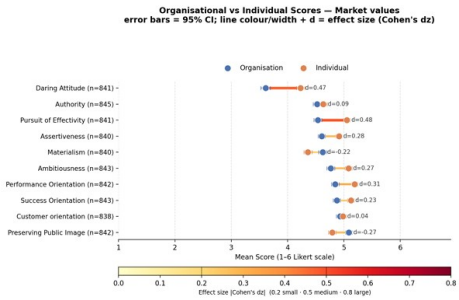
(a) Love



(b) Good At



(c) World Needs



(d) Market

Figure 1. *Individual vs. Organisational scores for each Ikigai dimension: (a) Love, (b) Good At, (c) World Needs, (d) Market. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.*

This is close to universal and fits a well-established finding that "people tend to hold overly favourable views of their abilities"[3]. The Ikigai tool's real value, then, isn't just identifying what people and organisations are good at – it's showing where self-perception and organisational reality differ.

5 Two Questions, One Survey

Because every value was asked twice, every test could be run on both self-ratings and employer ratings. All counts below are of traits that remain significant after FDR correction.

Whether someone leads a team predicts 27 of the 40 personal values: team leaders rate themselves as more assertive, authoritative and decisive. For organisational values, it predicts only 3. Age predicts 25 personal values but only 1 organisational one, and education predicts 2 personal values and no organisational ones. By contrast, industry and company size – facts about the employer rather than the person – predict organisational scores at least as strongly as personal ones.

[3]Kruger, J., & Dunning, D. (1999). Unskilled and unaware of it: How difficulties in recognizing one's own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77(6), 1121–1134.

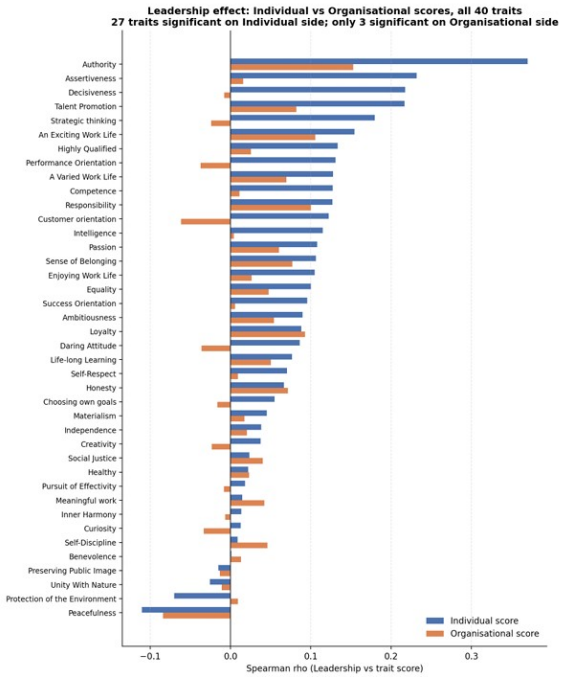


Figure 2. *Leadership scope vs. all 40 traits (Spearman's ρ). 27 traits are significant for Individual scores, only 3 for Organisational scores.*

6 Where You Work Beats Who You Are

Country of work predicted 35 of the 40 individual values and 25 of the 40 organisational ones – more than any other factor, on both measures. That makes sense given everything "country" includes, from economic development and labour law to religion and cultural norms. On the individual side, the differences are clearest for Peacefulness, Creativity and Authority – how safe and empowered someone feels depends more on national context than on career stage or rank.

The single largest country effect was on perceived organisational Daring Attitude ($\varepsilon^2 = 0.07$, $q < 0.001$). Employees in Nigeria rate their organisations as the most risk-tolerant, while those in Hong Kong, Switzerland, Singapore, the UAE and the UK rate theirs as the most risk-averse. Switzerland's caution doesn't simply reflect Swiss banking: only 11.5% of Swiss respondents worked in financial services, well below the sample average.

There's an important caveat, though. People in some countries simply tend to answer surveys more positively, whatever the question, and on several traits that habit accounts for most of the difference between countries. There is a real cultural effect underneath, but you have to correct for this response bias before reading too much into where any one country ranks.

6.1 Three More Signals in the Country Data

Materialism is the only trait that doesn't follow this response-style pattern: across countries, it has no link with how positively a country answers overall ($r = -0.02$). South Africa and Nigeria stand out, ranking near the top for general positivity but near the bottom for Materialism. Removing them points towards a positive link, but it isn't significant ($r = 0.33$, $p = 0.17$), so this is a tendency rather than a firm result. This fits with cultural traditions where openly valuing personal wealth goes against social norms.

Protection of the Environment also varies by country. The country effect is significant ($\varepsilon^2 = 0.04$, $q = 0.01$), and descriptively Greece and Spain have the highest averages and Singapore and Germany the

lowest. These aren't the countries behind the industry pattern in section 9, so this looks like a genuine cultural difference.

Bulgaria and Nigeria also appear to score higher on Peacefulness than their general positivity would predict. This is an observation from the data rather than a tested result, but one possible explanation, though I can't confirm it from this data, is Inglehart's scarcity hypothesis[4]: people place more value on things that are in short supply, and both countries have been through real periods of social and economic instability.

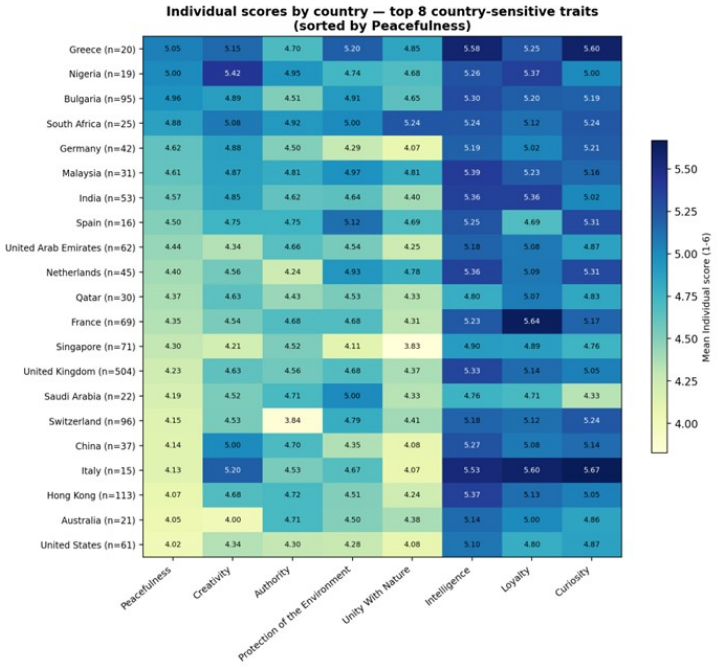


Figure 3. *Individual (self-rated) scores by country for the eight most country-sensitive traits. Scores are not adjusted for response style.*

[4]Inglehart, R. (1981). Post-materialism in an environment of insecurity. *American Political Science Review*, 75(4), 880–900.

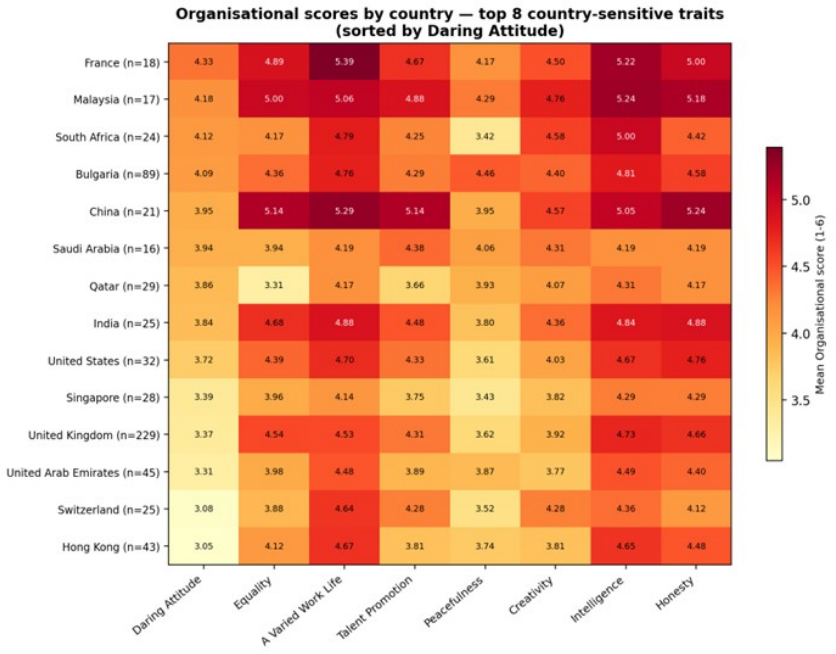


Figure 4. *Organisational (employer-rated) scores by country for the eight most country-sensitive traits.*

7 The First Promotion Changes You More Than the Tenth

Leadership's strongest effect on how people see themselves was on Authority ($\rho = 0.37$, $q < 0.05$), but the shape of the relationship was more interesting than its size. Looking at the group averages, the biggest jump wasn't between managing 30 people and managing 100. It was between managing nobody and managing anyone at all. Authority, Assertiveness, Decisiveness, Talent Promotion and Strategic Thinking all rose sharply as soon as someone took on a leadership role, then kept rising more gradually after that. This suggests that most of the change in how people see themselves happens with the first step into leadership. The overall trends are significant, but the shape itself was not formally tested, so it should be read as a strong tendency rather than a definite result.

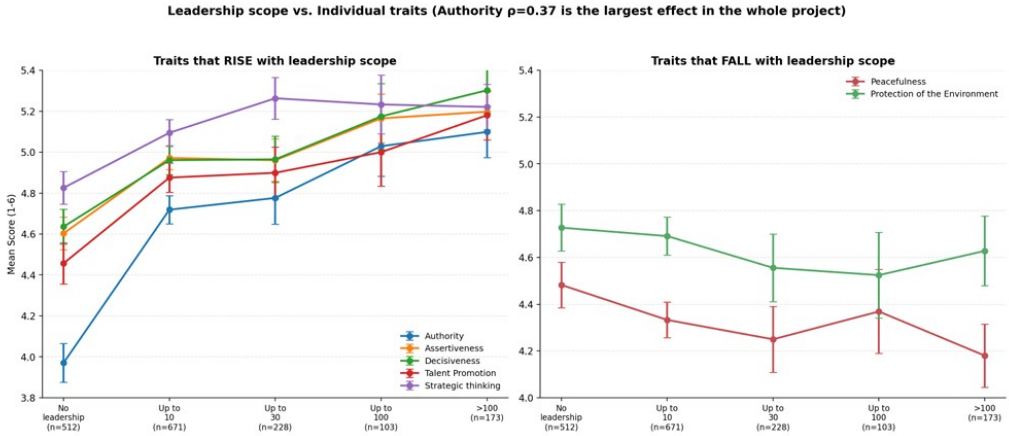


Figure 5. *Leadership scope vs. the Individual traits it predicts most strongly, showing the jump between no leadership and any leadership.*

Age and years of work experience affected a very similar set of traits. The two are closely linked, so I couldn't separate their effects. Two patterns still stood out. Peacefulness fell significantly with age ($\rho = -0.09$), and descriptively it dropped in the early years of people's careers, levelled off in the middle and

rose slightly at the most senior stage. This fits with early-career stress easing as people gain more control. Materialism, on the other hand, fell steadily with age (ρ = −0.06). A likely explanation is that financial security matters most while you're still building it, and less once you have it.

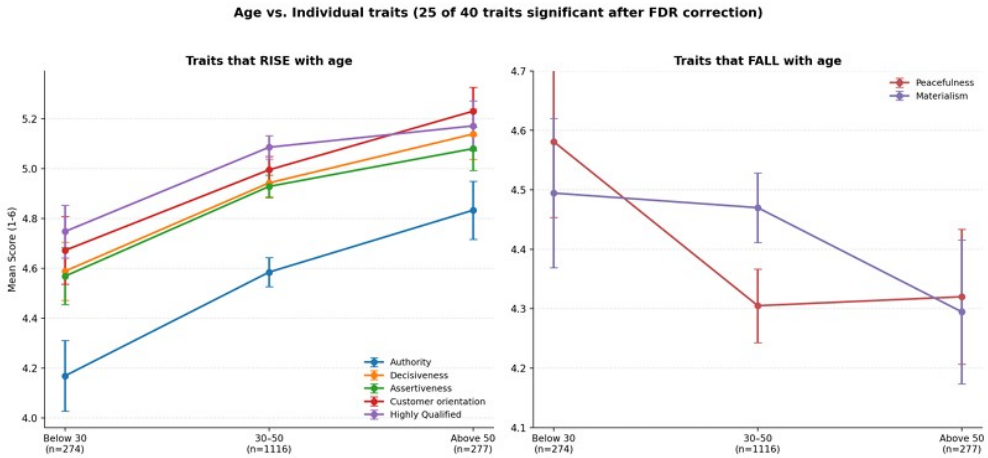


Figure 6. *Age vs. Individual traits, including Peacefulness and Materialism.*

8 What Doesn't Change When You Become a Leader, or Get Older

These patterns mostly disappear when people rate their organisation instead of themselves. Peacefulness is the clearest example. It's one of the strongest downward trends on the personal side (ρ = −0.11), but there's no significant effect at all when people rate their employer. Being a leader seems to make people feel less at peace themselves, without changing how peaceful they think their workplace is.

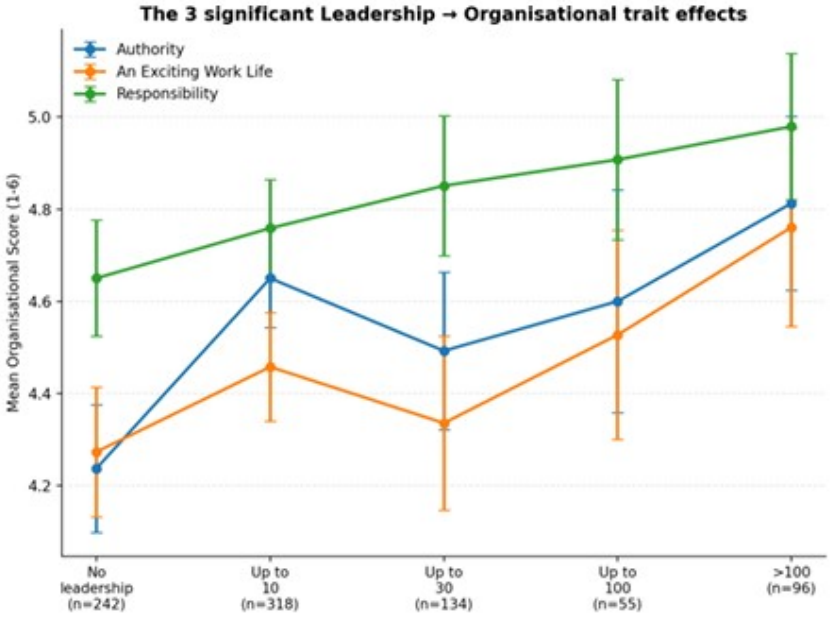


Figure 7. *Leadership scope vs. the three significant Organisational traits.*

The only organisational effect of age that survives is also on Peacefulness, and here it works the other way round: it's stronger for the organisation (ρ = −0.13, q = 0.01) than for the person (ρ = −0.09). Older respondents rate their organisation as less peaceful, and by more than the change in their own

peacefulness would explain. Years of workplace politics may gradually wear down how people see their organisation, though a single snapshot of data can't show cause and effect.

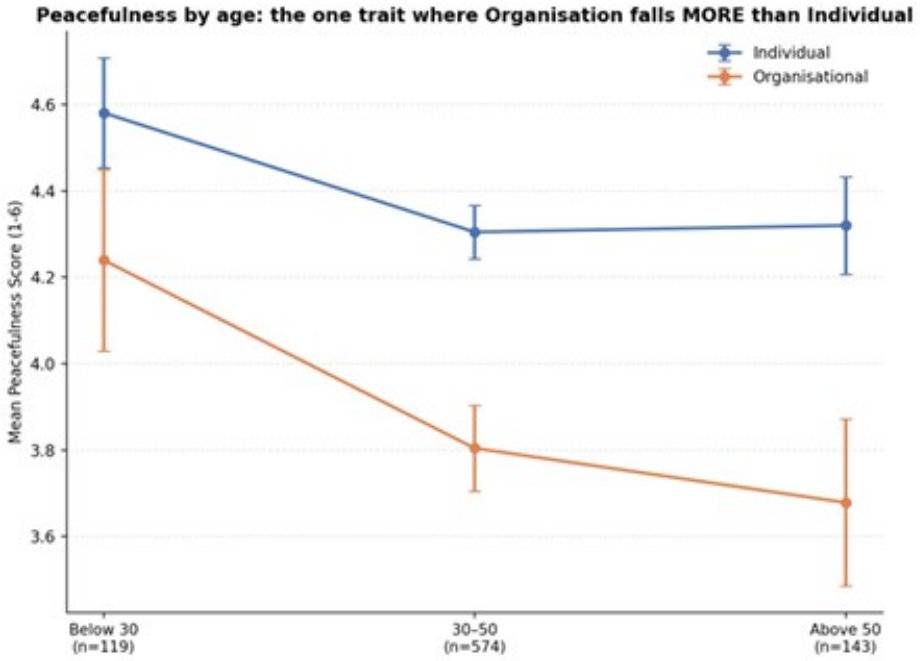


Figure 8. *Peacefulness by age: Individual vs. Organisational scores.*

Work experience adds a third pattern. On the organisational side, Peacefulness, Daring Attitude, Creativity and Benevolence all fall as experience increases, while none of these changes significantly when people rate themselves. More experienced people seem to see their organisation's limits more clearly.

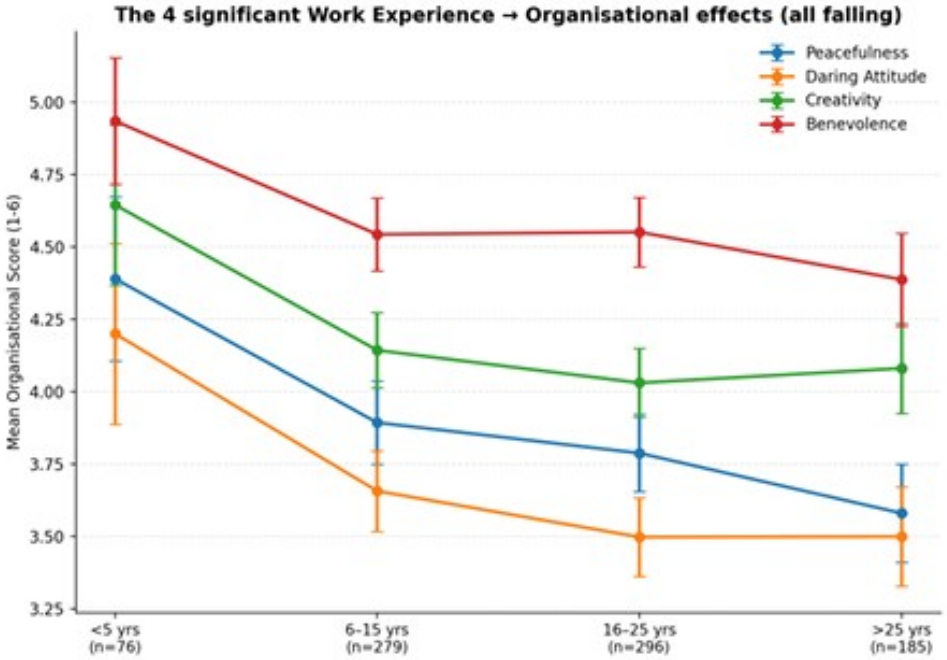


Figure 9. *Work experience vs. the four significant Organisational traits.*

9 The Industries You'd Least Expect to Care About the Planet

One of the most surprising results came from the industry data. Oil and gas, chemicals and utilities – the sectors most often linked to environmental damage – had the highest average personal scores of any industry on Protection of the Environment and Unity With Nature, and Media the lowest. The overall industry effect is significant for both traits ($\eta^2 = 0.04$ for each, $q < 0.05$), although individual industry rankings were not tested pairwise.

People who work directly with land and natural resources may feel a practical connection to nature that differs from environmentalism as a political view. Or it could be a selection effect: people who already feel close to nature may choose these careers. The data shows the pattern clearly but can't tell us which explanation is right.

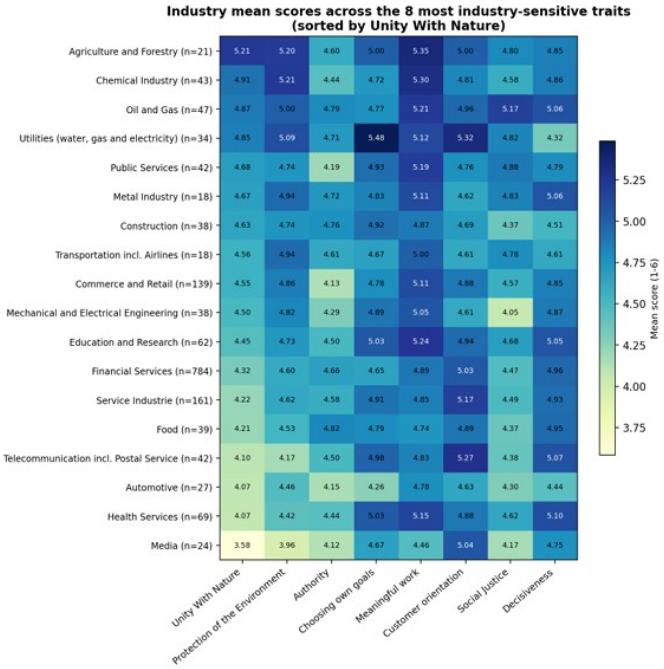


Figure 10. *Individual scores by industry for the most industry-sensitive traits.*

9.1 Education

Education showed its own reversal. Confidence in one's qualifications rose steadily from high school to PhD level ($\rho = 0.11$). Self-rated Authority went the other way ($\rho = -0.08$): PhD holders reported the lowest sense of authority of any group, even though they were the most likely to hold leadership roles. These findings don't conflict, because having authority and valuing it are different things. Highly educated people may separate expertise from hierarchical power more clearly, and value the latter less even though they hold more of it. This comparison should be treated with caution, though: 65% of respondents have a Master's degree, so the high-school and diploma groups are small.

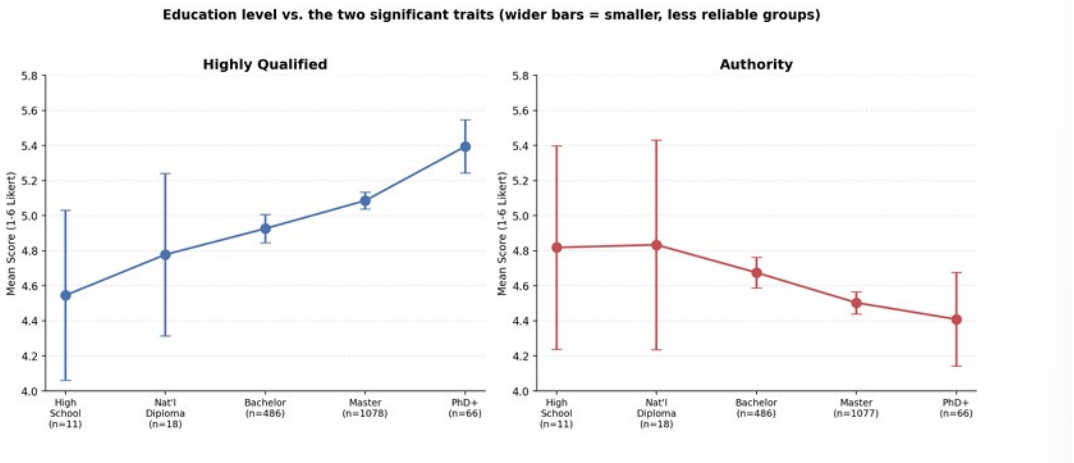


Figure 11. *Highly Qualified and Authority by education level.*

10 Growing Pains at the 100–500 Employee Mark

Company size didn't have a straight-line effect. Creativity, Meaningful Work, Choosing Own Goals, Sense of Belonging and Daring Attitude all fell significantly as companies grew (ρ between −0.06 and −0.10). Descriptively, most reached their lowest point at 100–500 employees and then recovered slightly at 500–2,000, although this dip was not formally tested. Companies of this size may get the worst of both worlds: they've lost a small team's flexibility without yet gaining a large organisation's resources. Peacefulness showed the strongest decline (ρ = −0.15), reaching its lowest point at companies with over 2,000 employees. Performance Orientation was the exception: it rose steadily with company size (ρ = 0.11), which fits with larger companies relying more on targets and performance reviews.

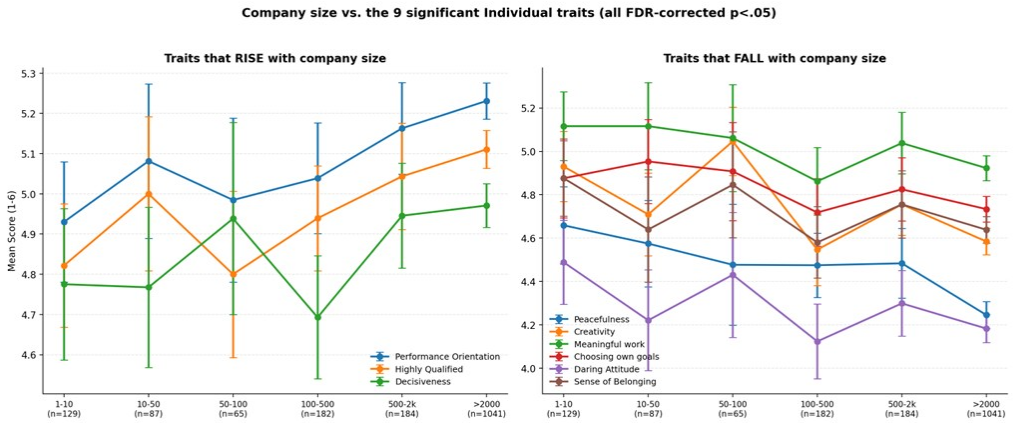


Figure 12. *Company size vs. the significant Individual traits, showing the dip at 100–500 employees.*

Company size also affects how people see their organisation, in a related but different way. Preserving Public Image rises significantly as companies grow (ρ = 0.22, q < 0.001), and Materialism rises with it – probably reflecting the PR and brand teams that large companies have and small ones can't afford. Peacefulness falls too, and the averages suggest one sharp drop between 10–50 and 50–100 employees, after which it levels off. Growing bigger gives a company more resources, but it also seems to make it more cautious in a way employees notice.

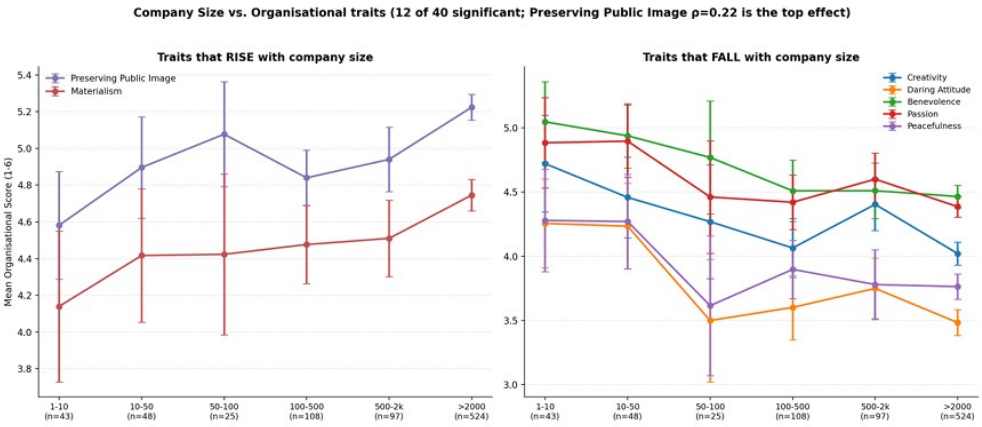


Figure 13. *Company size vs. the significant Organisational traits.*

PART 2: ADAPTING THE MODEL FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

11 From Assessing CEOs to Helping 20-Somethings Find Direction

The second half of this project asked whether the same framework, without the corporate framing, could help someone who hasn't settled into a career yet. Most of the big decisions about purpose aren't made by 45-year-old executives. They're made by people in their twenties and early thirties who are choosing a first job, questioning a second one, or wondering whether the path they're on is really right for them.

What Changed in the Adaptation

- Replaced business language ("customers", "the market", "financial performance") with everyday life situations.
- Removed the organisational side and the named leadership types (Doer/Career, Idealist/Visionary and so on), which have no equivalent for young people yet.
- Cut each dimension from a full page to about 250–300 words, to make it easier to read.
- Kept the psychological content of each dimension the same and changed only the setting.

12 Four Questions, Rewritten for Someone Who Isn't a CEO Yet

12.1 What You Need to Succeed

Do you read situations accurately? Can you speak up for yourself with the right amount of confidence, so that you're neither overlooked nor pushy? Ambition is important, but too much of it lets results and status crowd out friendships and ethics. The real test is whether you're proud of how you're succeeding.

This matters most at this stage of life. The psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, who came up with the term "emerging adulthood", describes it as a time when "many different directions remain possible"[5].

12.2 What You're Good At

Are you actually good at the things you say matter to you? Real expertise comes from practice, mistakes and repetition, not just theory. It's also where impostor syndrome tends to show up, because skill and confidence rarely grow at the same rate.

12.3 What You Love to Do

Being good at something is not the same as loving it. At its best, passion means holding yourself to a high standard because you care, not because someone is checking. Too much of it leads to burnout, and too little leaves you feeling empty even when things are going well. A good test: work you really love survives boredom and bad days.

12.4 What the World Needs

This is about your own moral compass: what can you actually do to make things better for the people around you? Humility matters here – sharing credit, owning your mistakes and caring about people for who they are, not for what they can do for you. The risk is treating "doing good" as a box to tick.

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[5]Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469–480.

13 So What?

Taken together, the two halves of this project point to a simple idea: purpose isn't a fixed trait that you either have or don't. It's shaped by where you work, who you report to, how long you've been working and what you've come to believe about yourself – and these factors affect how you see yourself differently from how you see your organisation.

The data points towards the biggest change in how people see themselves coming with the first leadership role, not later promotions. It also shows that the industries with the worst environmental reputations can produce the people who care most about the planet. And the framework itself suggests that loving your work and simply being good at it are different things, and that you can tell them apart by whether your interest survives the bad days.

None of this replaces the work of figuring out your own Ikigai, but it's a good place to start.

References

Brueck, F. (2020). *IKIGAI for leaders and organisations: The way to individual and collective purpose and meaning*. Lulu Press.

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