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OK, Boomer

What are the vital attributes of a scientist?

Nowadays, we'd say that at the very least scientists must be smart, creative and thorough. But do those attributes change over the years? In the past, you had to be a dab hand at using the index cards in the systematic catalogue of the university library. Nowadays, Google skills are more desirable and being able to give excellent presentations is an absolute must.

In the distant past, I read the books from Carlos Castaneda about his experiences as a mushroom-eating pupil of the mythical teacher Don Juan Matus. One of the lessons that I can best remember is the meditation in which Carlos had to stare at a stone for an hour every day. And every day at the same stone! At least until the moment he discovered that his teacher let him see a different stone each day and he started to appreciate the differences between the stones. Attention and patience lead to insight. A few days ago, a colleague let me see his research into ancient Chinese ivory puzzle balls. They are sculpted by hand from a solid piece of ivory but ultimately consist of 25 beautifully decorated orbs that nest inside each other but move independently. Attention and patience lead to a fantastic work of art.

With attention and patience, legions of monks copied manuscripts throughout the centuries.

With attention and patience, science is practised.

However, attention and patience appear to be increasingly rare qualities. Or is this a case of "OK, Boomer!", and do young researchers have other qualities that also lead to good results? Young researchers are often incredibly fast, very enthusiastic and afraid of nothing, but they sometimes do miss a historical awareness (as a result of which they can once again impartially wander down paths that are "known" to lead nowhere; or do they?).

It could well be the case that the requirements of research as well as the attributes of researchers change over the years. In a nutshell, that is another argument for making teams as diverse as possible and not only in terms of age.