

creativity at work

Ideas, original thinking, small improvements and big innovations are all essential to the success of businesses today. But how do people actually go about being creative? Can the working environment really enhance creativity, and if so, how? Herman Miller and forward thinking inc set out to explore these challenges through a collaborative research project into the nature of creativity at work and the implications for workplace design and management

Creativity: a valuable asset

- Everybody uses creativity
- It is not an exclusive attribute of 'creative jobs' such as inventors, designers, advertising professionals and architects – *everyone* uses creative thinking
- Every time an employee solves a problem or thinks of a new, improved way of working, they are demonstrating creative thinking. This may be a manager spotting an operational cost saving, or a sales rep unearthing a new business opportunity
- Creativity is critical to business performance – driving profitability and delivering tangible business results

The research

- The research sample was over 70 employees from a range of departments in 4 major global corporations
- Employees were selected because their colleagues identified them being creative individuals – the people who "are innovative", "always come up with the best ideas" or "always find an answer"
- These 70 creative individuals took part in a coaching style interview, where a trained executive coach probed the way they work, how they arrive at ideas etc.
- The participants then completed a more explicit electronic questionnaire which evaluated the impact of the working environment on their creative process
- These findings were supplemented by interviews with real estate professionals across Europe and Asia, exploring their response to supporting creativity

The findings: 4 creative types

- The research reveals four distinctly different approaches to creative thinking, each characterised by very clear preferences for the ideal physical and cultural working environment to maximise creativity. The four creative types are described below



Jigsaw Junkies

Jigsaw Junkies look at problems as puzzles that need to be solved. The 'problem' is their starting point, they spend lots of time exploring and analysing and their goal is resolution

- They are information gatherers and like to be sure they have all the pieces of the jigsaw before trying to solve the problem
- They often work in the belief there is only one 'right' solution
- Work is logical: structuring, manipulating, ordering and reviewing the gathered information in many different ways
- There is a strong desire to get all the information 'out of their head' and in front of them in some form of useable format. For some this is mind mapping and for others writing lists or stories
- They talk to a group of trusted colleagues to analyse, brainstorm and formulate ideas
- Jigsaw Junkies have a strong sense of completing the puzzle when 'all the pieces are in the right place' - they feel a great sense of relief and know they have found 'the solution'
- Implementation is a test and learn process. They set evaluation criteria and monitor results to ensure the solution is a success

The working environment

- It is important that the jigsaw junkie has easy connections which their sources of information – that may be a library of relevant materials, correct seating adjacencies or sophisticated knowledge management systems
- Individual space to concentrate is essential. Ideally this space includes plenty of room to 'lay things out'
- Jigsaw Junkies are the creative type most sensitive to workplace change. Because their creative process is methodical and relies on set ways of accessing information, workplace moves/changes can cause great disruption to their routine



Random Idea Generators

Random Idea Generators generate lots of new ideas. They make random and spontaneous connections that spark new thoughts and ideas. They trust that their natural talent and spontaneity will bring something to mind at some point

- They have vivid imaginations, and are independent thinkers who do not feel they need to play it safe with their ideas
- They often have a strong rebellious streak and like it when their ideas shock or surprise others
- They have a spontaneous, unstructured approach to creativity. Taking in information from the world around them, they make connections to problems they are working on and ideas are sparked
- Random Idea Generators do not have clearly defined creative processes. Ideas come at any time in any place
- They do not work well under constraints or to deadlines. They cannot turn creativity 'on and off' and need time and space to 'let creativity happen'. They hate brainstorming and other prescribed creative processes
- Very protective of their own ideas, they find it difficult to appreciate the ideas of others and are poor delegators when it comes to implementation

The working environment

- Random Idea Generators like working in environments which are fluid and informal with many alternative work settings and varied spaces
- They like the opportunity to spontaneously interact with colleagues from their own and other teams and value being able to move around the office to various spaces as and when they feel the need
- Ideally, Random Idea Generators have spaces where it is comfortable to sit and think on their own, a place where they can let their imagination run free without any pressure until they have a 'light-bulb' moment and the solution pops into their head



Change Agents

Change Agents are forward looking and visionary. They spot gaps and seek out new opportunities. They are able to define a better future and inspire others to believe it is possible. They like to make change happen and to shake things up

- They challenge organisational norms and question how and why things are done the way they are - to do this they must be independent thinkers and confident in themselves
- They see a vision of the future, and as they are excellent communicators, are able to share this vision with others
- Change Agents are constantly on the look out for new and better ways of doing things. They ask questions of themselves and others, such as "wouldn't it be good if....", "why can't we ..."
- They are not natural implementers, but inspire others to make change happen whilst they move onto the next big thing. They are happy to delegate and let others work through the detail
- They are willing to take risks to make change happen and encourage others to move to action before having all the answers

The working environment

- Change Agents prefer open plan office environments – allowing them to "roam around", listen in to conversations and join in discussions
- In quiet offices they can be disruptive to other colleagues and hate being subjected to noise protocols
- Roaming around the office is also a symptom of physical restlessness and the desire to be a visible presence within the office
- Change Agents in managerial positions like to "lead from the front", sitting within their team and being in regular communication with employees



Sensory Creators

Sensory Creators perceive the world in a holistic, highly spatial and non-linear way. They are constantly stimulated by all that is around them. They absorb and store lots of information which they regularly access to help explore problems or to create new ideas and solutions

- They are confident about their creativity and willing to express themselves, expose their ideas to others and be judged by their creative output
- Sensory Creators live life absorbing and storing snippets from nature, art, music, other people and anything else that stimulates them as an individual
- They are strongly intuitive, liking to “get a feel” for a problem and evaluating solutions using instinct
- In the workplace they are presented with a brief which triggers the need to focus their creativity in a specific area. They are naturally curious and quickly move to exploring the problem from many different angles
- They can be highly structured and employ clear creative processes - this mental exploration process is iterative, intense and focussed, and most often done alone
- Once they have an idea they will talk to others. They prefer to check out ideas one-to-one with a few trusted colleagues or friends and family outside
- Sensory Creators can be very attached to their personal ideas but are happy for collective ownership over implementation

The working environment

- The start of the creative process requires intensive individual thinking, so quiet spaces are essential for Sensory Creators
- However, open plan layouts are good for the later, more collaborative phases of the creative process, when spontaneous conversation with colleagues is valuable
- Sensory Creators rely on absorbing a wide variety of information and stimulus from their environment, so it is beneficial to working in a constantly evolving workplace, where information is readily displayed and accessible
- As well as a mental store of knowledge, Sensory Creators like to hoard information in physical format and have a tendency to work with a large amount of clutter
- They find it hard to adapt to clear desk protocols and their creative process can be stifled by not having information at their fingertips

5 tips for designing for creativity

Varied worksettings

- A variety of worksettings should be provided. All types need a range of worksettings to support their creative process - spending all day, every day at a workstation inhibits creativity

Varied Workspaces

- A variety of *workspaces* should be provided. The physical act of moving from one distinct space to another, with a different view and atmosphere, provides new stimulus for employees and aids creative thinking. This is especially important for Sensory Creators and Random Idea Generators

Real collaborative space

- Workplaces should incorporate well-designed space to support collaborative creativity. This means going beyond the traditional meeting room design and trying to match employees' natural ways of collaborating more effectively

Creative individual space

- A good workplace can foster creativity by providing comfortable and inspiring private spaces for individual working
- Many companies we spoke to seemed to think of creativity as an inherently *collaborative* process
- Spaces for individual concentrated work are often designed like 'phone booths' - small, dark spaces which are squeezed into the spaceplan
- Too often they do not provide appropriate work settings for employees to lay things out or work for long periods of time - both Jigsaw Junkies and Sensory Creators value such spaces highly

The evolving workplace

- All 4 creative types rely upon a flow of varied external stimulus to prompt their creative process
- A workplace which does not change at all in 5 years does nothing to encourage this flow of stimulus and inherently inhibits creativity within the organisation

