The Creative Process in Coworking & Collaborative Work

Insights for executives, managers & designers

An Expert Report
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**About Creative Friction Ltd**

Creative Friction is a London-based research agency that believes in the power of creative interactions. High-quality interactions are vital because they can radically increase levels of engagement, innovation and well-being, contributing to improved member recruitment, retention and business progress. As such, they are the ‘secret sauce’ that make a collaborative space truly lovable.

Creative Friction works with private and public organisations across the globe, including leading coworking operators and innovation funds. To help organisations flourish as creative catalysts and thought-leaders in their respective locations, Creative Friction draws on its world-class team of academic researchers, consultants and elastic thinkers to offer the following:

1. Initial diagnostic surveys to determine the strengths and weaknesses of your space / organisation / initiative
2. Online / offline consultations and workshops focusing on your toughest problems
3. Short research experiments to empirically test how your organisation functions while generating effective interventions
4. Long-term research and co-development engagements tailored around client needs, generating impactful publications and insights
5. Co-innovation projects to find the right digital solutions to power your organisation

The concept of the ‘creative idea journey’, illustrated above, is at the heart of all of our work, helping us to reveal and showcase how emerging ideas and projects are nourished in particular entrepreneurial environments. We ask: how do such environments add value along the growth path of new ideas and projects through diverse interactions? While good interactions come in many shapes and forms, the most valuable ones are those that propel a creative idea journey forward.

See [www.creativefriction.xyz](http://www.creativefriction.xyz) to read about our team and current projects.
Foreword

It is a delight to welcome this bold new report on the creative process in coworking and collaborative work. As a first-rate contribution and a compelling read, I implore you to study it closely.

We live in a world obsessed with ‘startup stardom’ and the glowing ideas of celebrity entrepreneurs. Yet we routinely overlook the nuanced nature of the creative journeys through which innovative ideas must develop in the real world. We pay even scarcer attention to how such journeys are shaped by their environments and other people.

In fact, entrepreneurs today benefit from an unparalleled abundance of intermediary organisations that range from accelerators and incubators to research-led organisations and coworking spaces. These organisations offer an array of support that can, in theory at least, effectively propel entrepreneurial journeys forward.

For the past four years, I have worked for one of London’s most interesting, multidisciplinary catalysts for digital startups, the Digital Catapult. I am also an entrepreneur who engages in mentoring activities at two of the UK’s leading startup accelerators. From this vantage point, I can see three crucial gaps when it comes to our understanding of entrepreneurship, creativity and coworking in particular.

First, more than any other type of intermediary, coworking spaces are surrounded by more than a little hype and more than a few myths. Build a cool open-plan environment and the magic will happen, serendipitously. If only it were that simple!

Second, few support organisations trace the creative journeys of their members with any rigour. This is a shame, for the fine-tuning of support clearly requires nuanced, evidence-based understandings.

Third, coworking spaces remain rather preoccupied with the design of physical spaces and vague notions of ‘community’. Arguably, a lot more is needed to generate valuable interactions, including what I would refer to as enabling sociotechnical infrastructures.

It is in this context that the report in your hands (or on your screen) has enormous significance. I expect it to serve as a priceless companion to coworking executives, managers and designers right around the world as they face up to intense competition while envisioning the next generation of coworking practices, cultures and spaces.

Enjoy!

Dr Irene Lopez de Vallejo
Director of Collaborative Research, Regional & International Development at Digital Catapult & Co-Founder at GivingStreets
About the Creators

Tuukka Toivonen, PhD (Oxon.)
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Tuukka Toivonen is an expert on creativity and idea journeys in entrepreneurship, coworking and collaborative organisations. He holds a PhD from the University of Oxford and until 2018 he worked as Senior Lecturer in Social & Economic Innovation at University College London. Currently Tuukka shares his time between academia and the research agency Creative Friction Ltd (www.creativefriction.xyz). Tuukka’s empirical creativity research has been funded by the ESRC, the Skoll Foundation, think tanks such as Sitra as well as several university funds. He was awarded an ESRC Transformative Research Grant (£250,000) to investigate, in 2016-2017, the creative idea journeys of digital entrepreneurs engaged in coworking. Having taught at all levels at global top universities in the UK and Japan, Tuukka strives to maintain a constant, inspired dialogue between research and practice.

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Carsten Sørensen is Reader (Associate Professor) in Digital Innovation within the Department of Management at The London School of Economics and Political Science. Carsten has been researching digital innovation since the 1980s, for example enterprise mobility (enterprisemobilitybook.com), infrastructures and platform dynamics (digitalinfrastructures.org), including those of payment systems. He has published widely in outlets such as MISQ, ISB, JIT, and ISJ (scholar.carstensorensen.com), and has 25 years of industry consulting experience, working with a range of clients such as IMF, Microsoft, Google, PA Consulting, Orange, Vodafone, Intel, to name just a few.

Keiko Nishiyama
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Keiko Nishiyama is an international fashion designer and print artist based in London and Tokyo who collaborates across industry boundaries. She set up her eponymous womenswear brand in 2014 after a prior fashion career in Japan and masters studies at the London College of Fashion. Prints are the brand’s signature: initially hand-drawn by Keiko, they are inspired by the ‘cabinets of curiosities’ and ‘wonder rooms’ of the past, considered the ancestors of today’s museums. Keiko strives to recreate and improve the same idea focusing on nature’s beautiful imperfections and mysteries, which are at the centre of her work.

Sam Walter
Graphic designer - www.festoon.studio
Sam Walter is a Graphic Designer and Founder of Festoon Studios, committed to research-inspired graphic design. His work ranges from smartphone apps for learning disabilities diagnosis to designing textbooks for educational programmes in Kenya. He was a key organiser of the Mobile Apps in Research Summit, an event exploring the development of research-based apps.

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Executive summary
Individuals and small teams are now at the centre of creative processes.

Technology has given rise to networked individualism: people function now more as connected individuals and less as committed members of specific groups or organisations. As a result, innovative projects, too, have become unhinged from formal organisations and we must now place individuals and teams front and centre when analysing creative processes, though without overlooking moments of shared creativity.

Let’s go on a creative idea journey: It pays to follow ideas.

New ideas, products, services and processes emerge through the creative idea journeys of individuals and teams. These journeys flow through multiple physical and organisational settings. Tracing their progress reveals how emerging ideas and projects are shaped by a mix of internal and external influences. An ‘idea journey lens’ helps coworking organisations understand the value they are adding, the opportunities they may be missing and the creative stage(s) they are best positioned to support.

Are you feeling creative today? Affect matters in creative projects.

The performance of entrepreneurial knowledge workers is influenced by the ebb and flow of affective states. Researchers broadly agree that positive affect stimulates idea generation and collaborative spaces should thus maintain a generally positive atmosphere. Ensuring that all members feel recognised and accepted is vital to making diverse creative communities flourish. Moments of negative affect can also catalyse creativity (e.g. when negative feedback motivates a person to solve a particular problem rapidly), but prolonged negative states are likely to be harmful.

Executive summary

The coworking industry is undergoing rapid growth the world over, expanding at a rate of up to 20 percent per year. For independent and corporate users, the value of collaborative spaces derives from their flexibility and ability to catalyse creative processes that drive innovation. However, while creativity is part and parcel of this sector’s brand image, few operators have formed a systematic approach to supporting the creative journeys of their members.

In an increasingly competitive world where networked individuals are ‘free to move, free to stay’, this theoretical and practical gap translates to a significant vulnerability. The purpose of this report is hence to supply a set of key insights, drawing on findings from high-quality organisational research, to inform executives, managers and designers as they deepen their own approach to creativity support.
Strictly speaking, there are no ‘creative spaces’

While attractively designed spaces may help attract ‘the right crowd’ for innovative work, creative processes are always co-shaped by spatial, social and digital elements. The role of the former is often greatly exaggerated. New thinking around the social affordances of space can help leaders productively reconsider the influence of spatial elements. Members should be enabled to co-design and flexibly alter spatial arrangements.

Digitalisation of work is shaping the parameters of creativity.

Paradoxically, digital connectivity is making us mobile and more interested in finding the ideal creative environment(s). Connectivity is also changing the way in which daily work is structured. For instance, a high share of coworking members belong to virtual teams that do not necessarily seek to be co-located but that might still benefit from bespoke support. Also, to better support creative processes in a coworking context, members should be encouraged to co-develop local digital architectures.

Adding creative value through feedback that serves diverse individuals.

Sharing feedback is a vital part of the creative process, especially at the so-called elaboration stage. It fosters co-creation between members who do not normally work on a shared project. Designing feedback-seeking/feedback-giving processes that cater to diverse individuals – including those who consider themselves introverted – constitutes an essential way for collaborative spaces to add creative value to their members’ idea journeys.
Key Terms & definitions

Creativity
In organisation science, creativity is typically defined as the generation of ideas, products, services, models or processes that are *novel and useful*. However, as novelty and usefulness are rarely apparent from the outset, we can view creativity as a process where existing elements and ideas are recombined into meaningful new forms that may come to be viewed as novel and useful. Researchers often assume that creativity starts with idea generation, proceeding through elaboration towards implementation, at which point ‘creativity’ morphs into ‘innovation’.

Collective creativity
Collective creativity can be viewed, first, as the mindful engagement of individuals in momentary creative interactions. Such creativity is present when interactions trigger new ideas, meanings or frameworks that individuals working separately could not create. Collective creativity is sometimes equated with group creativity; however, it is also a feature of one-on-one interactions. When successive one-on-one interactions centrally contribute to the development of an emerging idea, we can speak of *networked creativity*.

Creative idea journeys
Creative idea journeys encompass idea generation, elaboration, championing and implementation. This concept calls us to go beyond single moments of creativity to trace how successive steps, interactions and various forms of support shape a given idea or project over a period of weeks, months and years. This can inform the design of more effective creative environments by various intermediaries such as coworking spaces.

Fluid work
Fluid work is flexible and often team-based; enabled by technology and potentially mobile; autonomously performed; and relatively free of conventional organisational and temporal boundaries. Fluidity gives rise to both new risks (e.g. economic insecurity, burnout) and new opportunities. Fluid work requires appropriate creative support mechanisms that differ with those that may have worked in conventional work settings.

Networked individualism
A new sociological condition where people act predominantly as connected individuals first and as members of particular groups or organisations second. The logic of networked individualism is consistent with many aspects of fluid work; however, its implications extend beyond the realm of work.

Coworking
Coworking is associated with flexible shared office facilities of diverse types, with relatively autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals as a central user group. While myriad different coworking models have emerged, coworking conventionally assumes a high degree of openness in terms of access and the presence of a collaborative community, enacted through some degree of voluntary interaction between people who are not typically formally working for the same employer or department. Effective collaborative communities constitute a new type of ‘hub organisation’ that supports fluid work (Toivonen & Friederici 2015).

Corporate coworking
Corporate coworking is a broad, emerging area that encompasses various partnership arrangements between coworking providers and (typically large) corporations locating some of their teams in an external coworking space. It may also be taken to include in-house coworking practices, though it is questionable whether ‘coworking’ can exist between employees who formally work for the same organisation or department.

Entrepreneurial knowledge work
Integrative, project-driven knowledge work that combines extant knowledge into new and potentially useful forms around projects with discrete outputs. When we speak of the creative process in this report, we technically refer to creativity within varieties of entrepreneurial knowledge work, rather than creativity in, say, artistic work. Such knowledge work is performed by entrepreneurs, freelancers, employees and many others who create new knowledge-driven products or services.
Creativity in the world of coworking, collaborative organisations and fluid work
Creativity in the world of coworking, collaborative organisations & fluid work

A quick browse on the internet reveals an endless list of articles and blogs on ‘10 ways to be more creative at work’, ‘7 secrets to being an extraordinarily creative manager’ or ‘9 ways to become more creative in the next 10 minutes’. The profusion of such material speaks of our fascination with creativity in its many forms, but it teaches us very little about how to support complex creative processes in the real world of fluid work. Unfortunately, credible scholarly contributions on creativity remain locked behind paywalls and otherwise inaccessible to counterbalance simplistic claims made in the (digital) press. What is more, the high-quality research that does exist is primarily derived from laboratory studies or conventional organisational settings that do not reflect today’s flexible, mobile work situations.

This report is designed to bridge the above gaps by delivering a set of substantial insights on creativity for a particular group of readers: the executives, managers and designers of coworking spaces and other collaborative initiatives. Instead of adding to the endless pile of stylised but shallow popular writing on creativity, we seek to open up a deeper discussion on the creative process that can genuinely inform our readers as they develop their original approaches to fostering creative knowledge work. We refrain from ‘dumbing down’ our material and refuse to ignore the complexities involved, but we strive to make our insights as accessible as possible. Our sincere wish is that this report will offer valuable frameworks for serious practical thinking on how to catalyse creativity in constantly evolving contexts of coworking and collaborative work.

In a 2012 report on the future of work, one of the authors remarked that, rather paradoxically, the more we are able to communicate ‘anytime and anywhere’, and the less distance seems to matter, the more important your working location, environment, relationships and interactions become². This observation helps to explain the emergence of new spaces for creative knowledge work: today, highly mobile individuals and teams pay substantial money to share physical offices with people they’ve never met before – in expensive cities more...
CEOs and leaders are starting to understand that the [ir] culture will establish the type of talent they attract and the duration for which that talent will choose to stay. Talent has more choices than ever – with hiring it’s not about being the highest payer anymore, because there’s always someone willing to pay a little more. To retain talent, you really have to give people a reason to stay. The power has shifted. – Adam Neumann, Founder of WeWork

often than in exotic beach resorts. Constant connectivity notwithstanding, it is clear that we seek the possibility of new collaborations with highly skilled and like-minded others, office conveniences, proximity to relevant industries, and – last but not least – creative stimuli.

Predictions about the deepening importance of where and with whom one works have, if anything, been realised by the seemingly unstoppable growth of the coworking industry. It is no minor development that in London, WeWork became the largest private tenant in late 2017 when it was valued at $20 billion. While undoubtedly the market leader in terms of sheer scale and revenue, WeWork competes with a diversity of at least 400 other London-based ‘open workspaces’ in a context where approximately 17 percent of the city’s workforce is self-employed on a full-time basis. Globally, the coworking sector grew at a rate of nearly 20 percent in 2017; this industry is ballooning not only in western settings but also in India, China, Brazil and beyond.

Global and local corporations – from IT and consulting to the banking and food industries – have been swift to learn from these trends and are proceeding to establish their own open or semi-open innovation spaces and programmes. They have struck up partnerships with professional coworking providers, with the Work. Life-Verizon partnership in London a case in point. Along with cost optimisation, a chief motivator for corporations is the need to retain top young talent that is more footloose than ever. In the words of Adam Neumann, the founder of WeWork: ‘CEOs and leaders are starting to understand that the [ir] culture will establish the type of talent they attract and the duration for which that talent will choose to stay. Talent has more choices than ever – with hiring it’s not about being the highest payer anymore, because there’s always someone willing to pay a little more. To retain talent, you really have to give people a reason to stay. The power has shifted.’

For many large organisations, therefore, setting up spaces and programmes akin to ‘cool’ coworking spaces is a way to demonstrate their forward-looking, innovative culture to potential recruits.

However, the problem is that the underlying trend towards mobility and choice is likely to continue to increase dramatically, in line with the acceleration of broader tech-driven changes in the economy. The unsurprising consequence for workspaces will be the further intensification of competition – for talented, successful users, members and employees. In fact, rates of turnover are already very high in the coworking sector, with many users typically leaving a space after just a few months. The competition is driving coworking

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operators to find new ways to demonstrate their ‘creative value added’, beyond stylish interiors and clever marketing language.

Indeed – (re-)learning how to attract, engage and retain highly mobile, diverse members will surely remain a top business challenge for creative workspaces with flexible models.

While there are several positive reasons why a user might decide to move out of a given coworking community (e.g., when their startup grows or needs access to alternative networks), lack of support for creative processes is not among these. While data on creativity support is only beginning to emerge, it is clear to the authors from their conversations with dozens of operators in London and internationally that only a tiny portion of collaborative spaces have developed a systematic approach to tracing and fostering creativity within their spaces, communities and networks. In fact, we would estimate that fewer than one in ten have formed their own definition of creativity or clarified the dimensions of creativity they would most like to catalyse. Players in this domain thus remain relatively unsophisticated in terms of creativity support, including programme and intervention design.

This is ironic, considering that the coworking industry is largely built upon an imagery of creativity, expressed through visual design elements and the belief that encounters and collaborations between people from diverse professions and backgrounds will generate innovative outcomes. Yet, our observation is that even where there are hopes that creative episodes between diverse individuals will or might lead to ‘good things’, systematic, mindful research-informed support is typically lacking. As a result, the number of people disillusioned with vacuous claims about creativity is likely to grow in tandem with the further growth of the coworking sector.

Hence this report and its six insights. Each of our six insights draws on peer-reviewed research from the most reputable academic journals in management and organisational science, entrepreneurship studies and creativity research. These findings are curated and adapted with our specific readership in mind, the guiding question being ‘what is the most valuable take-away here for coworking space founders, designers and managers? In performing this task, we build directly on our own extensive research on the future of work, mobile technology, coworking and (interactive) creative processes among entrepreneurs who utilise coworking spaces in London. It is our sincere hope that you will find these insights useful in fostering the creative moments and qualities that add most value to the experience of your members.
The six insights
Individuals & small teams are now at the centre of creative processes
INSIGHT ONE

*Individuals & small teams are now at the centre of creative processes*

It is often noted that large corporations are undergoing massive transformation due to the rise of digital platforms, disintermediation and the evaporation of conventional hierarchies, among other drivers of change (Michelman 2017). However, such corporation-focused diagnoses miss a deeper sociological phenomenon that may seem obvious yet is revolutionising the nature of creative processes and collaborative work in unforeseen ways. This is the phenomenon of ‘networked individualism’. Thanks to the pervasiveness of new technologies, *individuals and not just companies* have gained access to a wealth of information as well as unprecedented powers to rapidly initiate creative work projects on their own. Regardless of formal status, individuals (whether employees or not) can tap diverse knowledge networks and direct their careers at the intersection of multiple communities, networks, locations and fields. Individuals with some entrepreneurial acumen have gained a substantial degree of liberty vis-à-vis employers and organisational boundaries.

In a world of networked individuals, we are all potential digital nomads now. Today’s university administrator can tomorrow become the founder of a tech incubator. A trainee at a cut-throat commercial law firm can choose to set up a crowdfunding platform to promote social justice. A graphic designer can work from a café in Copenhagen or equally from a beach in Thailand. By the same token, individuals with original creative ideas can enter a large corporation to bring those external frameworks to life, as in the case of the gaming aficionados who envisioned Microsoft’s Xbox (Verganti 2016:97-99). Either way, creative individuals and teams have fundamentally cut off their organisational umbilical cords, though this does not mean they are not in search of value-adding, innovative environments (see Insight Five).
Analytically it makes sense to place creative individuals and their idea journeys front and centre. Conversely – and vexingly for many leaders – it is less and less sensible to only focus on measuring the creativity-related attributes of a given space, office or organisation in isolation from broader creative journeys. Forget, for a moment, the fancy design features of the Crick, Google’s various headquarters or Second Home: no creative process can be contained within the bounds of a building or even an in-house technology platform, no matter how impressive the design. Instead, follow the potentially boundless journey of the individual and his/her creative project – or the project of a given team – and then observe how your organisation features within it.

While individuals and small teams are the captains of their idea journeys, this does not mean creativity is not fundamentally interactive, collective or social. Clearly, we are experiencing a boom in collaboration and various collaborative communities (Hecksher & Adler 2006; Toivonen & Friederici 2015; Toivonen 2016) just as networks are liberating individuals to pursue their own passions, missions and professional trajectories. As we argued above, it paradoxically matters more...
now where you work and who you work with, and therefore synergistic moments of shared creativity are rising in value. Although leading researchers have for a long time stressed the social nature of creativity (Hargadon & Bechky 2006; Perry-Smith 2006; de Stobbeleir et al. 2011), very few executives, managers, designers or other experts know how to foster such moments. Even fewer have developed a systematic approach to identifying effective ‘points of intervention’ along fluid creative paths that cross-cut organisational contexts. Where is your organisation in terms of mastering these novel dynamics?

This combination of empowered, untethered individuals (and teams) and boundary-crossing collaborations sets up several creativity-related challenges that competitive organisations must tackle. New questions must be asked well beyond the problem of attracting and retaining members/employees and include the following:

- Where does a creative process begin and end? E.g. idea kernels and projects are often brought into organisations and taken out of them.
- How do creative episodes that unfold across different organisations or locations intertwine and co-shape final products or services?
- What can or should organisations do to catalyse creative processes that constantly transcend their own boundaries? To what extent is creativity (not) contained within formal projects?
- How can conversations be used to drive creative idea journeys forwards?

Keeping in mind these observations, we next move to more tangible frameworks and findings that you will be able to apply in your work as an executive, manager or designer in charge of a collaborative space or initiative.

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**'The future of work'**

‘The future of work’ is a lively academic and public debate that has ballooned in the past 10-15 years, generating myriad perspectives and terminologies that cannot be covered here in full. Regarding the trend towards multi-stage lives and careers increasingly unhinged from large organisations, we refer readers to *The 100-Year Life* by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott (2016). Regarding the ‘projectification’ of organisations, work and society, we warmly recommend the work of Jörg Sydow and colleagues. We recognise substantial overlaps between our own approach and this project-focused organisational research – projects, just like individuals and their teams, have gained in prominence and autonomy vis-à-vis (supposedly) stable organisational structures. However, this is a literature that has explored creativity only in a cursory way.
Let’s go on a creative idea journey

It pays to follow ideas
Let’s go on a creative idea journey: It pays to follow ideas, not just people.

In an extended 2007 article in the MIT journal *Innovations*, Tim Flannery, the founder of the pioneering micro-lending platform KIVA, recounts how the idea for this business emerged through a spectacular journey spanning several African countries and critical encounters in the Bay Area of California. Combining ideas from computer science, micro-finance and development, his micro-lending idea became progressively elaborated through critical interactions with peers, users, investors, lawyers and many other experts. Flannery’s path-breaking innovation was the result of a creative idea journey – a boundary-spanning process through which knowledge from several organisations and communities was integrated without that process being contained by, or confined to, any single organisational entity.

Recent theorising in organisational research suggests there are four distinct phases to an idea journey: idea generation, idea elaboration, idea championing and idea implementation (Perry-Smith & Mannucci 2017). It is through this journey that initial inklings or ‘sparky’ moments and discoveries grow and are eventually turned into successful innovations. Generally, both researchers and practitioners have placed emphasis on the tail ends of this process, paying far less attention to idea elaboration – the vital second stage in the creative journey that is driven by critical as well as generative feedback. Approaching the creative process through the notion of idea journeys pays, for three reasons:

1. **It is only through the analysis of creative idea journeys that we can, for the first time, observe ‘what is really going on’ in the creative lives of coworking space members.** This is the first opportunity to situate a given creative environment or innovation programme within the broader path of a developing idea, business model, design or project. When speaking to us, coworking space founders and managers often express their keen interest in tracing both the internal and external interactions of their users so as to better understand what shapes their ideas (however, they never have the time to do in practice). Bespoke research that traces creative idea journeys can rectify this situation.
The creative idea journey concept brings attention to how creative needs evolve as an idea moves through different stages. Perry-Smith and Mannucci have reflected on how support networks must evolve as a new idea grows: for instance, diverse networks are useful in the very beginning while more cohesive networks are useful for implementing a project or organisation. An interrelated way to approach creative needs focuses on knowledge. At the start of an idea journey, creators may be inspired by diversity (e.g., exposure to fields different from one’s own) to produce new combinations. Supportive feedback from an inner circle of peers may then become vital to strengthening the initial idea and generating additional confidence, after which it can benefit more readily from feedback from critical external mentors, investors and so forth. Users and stakeholder groups provide yet a different source of feedback.

The creative idea journey lens can reveal how members’ creative needs are met and by whom/what and when. For instance, is the need for affective support met by peers at a coworking community, by family members, or both? Is technical advice shared by peers at a coworking site or sought from external experts? Is there a sufficient degree of challenging feedback along an idea journey? Does the idea benefit from a bubbly, buzzing creative environment where suggestions are exchanged freely? Well-designed research can shed light on precisely these kinds of questions, exposing how and where a given idea benefits from particular types of interactions.

What are some of the key patterns that characterise real-world creative idea journeys? While relevant empirical research is still in its early stages, our own current investigations are exposing the following features:

- Idea journeys are strongly shaped by affective (emotional) ups and downs that can be triggered by critical feedback, setbacks and successes; the course of an emerging idea may shift radically as a result of an affective shock.
- Ideas become progressively elaborated through successive moments of collective creativity; generally speaking, the more creators engage in such interactions, the more developed, articulated and well-targeted their ideas become.
- In some cases, successive feedback interactions can lead to erratic idea journeys (where an idea continues to change without a steady focus); they can also provoke a creator to abandon an existing idea and explore alternatives.
Why not use sampling to research the experiences and interactions of your members?

The seminal psychologist and creativity scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is known for his Experience Sampling Method – essentially, getting research participants to report on their activities and subjective feelings at random points in time. Toivonen and his team are currently developing a somewhat similar ‘interaction sampling methodology’ to further explore creative idea journeys in social contexts. This methodology allows us to examine the frequency, attributes and effects of diverse interactions that occur along idea journeys based on the assumption that, while capturing all (non-digital) interactions remains difficult, sampling a portion of them is sufficient to shed light on key patterns. With some expert support, this technique can easily be applied by coworking spaces and collaborative innovation programmes whose leaders wish to better understand how they are adding value to creative processes. For instance, a recent project by one of the authors revealed that the participants in a large innovation competition were having very few high-value feedback conversations with other contestants, prompting the organisers to rethink this collaborative aspect of their programme.

In our research we also see many examples of product reframing (e.g., a health device for animals taking on the character of a fashion accessory) and business model pivoting (e.g., shifting from an AI platform that targets individual workers to one that predominantly serves employers and government agencies). In forthcoming work, we will illustrate these patterns by constructing ‘idea maps’ and innovation diaries that pin-point key changes along an idea journey over a period of several months and across different key dimensions. We believe that this approach to following ideas – not just people or their daily work in a more direct sense – will generate vital knowledge that can guide executives, managers and designers as they configure their pertinent creative environments.
Are you feeling creative today?

Affect matters in creative projects
INSIGHT THREE.

Are you feeling creative today? Affect matters in creative projects

It is a well-worn cliché that entrepreneurship often resembles a roller coaster ride. To some, this expression speaks of the sheer excitement and headiness associated with new entrepreneurial work; to others, it signals the potential of failure, economic instability and severe mental hardship. In a world of fluid work that relies relatively more on individual initiative than organisational routines, it pays to take the role of affect, mental energy and recovery seriously when devising ways to catalyse creative processes.

Psychological and organisational research into the relationship of affect and creativity has boomed since the 1990s, spurred on by the earlier findings of Isen on the conducive effects of positive affect on creative thought (e.g. Isen et al. 1987). While some research has arrived at contrary findings, by and large the notion that positive affect – encompassing positive moods and emotions such as joy – promotes idea generation has held on among researchers. Positive affect promotes an expansive mental state whereby it becomes easier cognitively to form new connections (in one’s mind) between hitherto unconnected areas and ideas. With certain caveats, we can assume this individual-level mechanism will apply at the group-level.

Research on affect and creativity is now increasingly being complemented by inquiries into the role of rest and recovery in creative performance. Together, these research streams translate into the following implications for executives, managers and designers who wish to boost the creativity of entrepreneurial, integrative knowledge workers:

Positive affect tends to promote creativity at the ideation stage in particular. Collaborative spaces can support this by maintaining affectively bright, friendly moods in general. Also, they may want to ensure that ideation and idea-sharing sessions are predominantly positive in their affective tone (though this should not mean the absence of critical feedback which is also part and parcel of creative processes). They may moreover want to offer workshops on emotional self-regulation, and on affect and creativity.

Within the coworking industry, there is a growing awareness that more needs to be done to accommodate the needs and preferences of diverse groups, including women and ethnic minority youth. This makes sense from a creativity standpoint: feeling excluded and uncomfortable makes it harder to maintain positive affect and thereby fully engage one’s creative faculties.

Creative conversations, also, are more likely to flourish between diverse members in an atmosphere of mutual respect, recognition and inclusion.
Moments and episodes of negative affect are an inevitable part of most creative idea journeys. Such moments are not necessarily harmful and can even be valuable for creativity, as research shows negative feedback can, in certain conditions, re-direct a person's attention, or motivate him/her to solve a particular problem more rapidly than might otherwise be the case (Lazarus 2000). The majority of organisational research has been conducted inside formal organisations, overlooking the fact that entrepreneurial individuals who (wholly or partly) stand outside broader hierarchies can often deal with negative feedback by taking distance from the feedback-giver and retaining a psychological sense of control (that would not be possible under a line manager).

Creatives will normally benefit from emotional support, as negative affective states may be detrimental if prolonged. Accordingly, a culture of mutual consideration and support-giving should be fostered at collaborative spaces. While some might argue that the single most important function of coworking spaces is the provision of affective support through community, we believe the need for emotional support varies greatly across individuals, situations and stages of the idea journey. Therefore, it should be effective to (i) cultivate a generally friendly culture of mutual consideration while (ii) setting up small workshops or groups that individuals who are in need of support (or interested in giving support or learning more about affective dynamics and self-regulation) can freely join.

Adopting a recovery lens is becoming more important than ever. Better sleep can make entrepreneurs more creative. Rest is often neglected in discussions on creativity and the creative process, as are specific thought patterns. A recent paper (Weinberger et al. 2018) found that late night puzzling had a positive effect on next-day problem-solving, while negative rumination or worrying did not. It turns out thus that continuing mental work into the evening is not necessarily unproductive. Along with communicating research findings such as these to your members, creating opportunities for members to share their own recovery techniques and perspectives can help coworking spaces contribute to this dimension of creativity.
Strictly speaking, there are no ‘creative spaces’
Another resource that is misunderstood when it comes to creativity is physical space. It is almost conventional wisdom that creative teams need open, comfortable offices. Such an atmosphere won’t hurt creativity, and it may even help, but it is not nearly as important as other managerial initiatives that influence creativity.

Indeed, a problem we have seen time and time again is managers paying attention to creating the “right” physical space at the expense of more high-impact actions.

— Professor Teresa Amabile
Harvard Business Review
altogether denying the potential of physical space to co-shape creative processes, we believe it is worth stating the obvious: there are and can be no ‘creative spaces’ in any literal sense of the word. Prevalent thinking on the role of space tends to be simplistic, and the benefits of certain kinds of physical spaces are being grossly overestimated in the coworking field. Space – no matter how stylish – does little by itself, and its impact may yet prove modest compared to the host of other factors that matter in innovative activity.

Indeed, in a world of networked individualism where creative processes flow freely through myriad locations, office spaces and organisations (see Insight One), we need to be wary of the hype around spatial design (see De Paoli et al. 2017 for an exemplary critique). We must remain able to ‘de-centre’ the role of physical space – i.e., we must be able to think beyond it analytically – and put far more focus on tracing, and intelligently supporting, creative idea journeys that progress and meander across different contexts, within global digital ecosystems.

Of course, being critical of physical sites meant for creative work is not to deny outright the potential of certain kinds of design features to support creative processes. For one, it matters for creativity when the attributes of a given space help attract a community of people who are motivated to collaborate and interact in creative ways. While this convening function of a space does not necessarily have much to do with particular interior design features – for instance, it may have more to do with branding and/or the reputation of the founder(s) – if such features do help than that is significant.

However, even with these potential benefits in mind, developing a systematic understanding of how space can directly and indirectly support (or hinder) the creative process remains a challenge. Fortunately, new organisational theories are emerging that seek to address this exact challenge. One of these focuses on the capacity of a given space to accommodate certain kinds of informal interactions – in other words, the ‘social affordances’ of physical space (Fayard & Weeks 2007). This theory stresses that social interactions, instead of being somehow separate from (or analytically superior/inferior vis-à-vis) the structuring influence of the environment, become intertwined with features of the physical environment in myriad ways.

If applied, for instance, to interactions around a shared coffee machine, the notion of social affordances encourages us to pose certain searching questions: Do the features of the machine pull people into close proximity of one another? How exactly do they spark this proximity, and how does this, in turn, provoke and shape interactions? Do those using the coffee machine feel comfortable interacting with others
while serving themselves (or do they, for instance, feel observed by others to the point of not being able to speak very freely)? Do conversations initiated by relative strangers before the coffee machine subsequently continue at other locations within the same facility or community? One could also observe the flow of people to and from the coffee machine, say drawing on the Space Syntax methodology (Hillier 1998; Sailer & Penn 2009), and note whether this movement of people – and the surrounding structures – catalyse informal interactions (that in some cases, support creative processes).

We need to make two further points about how to approach space constructively. First, a subset of coworking spaces in cities like London (e.g. Work. Life and Huckletree) emphasises comfort as a design principle. This seeks to ensure that members benefit from a variety of different types of spaces within a coworking site, some facilitating socialising with others supporting rest and solitary focus. From the perspective of the creative process that has its ebbs and flows, facilitating these different modes of interaction and thought makes plenty of sense. Second, bucking the trend towards highly standardised models reminiscent of McDonald's and Starbucks (à la WeWork), another subset of of spaces – such as Yahoo Lodge in Tokyo – insist on keeping their space fundamentally customisable. This means very few fixed pieces of furniture, allowing users to be creative with space, approaching it with a software mindset. To be fair, a limited degree of customisability and fluidity is built into even standardised coworking models, but some spaces go much further by allowing users to drastically reconfigure their space according to evolving needs. There is a lot to be said for taking this messy but adaptive coworking model seriously and considering its advantages vis-a-vis what some might call ‘neat but dead’ standardised coworking sites.

As the coworking industry expands further, we predict that those with a more critical as well as elastic approach to space and creativity – in line with the above observations – will stand out, gaining an edge within an intensely competitive market.

**Suggested experiment:**

Spend one day observing and surveying your members to discover the locations within your space where creative interactions seem to take place most frequently. Craft a clear series of questions (using this report) and define what you mean by ‘creative’ interactions. Based on your findings, alter just one element in your physical environment – e.g. replace a table that seems to keep people too far from each other for conversation, or install a notice board with discussion questions on it (say from Theodore Zeldin’s books) in a central location. Then observe whether this opens up new possibilities for feedback conversations, for instance. When appropriate, use digital tracker devices to collect more comprehensive data on interactions. In another experiment, ask your members to collectively re-design the features of a designated space (e.g. an open-plan section within a coworking space), based on the notion that users should be able to participate in the co-production of their workspace, which includes moving furniture and other elements around to suit changing needs (Doorley & Witthoft 2012).
Insight

Digitalisation of work is shaping the parameters of creativity
INSIGHT FIVE

Digitalisation of work is shaping the parameters of creativity

At the turn of the Millenium, Sørensen and colleagues took to mapping out early examples of mobile working, witnessing how tech-savvy professionals roamed around Tokyo with their slick laptops and mobile phones (Sørensen 2011). It became common for pundits to take the appearance of such seemingly place-autonomous groups as a sign of the birth of ‘anytime, anywhere working’ and as the ‘death of distance’ (Kleinrock 1996; Cairncross 1997). Digitalisation – of nearly every aspect of personal and professional life – has continued to accelerate ever since (Susskind & Susskind 2015), and its consequences have undoubtedly been transformative. At the same time, the ubiquity of mobile technologies has also had some paradoxical, unexpected outcomes for the parameters of creative work, among which we may count the rise of coworking itself. Leaders in the coworking and collaborative domains will benefit from considering the following consequences in particular:

1. **Easy digital connectivity that makes us mobile also makes us search for the ideal creative environment(s).**

   In principle, entrepreneurial individuals with some digital skills are now free to work from a distant mountain village or a tropical beach, provided they have access to a decent internet connection. However, from the perspective of innovation and the creative process, connectivity has proven to be insufficient by itself to drive the development of new ideas, products, services and processes. In fact, it can be generally argued that as work increasingly becomes knowledge work – liberated, in principle, from physical constraints by digital technologies – the choice of where one should conduct this work also becomes of paramount importance (Sørensen and Pillans 2012). If one could, in theory, be based anywhere, then why not search for the best possible environment to catalyse high-quality work and facilitate a desirable lifestyle? Being in a place that allows for direct personal interaction with a network of talented people thus becomes a priority for knowledge workers. This is not altogether surprising: recent research shows that the influence of digital interactions on social behaviour and learning tends to be dramatically weaker than that of face-to-face exchanges (Pentland 2014).

   These factors result in both strengths and vulnerabilities for the coworking sector – as well as for many conventional employers. Those who offer environments where flexible workers genuinely want to work are at a distinct advantage, while those less popular or less responsive are at the mercy of increasing rates of mobility.

   In the words of a mobile phone ad plastered on London’s double-decker buses in early 2018, users and members are ‘free to go, free to stay’.
Digital creators are typically nested within virtual teams and distinctive work processes, shaping their coworking needs.

While coworking operators and collaborative communities often like to highlight the professional diversity of their membership (Toivonen & Friederici 2015), they rarely recognise the diversity of their members’ team architectures and work processes. Digital creators tend to be embedded in multiple groups and work processes, not just in their coworking community or wider professional networks. Virtual teamwork, a case in point, has become so prevalent that the majority of coworking users can be assumed to engage in some form of such work. It may well be that virtual teams will soon eclipse co-located ones (if they have not already done so). Coworking spaces do provide a flexible, adaptable infrastructure for various virtual teams (Johns & Gratton 2013), but they should now go beyond a passive infrastructure-focused approach to more actively and consciously foster creative virtual teamwork in light of its many paradoxes (Dube & Robey 2008). Leaders should moreover pay far more attention to the mode of creative work their key user groups engage in. Interestingly, while certain users and teams choose coworking because they need to engage in constant interactive work, others work more individually through digital infrastructures and utilise coworking spaces despite having no apparent functional need for co-location (Lee & Sawyer 2002). The ways in which the creative interactions enabled by coworking spaces can serve these groups will differ significantly.

Technology is leading to the global redistribution of professional work processes, yet digital infrastructures can also be shaped locally.

We are living through a moment when sophisticated professional services that were hitherto produced by a small number of human experts are being distributed or “farmed out” to a global army of both skilled and unskilled people as well as algorithms (Susskind & Susskind 2015). The same applies to creative entrepreneurial work: the task of setting up a new company, freelancing project or design undertaking requires working across multiple platforms and channels in a pattern that might be described as digital bricolage (Toivonen 2016). However, while creative processes now inevitably unfold within a connected global ecosystem, modular digital infrastructures remain malleable and adaptable in line with local practices (Star & Ruhleder 1996). This does not stop at configuring chat platforms such as Slack for the needs of a particular coworking community. Indeed, the possibilities – say, for testing out more suitable matching algorithms, knowledge-sharing practices or apps that stimulate face-to-face creative interactions – are endless and a key question coworking leaders should be asking themselves is: Are your members actively involved in inventing new, promising uses for technology in your particular context? If not, why not? As with physical infrastructures, keeping digital environments customisable – and assuming that ordinary members can be trusted to invent and share myriad productive uses (Zittrain 2008) – is a principle that leaders need to take seriously. Fostered in this way, user innovation can produce innovations that go on to substantially catalyse your members’ (diverse) creative journeys.
Adding creative value through feedback that serves diverse individuals
INSIGHT SIX

Adding creative value through feedback that serves diverse individuals

The act of giving and receiving feedback sometimes seems so mundane that we forget it is a critical and productive part of the creative process, especially when early-stage ideas are being elaborated, tested and fortified ahead of implementation (see Insight Two). Indeed, seminal research in organisation science has argued that mere ‘collections of creatives’ become genuine ‘creative collectives’ only when they establish cultures of feedback-sharing (Hargadon & Bechky 2006).

Unfortunately, coworking organisations rarely make systematic efforts to cultivate a feedback-rich culture. This is a lost opportunity because feedback can be about much more than evaluation, whether critical or constructive: it has the potential to open a space for co-creation between two or more people who do not necessarily work together on a regular basis. Through catalysing feedback interactions, collaborative organisations can add substantial creative value to diverse member journeys in a peer-driven, bottom-up way. We derive three particular insights from existing research on creativity and feedback in organisations.

Moments of collective creativity flourish when organisations foster feedback-focused behavioural patterns. These include (1) help-seeking, (2) help-giving, (3) reflective reframing (i.e., mindfully building on the comments of others and testing out alternative perspectives or metaphors) and (4) reinforcing (Hargadon & Bechky 2006).

There is no need to over-idealise ‘serendipity’ or spontaneous ‘creative clashes’ as this can result in a passive, hands-off approach to creative interactions.

Instead, collaborative organisations should foster a self-organised culture of feedback-sharing through workshops – that teach feedback-giving and seeking skills – appropriate mentoring schemes and other strategies that create value for members.
Certain feedback situations and styles can trigger strong emotional reactions, potentially harming the creative process as a result (Amabile 1996). Typically, feedback that is interpreted as critical or harsh simply gets ignored. Recent research by Toivonen and colleagues (Toivonen et al. 2018) suggests that, in certain cases, strongly critical feedback coming from a person of authority can be experienced as a powerful shock when it highlights a critical flaw within a new idea. Whether such shocks ultimately act as a positive stimulus for creative episodes is as of yet unclear. What is evident, though, is that feedback-sharing amounts to an affect-laden process, which is something collaborative environments will need to take into account.

Feedback research has also found that the active seeking of feedback tends to enhance creative performance (the broader and more numerous the feedback sources the better). Such seeking can mediate the effects of a person’s particular creative thinking style and compensate for organisational lack of support towards creativity (De Stobbeleir et al. 2011). The implication is that collaborative organisations should – rather than assuming one size fits all – explore how diverse individuals can tap into feedback processes effectively through routes and social situations that work for them. Also, research has found that feedback needs evolve in line with the creative idea journey (see Insight Two), which is something support measures need to take into account. For instance, at a very early stage in the idea journey, open-ended, exploratory feedback serves an important role, whereas more challenging, narrowly focused feedback is called for during the elaboration phase of the journey.
(Re-) learning how to foster creative moments

Every coworking space and collaborative organisation shapes the creative interactions and idea journeys of their members. As this report has argued, the problem is that only very few have developed a mindful, systematic approach to fostering creative journeys – despite the ubiquity of creativity-focused branding. Most leaders and managers do have an intuitive feel for, and an opinion on, how to cultivate an environment where productive interactions unfold. Yet, intuition is no substitute for systematic thinking and research when attempting to improve a complex creative environment in an effective, sustainable way. If we take the time to make our various implicit assumptions on the creative process explicit, we can then test them through well-designed research experiments, for instance. This can lead to a far more advanced understanding of the creative process while enabling the co-design of robust interventions.

In this brief conclusion to our report, we wish to highlight that coworking spaces and other organisations for fluid work have barely begun to scratch the surface of creativity support. Vast potential exists for bringing to life a new generation of more evolved environments.

Is ‘community’ the key to catalysing creative moments?

Virtually every coworking firm claims it hosts a ‘community’. There is a long-standing debate in the social sciences about the pros and cons of place-based knowledge communities, extending into recent research on coworking (e.g. Toivonen 2016; Garrett et al. 2017). Clearly, everyday notions of ‘community’ do little to remind us that collaborative organisations must strike a dynamic balance between external openness or fluidity and internal integration (Gryszkiewicz & Friederici 2014). External openness facilitates exposure to new people and knowledge, which in turn facilitates creativity. A degree of internal integration is required to catalyse creativity via high-quality interactions, but over-emphasising internal cohesion will make the given ‘community’ appear closed to outsiders, reducing creative potential.
where members and their budding ideas can genuinely flourish and receive the ‘nutrients’ they need. Accessing this reservoir of potential requires that leaders, managers and designers re-learn the art of fostering creative moments in a transformed, and continuously transforming, context. This re-learning should come from a place of humility – an acknowledgment that there are limits to how open collaborative organisations can shape networked, mobile creative processes that extend far beyond their boundaries – as well as from a place of ambition – an awareness that such organisations nevertheless have a special, growing role to play in a society where individuals (and with them, therefore creative processes) have become freed from a whole range of constraints.

This report has advocated that we re-learn how to support creativity through fixing our eyes on the so-called idea journey and focusing on how myriad interactions propel such journeys forward. A messy yet traceable, staged process that begins with the generation and selection of new ideas, coworking organisations may have most value to add during the so-called idea elaboration and championing phases (see Insight Two). Through these stages, an emergent idea starts to grow and become more robust through various conversations, presentation opportunities and prototyping efforts. Feedback interactions are among the most promising conduits through which organisations can ‘add creative value’ to idea journeys here (Insight Six).

With these points in mind, we hope this report will encourage you to identify specific points of intervention in the creative idea journeys of your members. Productive questions to examine would include: (1) Where are our members at in terms of their personal idea journeys, and when are they most in need of help from our community? (2) Are we providing value through the most obvious mechanisms, such as feedback interactions, and do we have (research) processes in place to keep track of how these mechanisms contribute to member progress? (3) Are we also supporting creativity through less obvious yet vital pathways, such as by supporting positive affect within a culture of mutual regard and recognition? (4) Are there creative challenges – such as those faced by members who regularly engage in virtual teamwork – that we have not yet considered at all?

We wish you luck with your own creative journeys as leaders whose innovative efforts will ultimately shape the future of coworking and collaborative work in the years and decades to come.
We hope that the insights set out in this report will stimulate the thinking of executives, managers and designers as they craft new creative environments and improve existing ones. At the same time, while offering useful frameworks, perspectives and perhaps inspiration, the direct applicability of extant research is limited due to the fact that no two creative communities are the same. Inevitably, each brings together a unique mix of people, values, knowledge, networks, moods and experimental possibilities (within a particular cultural and urban setting). The branding strategies of each organisation will differ as well, with some investing in a menu of cultural content (e.g. Second Life) and others emphasising innovations in well-being (e.g. WorkLife and Blooms). This is why working together with experts who can provide tailored research and feedback can be of great value; it can respond directly to the most salient problems a given organisation faces at a particular time, taking into account strategic priorities.

Given the short history of serious research engagements between collaborative spaces and external experts, how should value-generating collaborative projects be structured? We recommend adopting a fundamentally iterative approach where new knowledge is generated and then swiftly applied, in successive cycles. Diagnosing the current strengths and weaknesses of a creative environment is often an excellent first step, as it establishes a necessary baseline against which the effects of various adjustments and new initiatives can be measured. Based on this, further research and co-design activities can then be planned and initiated. The key point is to ensure the entire process remains collaborative and aligned with the needs and priorities of the organisation in question. Such needs and priorities could include an interest in raising levels of engagement, well-being and innovation to boost overall member satisfaction and retention rates; they could also focus on creating evidence and momentum for thought-leadership activities.

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