

# Creativity and how it works/doesn't work in the WFH era

 By [John Davenport](#)

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People are different. We can tell this by just going outside (while staying 2m away from everyone) and having a look around. Some people are, of course, more different than others (for example that guy called Nigel who knits his own underwear) but he's probably a unique case.



Photo by [Vlada Karpovich](#) from [Pexels](#).

But being different means that we, as humans, deal with things differently. And this applies to how we handle everything from success to failure to stress and, of course, lockdowns during global pandemics.

## WFH works better for people who are more organised

Although the nature of work and productivity is an area into which there has been a huge amount of research (because it's a lucrative area for academics to study) there has been very little research into home-based working.

Probably because until now only about 2% of people worked from home, making it a decidedly unlucrative area in which to do research.

But that has changed just a tiny bit this year.

The numbers are hard to find, but it seems like more than half of professionals are now working from home. And it seems to be working better for some than for others.

Generally, it's easier for people who are older, because older people tend to have more space, meaning that they aren't working 8 hours a day in their bedroom with their computer balanced on a pile of books. In fact, one study claimed that 30% of young people had essentially spent the last five months working in or on their bed. Meaning they've been in bed since March, which can't be especially psychologically healthy...

WFH also seems to work better for people who are more organised. People who don't suffer from ADHD. People who don't rely on social interactions as much. And people who don't need much new sensory input. All of which means that this new way of working is particularly tricky for one group of people: creatives.

## The creative leap

The act of creating a new idea is a funny one. Psychologists still don't fully understand it. But it seems to be related to the ability to make unexpected connections between things. This creative "leap" seems to be helped by many of the things that are currently unavailable in the WFH space – conversations with co-workers, seeing new things, brief & fun distractions from the task at hand before returning to it. All of this seems hard to achieve when one is working from home. But we need to figure out how to do this, because social distancing is one of the very few tools we have to fight this End of Days pandemic.

So how do we do it?

**Technology** – We really are terrifically lucky to have digital tech that has made group video chats so simple and accessible. Can you imagine if this had happened 30 years ago when a telephone was the only tech available? However, we need to make sure our Zoom-ness isn't only used for meetings. Meetings, as we know, are the opposite of creativity so we need to make sure that these group calls aren't just used for information-heavy discussions about work-flow etc. We need to make sure that they are used for casual brainstorming, conversations, and talking nonsense – because this is where a lot of creativity happens.

**Make the most of this change** – A change in environment or way of working can often be a great way of getting your mind to look at things in a new way. And WFH certainly entails this. We need to embrace it. Things are different now, and that can be good for ideas, we just need to dive into it and not fight it. In the good old days, you could chat to a colleague to take a break, now you can go for a run. Before you had people to bounce ideas off, but now you have all your personal books to draw on. The important thing is to make sure we actually do this, and don't slide into the grey creative abyss that is composed purely of work and then Netflix...

**Kill the boredom before it kills you** – Nothing crushes creativity more than boredom. Things like having a mean or dim-witted boss don't even come close. Trust me, I've looked into it.

During this lockdown period, boredom stalks us like a hungry predator. The only way to fight it, is to fight the work/Netflix rut and it's warm, sticky embrace...

- Invent a card game.
- Write an article nobody will ever read.
- Have a picnic on the roof.
- Play strip poker.
- Call someone you wouldn't normally call on a Tuesday.
- Dance. Even if you're crap at dancing.
- Light a bonfire.
- Paint the bathroom.
- Do 200 push-ups.

- Dress up for breakfast.
- Invent a cocktail with a glorious name, made out of the 10ml of leftover gin and that cheap bottle of sherry you keep under the sink.
- Learn to sing.
- Anything.

But don't let the boredom win.

**Organised-ness** - We need to be patient with creative people, while helping them be organised. Sadly, apart from a few super-humans (no, you aren't one of them) who can do both, people tend to be either efficient and organized OR creative. The physical workplace helps the creative mind stay on-task and helps it manage the on/off distraction/creativity cycle where ideas tend to be formed. This means that we as creatives need to try and practice more self-discipline, and also means that managers need to find ways to over-see and check-in just as regularly as they would in a physical office space without micro-managing. It will take us all a while to learn these skills. In the meantime, we need to be patient with each other.

**Getting out of the house/your bedroom** – So while we can't exactly go to a museum/art/exhibition/bar to jerk the creative mind into action, there are other things we can do. Even if it's a totally safe drive out of the city where you never leave your car, it's vital to change one's environment a bit when the blank page looks very blank and new ideas resolutely refuse to appear.

**Managing the return to work** – The truth is that creatives probably need to be the first people to return to a physical workspace of some kind. But when this happens (and that's currently unclear) it will need to be done carefully. However, if only a proportion of employees are returning it should be relatively easy for them to observe strict distancing and sensible Covid protocols. Fortunately, creative people don't need to spend 24/7 working together to fuel the creative process, getting together for short periods of time should be enough to start the process and help pull one's mind out of the ruts that bog down creative thought.

**NB:** Don't imagine that creatives will want to/be able to work from home when this is over - One reads with interest that some companies seem to be embracing the idea of staff working from home with an enthusiasm exclusively reserved for ideas that save them money.

## The creative mind is a problem-solving machine

This is a bit like the speed with which hotels embraced the idea that not all their towels should be washed daily – which was quite funny because we know they would happily sell the sun to Satan for a 2% increase in profitability.

But the point is that this won't work for businesses that employ creative people. Unless you want to lose all the good ones. A start-up in London that I know of recently said to their staff that they could save \$200 000 a month on rent if they moved to a permanent WFH system and offered to pay half of that to their 60 staff as a salary increase. Almost 100% of the staff said that they thought this was a terrible idea, proving how highly the creative mind values the need for other people and human interaction.

But when all is said and done, the creative mind is a problem-solving machine.

Wherever it is, it will find ways to come up with ideas. I have had some of my best ideas simply appear in my head unannounced while I was doing something completely unrelated. And have had others while sitting down and staring at a computer screen till my cerebral cortex felt ready to explode – either way ideas won't be stopped, we just need to help them make their way into the work as easily as possible.

ABOUT JOHN DAVENPORT

John Davenport is the Chief Creative Officer at Havas Southern Africa.  
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