

Required profile: original ideas, ideational flexibility, openness to new ideas

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT HIRING CREATIVE STAFF

Mark Runco

This article summarizes thoughts about how to hire creative employees and allow them to work well in an organization.

The label “creative” may not be the one you think about when you consider what you need from a new employee. Yet organizations change, and they are changing today faster than ever before. The creative employee will have the capacity to change, to adapt, and to remain engaged, even with rapid change. Creative talent will be useful even if the employee is in some position that does not require the production of new ideas and designs. In addition to its association with adaptability and the capacity for change, creativity is directly tied to innovative thinking, inventiveness, entrepreneurship, and originality.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Creativity is a prerequisite for innovation. It is necessary, but not sufficient for innovation. To understand this relationship, it is useful to consider the “standard definition” of creativity. This is the standard in part because it has been around for over 50 years. You would be hard-pressed to find an article in the leading research journals (e.g., the *Creativity Research Journal* and *Creativity and Innovation Management*) that does not use this definition.

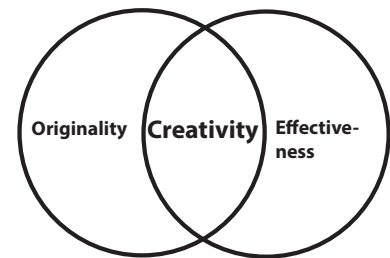
The standard definition points to 2 things: originality and effectiveness (Ill. 1). Both are required for creativity. Something can be highly original, but if it is not effective, it is “just” original – and perhaps grossly unrealistic and impractical. Indeed, tests of creativity have been given to institutionalized psychotic individuals, and they turn out to be highly original. But their ideas are far removed from reality. For this reason their ideas and thoughts are original but not creative.

Creativity: novelty combined with effectiveness

Effectiveness depends on context. It is sometimes called “fit”, “appropriateness”, or even “value”. When the creative capacity is being used to solve some problem, effectiveness is apparent in that the idea solves the problem. It works. But of course there are effective ideas that are uncreative. These would be practical but unoriginal. There is nothing wrong with them, if they work – unless they keep you from considering new possibilities.

Innovation vs. creativity

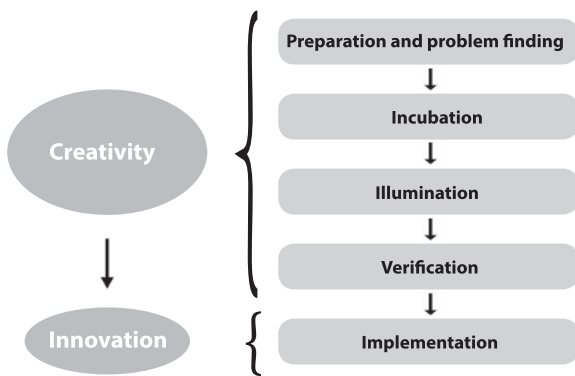
One way to distinguish creativity from innovation is to think about the ratio of originality-to-effectiveness. Both are required for creativity, and both are required for innovation, but the ratio may vary, with creativity depending



Ill. 1: Creativity: at the intersection between originality and effectiveness

more on originality than effectiveness, and innovation depending more on effectiveness than originality. An innovation may represent a small variation on an existing product or service – but if that variation is enormously effective in terms of utility or profit, it qualifies as innovative. Creativity, on the other hand, may weigh originality more heavily than effectiveness. Think about the arts, where there may be a breakthrough in style that is not immediately understood (or even interesting) to all audiences. It may be highly original and yet not broadly effective, at least in terms of the masses. The artist him- or herself may see it as effective on some aesthetic level, or perhaps in the context of previous work.

A second way to distinguish creativity from innovation relies on a “stage-theory” (Ill. 2). This describes creativity and innovation as processes, and for convenience, each process is divided into phases or stages. Creativity can be described as starting with a prob-



Ill. 2: Stage theory: creativity involves the stages preparation and problem finding, incubation, illumination and verification. For innovations a fifth stage is required: implementation

generating original ideas, and some of these are designed specifically for business.

The rCAB SWOT measure is a good example of such a measure. It asks the prospective employee to generate ideas for the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats related to a real or hypothetical business, organization, product, service, or even market. Several things can be learned from those ideas, in addition to “how original is this person when faced with an open-ended task?” the SWOT measure provides very good information about the flexibility of the individual, for example, as well as his or her fluency with ideas and solutions (Ill. 3 and 4). The capacity to generate ideas is an enormously important part of creative talent. And it can be reliably assessed. In fact, the rCAB has computer versions where the prospective employee sits, completes a few tasks (the assessments), and the prospective employer is immediately given data on originality, flexibility, fluency of ideas, and so on.

Creative potential vs. creative performance

The most important distinction used in the research on measuring creativity is the distinction between potential and actual performance. The expert, having a large investment in a particular line of thought, may have a history of previous creative performances. Still, there is no guarantee that he or she will continue to perform in a creative fashion. And given that expertise can constrain thinking (hence the idea of “overly invested” and descriptions of “the cost of expertise”), there are reasons to think that entirely new ideas are not likely to be produced by individuals with tons of previous experience.

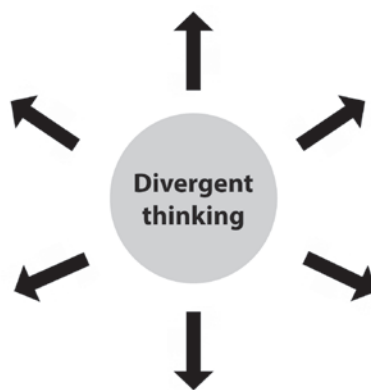
The distinction between potential and actual performance helps with the question of “Who should be hired?” In fact, this is the first question that an employer must ask. Does the organization need someone with a track record, but someone perhaps entrenched towards particular thinking tendencies, or would the organization most benefit from an employee who is inexperienced and yet open to new ideas and likely to be flexible in his or her thinking and contributions?

Sometimes an employer might need to hire an individual with a track record and proven skills, in which case actual performance rather than potential is

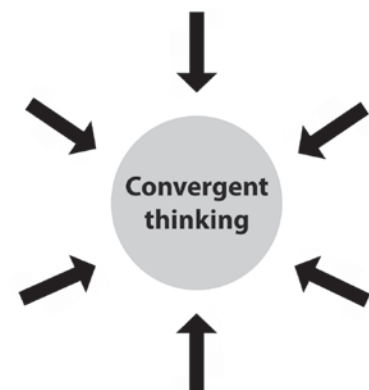
lem definition stage, followed by the generation of alternatives, and then the evaluation and testing of those alternatives. Innovation may involve these same stages, but for innovation, there must be “implementation” as well. The idea or alternative that resulted from the earlier stages must eventually be translated into a product or service. This may all sound quite theoretical, but there are practical implications. Someone hiring a new employee and looking for creative and/or innovative talent may choose to use some sort of assessment of potential, and it may tap problem definition or original ideation or one of the things mentioned above. There are actually several ways to empirically assess originality and creative potential – good reliable methods that are based on research and theory.

ASSESSING CREATIVE POTENTIAL

My own battery of tests, just to name one illustration, has instruments that reliably assess how accurately a person recognizes original ideas, and another similar instrument to reliably assess how well a person recognizes valuable or appropriate ideas. The same battery, called the “rCAB” (for “Runco Creativity Assessment Battery”), has quite a few measures to assess the capacity for



Ill. 3: Divergent thinking tests like the SWOT ask people to produce a large number of ideas, allowing thinking to move in different directions



Ill. 4: Assessments of creative potential avoid contamination by convergence, where thinking follows habit and ideas are conventional

Assessing creative potential and performance

It is one thing to assess creative potential and quite another to assess creative performance. Creative potential can be assessed with divergent thinking tests, like the SWOT (i.e., analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats for a given company or project).

Measures of creative performance focus on actual results. They can be assessed by answering questions like:

- How many patents do you hold?
- Have you published any articles?
- How many presentations have you given to professional groups?
- How often have you developed new services that were then offered by your company?

These questions are domain-specific for engineers and scientists. Example questions for the domain “artistic performances” are:

- How many times have you shown a work of art in a show?
- How many works of art have you sold?
- How often have you been commissioned to produce a work of art?
- Have you received any award for artistic accomplishment?

Questions: © Mark Runco

vital. This may sound very straightforward, but what may not be obvious is that the distinction between potential and performance is much the same as looking forwards or backwards. An assessment of creative potential is a prediction about what could or perhaps should occur in the future. An assessment of actual performance, on the other hand, measures what has already occurred.

The rCAB has instruments to reliably assess both creative potential or actual creative performances. Assessments focusing on actual creative performance will often ask what an individual has previously achieved. These tend to be domain- or profession-specific (see blue box). There are actual surveys to get at this information, but in the context of employment, the information may be available on a résumé or letters of recommendation.

Creative potential may be much more important to the organization, certainly to any organization that is looking ahead. Creative potential is, however, more difficult to assess. Creative potential must be inferred from various indicators. These indicators are just that – indicators but not guarantees. Again citing the research,

an indicator is a useful one if it has a high correlation with actual performances. Importantly, correlations indicate the strength of an association, but they do not represent causal relationships. 2 things may be correlated and yet not causally related. Just because a sexy movie star is in movies that have made tons of money does not mean that people are only paying to watch the movie because that star is in it. It may be a timely story with a good plot, compelling cinematography, a powerful director, and it may utilize other good actors. Correlations are useful but not the last word. In research they help identifying good indicators but they do not guarantee that a person will in fact perform in the future as expected. They are likely to perform as expected, but there is no guarantee.

Regardless of the choice by the prospective employer – selecting a measure of potential or a measure of actual (past) performance – the employer should look for measures with good predictive validity – but at the same time keep in mind that the measures are mere indicators, each with a probability representing the statistical likelihood that the prediction will hold up.

Indicators of creative potential

The most typical indicators of creativity include the capacity to generate original ideas, noted above, as well as ideational flexibility, an attitude that reflects an openness to new ideas, personality traits that will allow the individual to exercise discretion, and a value system that appreciates creative things. The last of these is a remarkably important indicator, but then again, it may not be the primary concern when it comes to hiring employees. That is because organizations tend to have their own values, and these are likely to be conveyed to employees via reward systems and job evaluations. Any intelligent and motivated employee will discover what is valued in the organization, and the adaptable ones are likely to behave accordingly. They will change their ways, if they need to, earning rewards, succeeding, and staying employed.

An organization that clearly values creative and innovative thinking, and does so in a fashion that is communicated to employees, is likely to have employees that put effort into applying their creative potentials. This is a recipe for an innovative business: hire individuals with creative potential, and perhaps some with rich experience, ensure that the value system points to creativity and innovation, and monitor both.

TEAMS AND BRAINSTORMING

The capacity to generate ideas would also be particular important if that person is being considered for a position where work is done in teams or groups. After all, brainstorming was designed for problem solving by groups, and the focus when brainstorming is on fluency with ideas. The brainstorming method usually labels this quantity, as in “produce a large quantity of ideas and postpone requirements of solution quality” but that is what fluency represents: a large quantity of ideas. This is in contrast to ideational flex-

ibility, where the individual is able to shift from conceptual category to conceptual category. Fluency is also different from originality, where the person can find remote associations and highly unusual or unconventional ideas. All 3 skills – fluency, flexibility, and originality – play a role in creative talent, and each can be reliably assessed and selectively supported.

Brainstorming is widely misunderstood. Research indicates that brainstorming often does not work. And the reasons it does not work include things that can be avoided when new employees are hired. In other words, if teamwork is to be expected of an employee, certain things should be on the list of “desirable skills”.

Too often “social loafing” occurs in workgroups and the individual members do not contribute like they should. In fact, research shows clearly that, if you collect ideas from a set of individuals as they work alone and compare the total with ideas gathered from the same individuals working in a team, there is no comparison. People give more ideas, and better ideas, when they are alone. One reason for this involves tendencies towards socially acceptable behavior. When in a group, individuals censor their thinking. This is a good thing, at least for social convention, but it inhibits creative thinking. After all, creative ideas are original and unconventional.

Overly conventional thinking in brainstorming teams can be avoided, and originality is thereby more likely. Employers could just hire weirdos, people who care not at all for convention and do not censor their thinking. The organization might suffer, however, since cohesion and collaboration would likely be very difficult. What employers should look for is discretion. In this context discretion indicates that the individual (a) has the capacity for original thinking, but also (b) knows when to be weird and when to fit in. Discretion allows the individual to collaborate and cooperate because he or she knows when to be conventional, but the person retains the

capacity for unconventional thinking as well and is able to tap that when it is needed for some task or another. Discretion is implied by a quotation, used in various creativity publications: “Dare to be a radical, but don’t be a damn fool.” There are ways to increase the likelihood that a team will in fact produce truly creative ideas. The group can be optimized for creativity. It should not, for example, be too large of a team. The larger the group, the more pressure towards convention. Second, a group should be heterogeneous. This will ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, and this can easily contribute to original thinking. It also helps to avoid assumption, routine, tradition, each of which is also likely to preclude original ideas. Heterogeneity may relate to training or tenure within the field or organization. The most experienced individuals will bring large knowledge bases to the team. They may, however, be the least likely to share or appreciate original ideas. Psychoeconomists describe experts as “overly invested in their own way of thinking”, which means that they have the most to lose if something new is adopted. So they frequently do not consider things which are contrary to their area of expertise. Note that they do bring something to the team – large knowledge bases.

CONCLUSION

Creative potential is remarkably important, and it can be assessed in an objective manner. The problem is that it is mere potential. By definition, that means that the individual is not yet actually performing in an unambiguously creative fashion. If they were, it would not be mere potential – it would be actual performance. This in turn puts the prospective employer in a tough spot because the employer will need to (a) take a risk on the person who is not yet performing in an unambiguously creative fashion (but who has obvious potential) and (b) support the

creativity so it can flourish and develop. There might be something analogous to a learning curve where patience is required and time must elapse before there is a return on the investment – the investment into creative potential.

Many employers are unwilling to hire an individual with mere potential. Yet this is where they will get the most bang for their buck: by hiring people with potential and then making sure that the organizational culture values creativity. It should be obvious that the point about heterogeneous groups can also be used when hiring employees. It may be that the organization is hiring more than one person, in which case it is in a perfect situation for constructing teams that are optimal for creative and innovative thinking. It may be that the organization already has experienced employees in which case less experienced (and thereby flexible) individuals should be targeted. The heterogeneity may also be ensured by hiring individuals with diverse backgrounds. Any organization that cares about the future should always be on the look-out for employees who may still be developing their skills but have tons of potential which will flourish and pay dividends in the future. Clearly, investments into creative potential can pay huge dividends. ■

NOTE

¹ cf. www.creativitytestingservices.com

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Creativity Research Journal and now has a new journal, Business Creativity and the Creative Economy. www.markrunco.com