

# **A PLEA FOR PROMOTION: ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES SUPPORTING COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY**

Even after a long period of studying creative individuals in organisations (George 2007, Shalley et al. 2004) and a growing interest in studying creative collectives (e.g. Hargadon and Bechky 2006, George 2007), there are currently few empirical studies giving insight into what organisational creativity are and how it is constituted, maintained and developed. While observations indicate large variations between organisations on their capacities for being innovative and creative, there is at present no satisfactory answer to the question of what makes an organisation creative.

In this paper we try to address this question by proposing a framework that describe a typology of creative work practices for improving creativity processes in organisations. By creative practices we do not intend to limit ourselves to assess creativity in terms of outcome and subscribe to Drazin's et al. (1999) definition of creativity as "...the *process* of engagement in creative acts, regardless of whether the resultant outcomes are novel, useful, or creative." (p. 287). The framework is based on empirical studies of five firms, each regarded as leading in their fields.

The practitioners' work in these firms is dominated by daily complex problem solving involving activities of generating, combining, testing and implementing ideas in new or improved products and services. Our methodological approach is inspired by action science and co-generative learning advocating an interactive inquiry process that balances problem-solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven collaborative analysis (Reason & Bradbury 2001). "The objective of action science is to make (...) tacit theories explicit so that they can be critically examined and changed." (Friedman 2006: 133). In our project these examinations take place in collaborative sessions where we interactively engage participants to question their own practices or to

generate ideas. The identified drivers are actively deployed in these sessions as a point of departure for facilitating and nurturing their ongoing creative processes. The oil explorers and bankers have in these sessions been encouraged to first engage with reflection and self-assessment of their own work practices, then shifting to forward projecting prototyping of new concrete (often half-finished) ideas on critical aspects of their creative work. The purpose for our longitudinal (and still ongoing) project is thus twofold; for the participating organisations to improve their creative practices and for the researchers to obtain data and new insights on organisational creativity processes.

Creative activities and processes are enacted, provisional, in constant movement, and not easy to grasp (e.g. Amabile et al. 1985). In order to apprehend these practices in flux, we identified *drivers* of creative practices based on semi-structured interviews, observations, and discussions. A driver outline bracketed streams of activities that are present in situations or instances where there is a change of state in the creative work process flow bringing forth new dynamics and creative co-enactments. Brought together the set of drivers display aspects of high performing practices that highlights essential characteristics of what it takes to be successful with idea work. Viewed as such the drivers represent glimpses into experiences, capacities for knowing and co-constructed efforts, and dialogic imagination of forward looking projections, and are not supposed to be read as fixed findings. Rather they aim at putting parts of sometimes already well-known practices into words to enrich language and awareness of creative work for further action.

Overall the framework consists of a set of four intertwined, but still distinct, organisational practices positioned along two dimensions. The first dimension differentiates between practices directed at intervening and enhancing actual creative processes (*ideation*) and second-order practices for reflecting and improving the creative processes in themselves (*reflection*). The second dimension differentiates between *exploitation* or leveraging of creative work/ideas in progress and *explorations* or creation of novel ideas often by prototyping.

REFLECTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrichment of exciting activities.</li> <li>• Articulate common ground, concretize</li> <li>• Invite for holistic thinking and questioning the given</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagining future demands</li> <li>• Enable future perfect thinking</li> <li>• Envision new paths for success</li> </ul>
IDEATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enrichment of ideas</li> <li>• Structure, qualify, prioritize and reject ideas</li> <li>• Ensure leverage and robustness of ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prototyping of new ideas</li> <li>• Stimulate combination of ideas and explore boundaries</li> <li>• Avoid creative blockers and facilitate energy and engagement</li> </ul>
	EXPLOITATION	EXPLORATION

The conceptualisations made here draw on empirical studies of creative processes in an architectural firm, a law firm, an oil exploration company, a bank and a company specialising in carbon analysis. What we found was that these firms deliberately alternate between the various practices over time and that they don't stick to a fixed position in the matrix.

Organisations displaying extraordinary performance characteristics related to creative work processes and their outcomes are found to inhabit a repertoire of organisational practices (to a varying extent formalised) available for maintaining and strengthening today's creative work processes as well as keeping an sustained ongoing questioning of whether they should work different. The full paper will investigate in more detail how this is accomplished in our case companies.

## References

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