

Rest and constructive thinking feed entrepreneurs' creativity



Creativity – the generation of new and useful ideas – is seen as essential for entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs need to be creative day in and out to navigate the uncertainties, constraints and challenges that starting, growing and managing a business involves. Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop, [once said](#): “Nobody talks about entrepreneurship as survival, but that’s exactly what it is and what nurtures creative thinking.” Creativity is important for finding the “big breakthrough ideas” for business opportunities and firm innovations as well as for tackling the everyday challenges of entrepreneurial work such as managing human and financial resources.

Researchers and practitioners typically treat entrepreneurs' creativity as an in-born personality trait that is stable over one's lifetime. This implies that people deeming themselves to be less creative might refrain from entrepreneurial activities, because they think and are being told they do not have the right skills to be an entrepreneur.

[Our research](#) proposes that creativity is not as fixed as often assumed. Instead we see creativity as a skill that can, at least in part, be nurtured. Such a view on creativity entails that it is changeable and may be influenced by factors that the entrepreneur can control. Specifically, we investigated the drivers that make one day more creative than another. Considering that entrepreneurs' work is highly [stressful and demanding](#), we expected that their strategies to recover from work during leisure time to have an important role. Recovery from work helps to “[recharge one's batteries](#)” and it may enhance entrepreneurs' creativity.

We predicted different effects for physiological and mental recovery. First, [good night-time sleep](#) is an essential indicator of physiological recovery that may fuel creativity. High quality sleep enables incubation processes during which creative ideas are developed unconsciously. Second, mental recovery after work in the form of constructive thinking about one's work may similarly pave the way for creative solutions for entrepreneurs' business.

In particular, we predicted beneficial effects for entrepreneurs' creativity for so-called work-related [problem-solving pondering](#), but not for work-related affective rumination which refers to repetitive thinking and comes along with negative feelings. In other words, pondering problems may benefit creativity but only if it is not associated with feeling worried, anxious, and tense (affective rumination).

We worked with 62 entrepreneurs who wore an [actigraphic device](#) around their wrist to measure their night-time sleep quality for twelve days. Each evening, we contacted the entrepreneurs individually for telephone interviews. We assessed their creativity experienced during their working day and their engagement in problem-solving pondering after work. We also collected information on a range of control variables, for further details [see our study](#).

We found that creativity varies for each entrepreneur on a daily basis. Thus, entrepreneurs experience changes in their daily creativity and are more creative on some days and less creative on other days. Critically, these daily fluctuations in creativity are much more pronounced and substantial than creativity differences between individual entrepreneurs. Day-to-day fluctuations explain about 77 per cent and individual differences between entrepreneurs account for 23 per cent for the total variation in daily creativity observed in our study.

We find that physiological and mental recovery are indeed drivers of entrepreneurs' daily creativity. Good night-time sleep is beneficial for entrepreneurs' next day's creativity. Furthermore, we find differences between entrepreneurs: entrepreneurs who tend to ponder work problems in their leisure time are more creative than those who tend to "switch off" from work.

We also explored the effects of age on creativity. There is a common stereotype that older workers and by extension entrepreneurs are less creative. We found indeed that older entrepreneurs were less creative compared to younger entrepreneurs. However, our findings suggest that this may be a choice rather than a biological inevitability. Older entrepreneurs spend less of their leisure time with pondering work problems and hence generate fewer creative ideas than younger entrepreneurs.

Taken together, our study highlights that creativity is malleable and not as fixed as often assumed. This finding is important for policymakers, business support consultants and educators. It means that they can support potential and existing entrepreneurs to enhance their creativity for instance through developing tailored strategies of recovery from work stress.

Entrepreneurs can also self-regulate their recovery and influence their creativity accordingly. For instance, entrepreneurs might strive for good sleep quality and avoid sleep problems (e.g., by listening to relaxing music prior to bedtime or by practicing yoga). They may consult health advisors if they notice severe sleep problems. Our findings also show that thinking about work in a constructive and emotionally-neutral way during leisure time has beneficial effects on their creativity, and helps to make sense of some conflicting findings regarding detachment and creativity [in the literature](#).

We hope to inspire future work on entrepreneurs' recovery – recovery is a strategy under the control of the entrepreneurs and likely a key tool for entrepreneurs' to deal with their stressful jobs.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Having a creative day: Understanding entrepreneurs' daily idea generation through a recovery lens](#), *Journal of Business Venturing*, 2018
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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