Making space for creative work

Creativity in confinement
68% of senior marketers say creative collaboration will suffer if teams cannot share the same space during the coronavirus crisis¹

It doesn’t have to be that way.

¹According to survey of 887 UK brand marketers conducted by Marketing Week and Econsultancy
On the 19th of March, we closed our beloved office, and went home. Now working from our kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms, there’s no denying that we miss working side by side in our studio.

Some things are more of a challenge when you have to work remotely. But that doesn’t mean the creativity has stopped. The pressure to innovate has only increased, and who knows when we’ll next be making a trip into the office.

Over the past couple of months we’ve been reflecting on what it was that made our studio such a creative space, to ensure that the sudden thrust into the virtual world doesn’t reduce our ability to create.

Creativity cannot be put on hold.

Matt’s various roles have taken him from hot desks in London and cubicles in Montreal to being entirely remote based, whether that’s at home, or on site in a client’s office. In lockdown he can occasionally be found working from the shed on Yoyo’s allotment.

The nature of remote work and creativity has long been a passion of Matt’s, having written a dissertation on the subject and been responsible for delivering tools and processes to support communication, collaboration and innovation in global companies in the past.

Matt Lee
Head of Strategy and Experience
There are many ways to look at creativity. We see it as a behaviour. One that is innate to our human abilities, but one that needs to be nurtured, because challenging the status quo can make us vulnerable.
It is the process of questioning, exploring and experimenting. It is a determination to find valuable new ways of doing things. It is resilience to being ‘wrong’.

There’s no doubt that creativity is essential to business. It is a behaviour needed at all levels, not only as the seed for disruptive innovation, but also as part of day to day efforts to stay relevant, keep customers happy, and for us to have an individual sense of purpose.

Creativity, however, is misunderstood. The things that are hailed as truly creative are the output of years or decades of work. These are things that must be deemed novel and useful to all of society. Stories often gloss over the mistakes, the conversations and the collaboration; instead focusing on the mind of a solitary genius. That uniquely gifted individual, who has a license to be creative, and freedom from ‘business as usual’ constraints.

Our unique experiences and knowledge mean we can all find a role to play in the process of creating – it is not the sole responsibility of one person, or one team. While an idea may emerge in one person’s head, it can only form something valuable when it is shared, embraced and evolved.

We can all be creative. We need to be.
Remote work and creativity

We very quickly realised that we couldn’t recreate our studio in the virtual world. There are elements we’ve managed to emulate with some success, but you cannot expect to work in the same way when you’re remote. Routines and expectations need to change, or you’ll quickly find people burning out or becoming disengaged.

To understand how we can make creativity work from home, we needed to understand what was making it work well in the office.

After taking some time to reflect, it became very apparent that the office was not the only place where creative work was done. Sometimes creative moments would happen on the commute, or during a workout. Getting out of the office to visit clients provided inspiration, and occasionally we’d need to escape to a coffee shop if we really needed to to focus without distractions.

The office was just one part of the picture, albeit an important one. It was the focal point of our routine and identity, and provided much needed facilities, comforts and interaction.
Space for creativity

6 key modes of working
We’ve identified 6 key modes of work that we believe are vital to the creative process. Each of these might seem diametrically opposed to one another – for example, the ideas of ‘focus’ and ‘play’ might seem incompatible. However, time spent in deep focus requires a measure of play to reset and allow the brain to prepare for the next wave.
A good work environment will make it easy to transition between these activities by providing access to spaces that support them.
Collaboration
Collaborative workshops are a key element of the creative process at Yoyo. The purpose of them is twofold:

1. It gives us the opportunity to elicit vital information from key stakeholders so we can understand their main drivers and pain points. This gives us the kind of deep understanding that no written brief can offer.

2. It is also an opportunity for us to take our clients on the journey with us. By exploring insights and working through activities together, we form collective ownership for the ideas that begin to emerge. This joint participation means we become one team. There are no nasty surprises when something “different” is offered up. Because isn’t that what creativity is about?

It requires a certain amount of bravery for a client to embrace a truly creative idea, so they need to understand the rationale, and they really need to trust the team delivering on it. A good workshop builds the foundation of this relationship with open communication and shared experiences.

In normal times we would always make the effort to have at least one face-to-face workshop, because an event like that is about more than just the meeting itself. The time around the ‘official activities’ is vital to go beyond niceties and really build a connection. In the virtual world we must find new ways to get to know our clients remotely, and for them to get to know us.

Being a creative agency naturally means we embrace sticky notes whenever we can, but we’ve found digital whiteboard tools paired with video conferencing to be just as effective. We just have to provide our own snacks.
Collaboration in the...

Physical world
- Meeting rooms with whiteboards and sticky notes

Virtual world
- Video conferencing
- Digital whiteboard tools like Mural, Miro and LucidChart
2. Stimulation
Seeking out inspiration and new ideas by learning from others.

Beyond fear or micromanagement, the big motivation for keeping offices up until now was for those ‘water cooler moments’. The magic of serendipity – that chance conversation providing the insight that leads to a new idea or breakthrough.

Serendipity¹

¹ The occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.
Stimulation in the…

**Physical world**
- Interactions in an open-plan office
- Sticking the kettle on for a cuppa with colleagues
- Turning around to ask a question or show a colleague something

**Virtual world**
- General channels on Slack or Teams for sharing anything of interest
- Making time in the schedule for impromptu chats and virtual coffee breaks
- Displaying an ‘available’ status in messaging tools
- Always open virtual meeting rooms
- Use of social networking sites like Twitter, LinkedIn & Dribble
- Browsing favourite news and awards websites
Focus
Like seclusion, this is about accomplishing individual tasks but it does not involve isolation. Instead, proximity to those working on the same, or similar initiatives ensures that moments of collaboration can be efficient.

Getting a task done

It also provides a certain element of pressure. If those around you are aware you're working on this task, then there's an expectation that you should have something to deliver – or at least something interesting worth talking about when the time comes. The right level of expectation provides motivation. Seclusion does not carry this same pressure.

No one has the capability to function effectively when surrounded by multiple 'shiny objects' that are fighting for your attention. Equally, when trying to be creative and problem solve, you need to feel in control and have a space that supports that.

A key mechanic here is goal setting. Plenty of us have 5 to 10 year goals but using a similar technique for much shorter periods of time, such as the current day or next few hours helps to manage the amount of items you are balancing at any one time.

When we’re trying to solve a particularly in-depth problem or developing the strategy for an exciting new campaign we adapt a ‘war room’ methodology by taking over a meeting room and agreeing an approach. This helps us develop a common understanding of key tasks and how we are progressing to achieve our objectives. It helps to remove background distractions from the rest of the office and provide a cultivated space that is focused on resolving a particular set of problems.

In isolation, we have worked on replicating this war room feel through project-specific channels paired with virtual meeting rooms that are always just a click away. Shared documentation in Google Drive allows the close-knit team to understand what others are working on and current progress.
Focus in the…

Physical world
- Dedicated desk with proximity to colleagues
- Turning a meeting room into a ‘war room’

Virtual world
- Project channels in Slack and Teams
- Quick access to virtual team meeting rooms
- Document collaboration in G-Suite or Office 365
- Task management tools like Trello and Microsoft To Do
4. Seclusion
Isolating yourself from distractions and interruption to allow time for reflection and contemplation.

“As far as creativity is concerned, isolation is required... The presence of others can only inhibit this process, since creation is embarrassing. For every new good idea you have, there are a hundred, ten thousand foolish ones, which you naturally do not care to display.”

Isaac Asimov on Creativity

This solitude is the polar opposite of collaboration. It is, however, important to note that seclusion and collaboration often work hand in hand. We know well from our own experience that not everyone favours a workshop environment or is comfortable with the process of discussing and moulding ideas on the fly. Indeed, we all require time to process and ponder the impact of decisions we’ve made. It is important that individuals can spend the time to explore concepts they find of interest without the nagging fear of judgement or interruption.

Finding seclusion in an open-plan office environment can be difficult. We’ve acknowledged that wearing headphones is a physical ‘do not disturb’ signal, but sometimes we’d find ourselves needing to escape to a coffee shop to avoid distraction. That wasn’t always the best solution, so we had recently introduced a dedicated quiet room, and even acquired a sound-proofed booth that was brilliant not only for a private phone call, but also for a moment of seclusion on the fly.

Studies have shown that in actuality, group brainstorming runs the risk of smothering bold ideas. In the end, the ideas that prosper are often selected due to the strength of personality favouring them, rather than the actual strength of the idea itself.

For those who are doing childcare or homeschooling during lockdown, finding space for seclusion can be very challenging – usually left until late in the evening when exhaustion has truly set in. For those living alone, on the other hand, it can be hard to avoid seclusion. That said, due to the nature of our ‘always on’ lifestyle, we run the risk of being disturbed at any moment. When you share an office it’s possible to see when people are in need of some time to think, but online this is not so visible. We must learn to interpret the virtual version of “my headphones are in! Talk to me later.”

We found ourselves needing to communicate an acceptance of the need for seclusion. We accept that staff don’t need to always be instantly available on Slack, and we recommend they block out periods of time in their calendar to inform others when they need the space.
Seclusion in the...

Physical world
- Working from a coffee shop
- Working from home or a garden shed
- Finding a quiet corner or booth in the office
- Putting in headphones as a ‘do not disturb’ signal

Virtual world
- Do not disturb status notification
- Blocking time in the calendar
- Streaming classical music
- ‘White noise’ generators like coffitivity.com or mynoise.net
- Screen time limiters:
  iOS Screen Time, Android Digital Wellbeing, FocusMe
5. Calm
Taking a moment to disconnect.

Ideation, research and exciting discussions with a team are inherently active and can be intensive and draining, especially over a video conference. We all need some downtime to allow us to ‘switch off’. In truth the brain doesn’t switch off, but it gives breathing room for your subconscious mind to process.

We have all experienced at one time or another the random ‘eureka!’ moment where we are hit with a sudden spark of inspiration that neatly ties together our disparate thoughts that we’ve harboured throughout the day. Our brain, when given time to unwind, can allow our subconscious to knit together the frantic, hurried thoughts into a cohesive plan or solution.

This is not inherently a social act. Here, the brain is free to drift and ponder the thoughts of the day, without being attentive to interaction or other concerns. Unlike ‘seclusion’ or ‘focus’, the mind is not actively focused on delivering work, meeting deadlines or solving problems.

We’re not saying that everyone needs to have a nap in the afternoon but there is merit to considering the power of individual’s sleep and downtime in the rhythm of your ideation process. Scheduling your team’s regroup the day after a creative workshop allows your team to benefit from the power of their commute home, their hobbies and their sleep. Revisiting a creative direction the next day will increase the chance of reaching the best possible outcome.

The greatest successes can be found when an individual has an enjoyable or satisfying task to complete that is repetitive. A task that becomes almost automatic, allowing an individual to mentally disengage from it. At Yoyo, we always seek ways to build this approach into our daily routine. We recently acquired a plot on an allotment close to our office and are committed to growing our own fruit and vegetables. This gives us a space to switch off and engage in simple tasks like planting, weeding and watering, which can offer a welcome break to the day.

There is no need to get your hands muddy to find this kind of creative outlet. In fact taking a shower might do the trick. The daily commute, household chores and repetitive tasks such as data entry can also often elicit the same response.
Calm in the...

Physical world
- Walking, driving or cycling
- Working out or swimming
- In the shower or bath
- Cooking or cleaning
- Gardening
- Sleep

Virtual world
- While simple or repetitive tasks like organising files and folders can allow the space for your mind to wander, generally it is best to get away from the screen if you already find yourself online for much of the day.
Play
To many, work and play are like chalk and cheese or night and day. However, making time and space for ‘play’ can be a catalyst for creativity.

‘Play’ is so vital as it has the potential to forge shared experiences. Shared experiences lead to better relationships. A study, published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, found that those with a stronger relationship with their colleagues gave more positive encouragement, and were more constructive and honest in their feedback—whereas acquaintances were less willing to seek help or have a robust discussion of their coworkers’ ideas. Over time, it is easy to see that a lack of thorough and open exchange of ideas could stunt creativity and hinder a team’s ability to seek out the best solutions and deliver great work. Playful activities provide an excellent avenue to build these strong connections between colleagues.

Play can take many forms but at Yoyo we love taking a break from the screen for a game of table football, or for a walk to the park. We’ve even built a small bar for those Friday afternoon meetings and the occasional late nights. We’ve also found ways to branch out into more wide-ranging pursuits including a particularly messy foray into clay modelling, and a range of activities from curling to bouldering.

Outside of the agency bubble, ‘play’ can take the form of a lunchtime group workout or 5-a-side football game, to even simpler forms like dedicated break out spaces for lunch where teams can gather and chat, away from work, without distracting other colleagues. A company culture that supports and actively encourages time for lunch away from your desk can go a long way in building better relationships between colleagues.

When the team is apart it is more important than ever to promote a strong team ethos. To maintain the culture of play throughout lockdown we’ve been taking part in virtual fitness sessions over Zoom, virtual games and quizzes, and created a ‘Theme of the Day’ Slack channel to discuss topics as wide-ranging as our pets and front doors, to the state of our jerry-rigged home desks. We’ve found it to be a wonderful way to share in the struggles, the absurdity and the hilarity of lockdown life.
Play in the...

Physical world
- Table football, table tennis, pool table
- Games consoles
- Pubs, bars or beer gardens
- Parks

Virtual world
- Virtual quizzes
- Online games
- Non-work related spaces on social channels
The power of choice

The creative process isn’t necessarily a straightforward one. It requires a flux between individual work and social contact, and between active thinking and moments of relaxation.

The sudden shift to remote working was a complete disruption to our established routines. With lockdown measures in place it can be hard to find the right environment to support our current activity. We may find ourselves in seclusion too much if living alone; or in a crowded house struggling to get away from the stimulation of the kids’ latest inventions. Sometimes it can be hard to switch off.

It is crucial that we have both the freedom and ease to move between spaces of our choice based on our needs and preferences. We need to find a new rhythm to our day that can provide a balance between different activities and environments, and help us divide work and home life.

An office solely consisting either of cubicles or open plan desks does not allow this, and is unlikely to be viewed as a very creative environment. The same can be said for trying to do creative work stuck in one place in the corner of our homes every day. It’s no surprise some people are missing their commute as this gave them the chance to change their environment and work mode, even if it was always subconscious and generally considered a necessary evil of the job.

An office should provide environments to support different types of activity, but it only works if the right culture and leadership is in place to foster those behaviours. Without going down the route of the likes of Google in providing gyms and endless social areas, it is very hard for an office to offer all of these spaces, and frankly they shouldn’t need to. People can find such spaces on their own, provided they understand the importance, and allow themselves the time.

As we emerge from lockdown, the increased acceptance of remote work provides an opportunity. If there is trust between an organisation and employee to work where and when is best for them, then the flexibility on offer can be a powerful thing for creativity.
“The implications for everyday life are simple: Make sure that where you work reflects your needs and your tastes. There should be room for immersion in concentrated activity and for stimulating novelty.”

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Do you need an office?
It’s the question everyone seems to be asking right now. What this pandemic has done is booted us collectively into the digital age and shown us the benefits of remote work, from increased flexibility, to access to a wider talent pool. Closing down our offices could also save vast sums of money. But is it worth it in the long run?

A creative work environment not only fosters innovation; it encourages collaboration, increases satisfaction and creates a strong culture and sense of belonging. An office that supports creative work is likely to be a major attraction for recruiting talented individuals, and a big factor in employee retention. But will an office be the same now, with social distancing measures in place?

A good office will offer a range of spaces that support creative activity, from individual focused work to sharing and learning. It’s critical to think about the importance of this to employees who may not have the luxury of a private home office, or those sharing childcare duties in need of a space away from home. For some, travelling into an office provides some welcome social interactions and opportunities to learn that simply can’t be matched online. A good office supports our wellbeing and mental health.

It is also important to note that when offices were forced to close, we were all in the same boat. Everyone was forced to work from home, and no one had the benefit of the latest inside knowledge from the office. Regardless of whether offices are downsized, some employees may want to maintain the flexibility of remote work. That should be embraced, but organisations must tread carefully to ensure those employees maintain the connection and sense of belonging that is experienced by those in the office.

Thinking about the six types of creative activity might allow us to rethink the role of the office. Virtual tools enable all of these activities, but what employees need is an opportunity to change their physical working environment to match the activity they are pursuing, whether that’s individual or social. Perhaps this can be achieved through providing access to coworking spaces for those who need it, and hosting regular social events to get teams together and form the social bonds needed for creative work. Maybe, offices can be reduced in size and focused on being a place to meet and a place to focus.

If your office environment wasn’t effective in the first place, it seems like a no-brainer to stay working remotely, because you’re better off finding the spaces that you need, yourself. However, for organisations who viewed an office as more than a mere necessity, the idea of never going back will be difficult to fathom. Such an office is likely to be intrinsic to their identity and culture, and shedding it will be a much harder decision to make.
Where do you do your best creative work?

In the office? At home? Somewhere else?

Is it a new place you’ve found, or is there somewhere you really miss? Are there tools you use that compare with being face to face?

We want to hear about how you are making space to inspire, interact and introspect. Share your thoughts, photos and videos with us on LinkedIn and join the conservation about how we can be creative in confinement.

Join the conversation
#creativityinconfinement
We help clients to deliver ‘Experiences with impact’, finding creative ways of engaging people through technology. Whether it’s developing a new product, creating a bold campaign, building a website that brings a brand to life, or experimenting with emerging technology like voice, VR and AR; we always put users at the centre of our thinking.

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