

Dr Mark Batey

What makes creative individuals and teams, according to the latest research

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Dr Mark Batey

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone and welcome to another interview at the innovation and creativity summit. Today we've got Dr. Mark Batey from the Alliance Manchester Business School an expert researcher in creativity. Mark lovely to have you.

Mark Batey: Thanks for having me Nick, how are you doing?

Nick Skillicorn: I am doing very well, how are you?

Mark Batey: Good. Thank you.

Nick Skillicorn: Mark why don't you let our viewers and listeners know what is your background in creativity and how did you get into the work?

Mark Batey: That's a great question, I am being great I guess I have been into creativity since I was born like most of us and I think that my true interest and passions around creativity probably lies at home with things like cooking making things with my kids and finding everyday solutions to stuff, finding better ways of spending our time and having fun together and I think probably like most people I have watched immensely, they are using their creativity in the daily sense. From the boring sort of dull rusty side in terms of academia and I got really interested in individuals and as a psychologist probably about the age of 10 or 11 I started reading psychology books and I knew that was the kind of thing that I wanted to do and I spend a lot of my time thinking about my work at home in a positive kind of way. But I often find myself day dreaming in one way or the other about a research thing or something I have read or something to do with my work and I wanted to fill my time with something. I for one was incredibly positive, and a force for good in the world. And I think studying creativity, what makes individuals happy, creative justice and what make teams flow and work in a creative innovative way and how to build a creative organization or even indeed some of our latest research how to support cities to be more creative. I thought of really positive ways of doing things and I quite like to have my mind full of those kind of positive things rather some of the more negative types of psychology they that can be out they are very important stuff but studying things like substance misuse and addiction or studying depression, it's really important stuff but I want to do something that felt kind of positive, that's why I got into creativity

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Nick Skillicorn: What exactly do you do at the Alliance Manchester business school when it comes to creativity?

Mark Batey: it's a good question, one that I have been trying to explain to my wife and children for sometimes. What does daddy actually do? I will try.

Obviously as a researcher; I conduct studies on individual creativity. What makes people tick and I have been doing studies on how to help individuals and teams be more creative through what kind of instructions you give even to the points of coning new slogans and patterns on the walls. When you change the office designs to encourage creativity. I have been working with co researchers on measuring creativity climate and innovation climates, what are the key determinant and drives as a creativity innovations and organizations. I have been doing a lot of interesting research on cross cultural and global understanding of creativity and innovational project at the moment on how do people from the far east and the middle east and the west define and understand what creativity and innovation are. I think we think kind of slightly differently.

I have been working in the Gulf, the Arabic Gulf on trying to understand regional differences around creativity and innovation. How do you train those skills giving that people come from slightly different perspectives. That's the kind of research and stuff; I try and apply as much of that research to teaching to undergraduates of course, master's students and a lot in terms of executive education programs for the business school. I have my own private consulting and we are in the number of the fortunes 500 organizations on creativity coaching for senior leaders and facilitating workshops and helping develop new strategies or providing some sort of consultancy services to help them build more innovative organizations. That gets in a snapshot some research, some teaching, some consultancy but generally running around having some lots of good fun at the same time.

Nick Skillicorn: Excellent I mean that's what you want, you want to be able to get the idea of what creativity is but still enjoy the work that you do. One thing you mentioned just there, I will like to find out a bit more about it. You said that people in the west and people in the east and people in the Middle East seem to define creativity slightly differently. What do you mean by that?

Mark Batey: Well just starting on the desk research and I have done number of focus groups across Beijing, I have done focus groups in Shanghai. I have been on every country across the Gulf Cooperation council countries the GCC countries. I don't have the most extensive findings but we do, we have spoken to hundreds of people and done lots of research. What seems to be coming out is that as we move from west to east, we become gradually less individualistic and more collectivistic. What we find is only individually oriented societies like America and the UK is that creativity seems like something very special, very unique often the property of a single individual and it's the wellspring of a single person's innovative and ground breaking idea. In the eastern culture, there is much more attention to think of it as a collective activity, something the society engages in but it's less about brand new novelty and being super surprising unique and much more around utility.

A lot of this I think starts to extend back to the original usage of the word creativity and innovation in different societies. In the west it tends to come from genesis, from the Latin creare "to bring into being what was not there before". This sort of bound up in creation myth or creation story so that there is a flash of light and TA-DA there is a creative idea. Where as in the eastern cultures there is much more the ideas of standing in the shoulders of giants. There is no such thing as brand new. You

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evolve and you adapt ideas that were there before and someone makes suggestion, another person comes along adds something to it, and it's an ongoing revolving process. So in the west it's all brand new super duper idea, in the east it's much more a collective evolving process. Innovation and creativity as the two things combined, I find in the west there is more an understanding of separating out the two concepts. Creativity often being more associated with the thinking side and innovation more with the doing. In the Far East, there seems to be less of a distinction, these words are merging together. I guess probably more often than anything else it's because we are taking these western words and then exporting them and then importing them into another country and perhaps those cultures can use slightly different terminologies. But we kind of got that first, you might argue in a robbery imperialistic way. Well here is these two things we have been studying now you are studying creativity and innovation in your country but without redefining them without really looking at what these concepts actually mean and where they come from. We are hoping to unpick some of that and I find it rather fascinating how what we thought might be rather giving unitary set of concepts that this creativity thing is what we all agree what it is and the innovation thing we all agree. Actually that doesn't seem to be so much the case.

Nick Skillicorn: it's fascinating because I actually grew up in Asia, in one of the most westernized cities in Asia, Singapore but you really did see this difference in the way that people perceive their own desire to be creative and express themselves. They have the desire to essentially work for a the benefit of the community. There was always a bit of discrepancy between what the individual wanted and what they felt they should be doing. I think that relates again to what you were saying, the desire to do something new versus or continue and improve upon what's happened previously.

Mark Batey: yes. There is a lot of issues around potential conformity and from approaches toward risk. I have a doctoral student who is based in Singapore, who has extended the work that we have done in the Gulf countries and he is now adapting that research method to Singapore. So we are asking our five questions, we are trying to define creativity and innovation, we are trying to understand how people go about doing business in Singapore, what are the strengths and the weakness of the way that they do business for creativity and innovation, what might be some of the draw backs, the issues and what do they think we could do differently and maybe we will have to be speaking for about a year or so when all those data are coming in and we have a bit more of an insight into Singapore.

Nick Skillicorn: lovely I will have you on the podcast for them. So that's one of the research pieces that it sounds like you are working on right now, what about the previous research that you have done, what sort of things have you found out there?

Mark Batey: So I started off with individual creativity and like most things I think there's a tendency in academia for us to often want to invent something brand new and pretend that we have invented something when really it's relabeling old models. It's taking some similar concepts and rebranding them and then present them like some kind of an amazing new break through. I tried really hard to avoid doing that, most of my research is to try possible to use really well established models and really well established frame works and then apply them to what we are really trying to understand what we are trying achieve in creativity so I can add on knowledge within what we have already know and trying to make it really useful rather than just inventing something for the sake of it.

So most of the individual research was looking at the really basic obvious questions to start with, do you need to be really intelligent or just have high cognitive ability to be really creative. The great news is for all of us, you don't need to be that bright. It's not about same as being really intelligent and yes there is some overlap and indeed you must have some brain power to be creative but it's much more I think down to our ability to think in different ways and take on certain more non conformist approach. So I looked a lot at some personality predictors, I looked motivational orientations, I looked at confidence variables that came up with a set of four facts model and yes there are idea generation type activities that's been fluent and coming up with loads of ideas that's intended towards originality and highly creative people do tend to reflect a bit more, they tend to be quite mindful, they tend to incubate their ideas. On the personality level, we look at the five factor model of personality and some others and some of the more obvious findings, highly creative people are very open to new ideas and new experiences and they tend to be certain conscientious, less rule bound, less structured and less organized especially with an artistic type field much lesser than those who were being creative within scientific endeavors. Same thing with extraversion, you find that extraversion, here is positive predictor of more socially oriented forms of creativity that are entrepreneurialism, enterprise, business creativities often quite stronger as an extra version here a scientific creativity and often some forms of artistic creativity are actually introversion.

So that's quite interesting the different patterns and the different flavors of what predicts creativity in different areas, often sort of breaking things down to our science. Universally all people who see themselves as highly creative tend to be quite confident in their creativity and they prepare to stand up for what they believe in they prepare to go against the grain to be disagreeable sometimes about their ideas and no great shakes, here again one of the common findings most and highly creative people are very strongly internally motivated. A strong sense of intrinsic motivation as the mixture often referred to and they are kind of driven from a lot of passion and a lot of engagement in what they do. So that's kind of where my research started from, trying to understand those individual characteristics and then applying those trying to help organizations, record companies, insurance and banks and so on, to help them build a recruitment process using that research to identify people who are more likely to be highly creative

Nick Skillicorn: I think that is fascinating. Because one thing that I always find when companies talk about how they generate ideas, the classic example is getting bunch of people in a room and shout out ideas and put them on a wall like a standard brain storming session and the people who tend to dominate those sessions are the most outwardly vocal, mostly extrovert people. A lot of the research that I am fining is that there is a lot to be said about the introverts who take time and process ideas internally and then only willing to let people know about them at a later stage. I think that relates to what you are talking about as well, there's different types of creativity that are related to different personality types.

Mark Batey: Apparently, I agree with you very much there Nick. Some of the things I think we can do to help that I would often try and start a brainstorming type exercises if I am doing a strategy workshop with some senior chaps, first thing I do is let's circulate the main challenge while we are going to be coming together, let's get people thinking and starting their creative process a long time before they get into the board room or the conference center. I find that's one of the most least useful ways of getting good ideas out of people is bringing them together and then tell them what you would want to be creative about. That's when you are going through all your obvious ways of

What makes creative individuals and teams, according to the latest research

connecting all of your ideas and thinking outside the box and joining all the dots. We want to describe the creative process, you know all of that, you get through that, you exhaust all the normal ideas and the normal avenues and then the meetings are over.

Start early, allow people to think on their own before hand, share interesting insights and the knowledge that might pertain to the thing that we are trying to think about and then what kind of new trends and then demographic information might there be, what new technology might be relevant, what new legislation, what kind of changes are we seeing, demography or customer or consumer interest. Share all that stuff, get people thinking, get them to come to the meetings often with some of their first thoughts, their first ideas and for me the real key to want to get the most out of introverts always in the beginning of the brain storming session getting people to work on their own.

On their own for a few minutes, five minutes, ten minutes depending on whatever the constraints of time, get your first ideas out, get them to start developed and then share them. That way introverts have a chance to reflect, to write some stuff down, to have a chance to prepare themselves rather than let's just throw out the extroverts at the beginning and before you know it, they have dominated the meeting as they would do and as they probably should. They have more choice, in any case that's their natural tendency or style but we don't work around people who might have a different approach. So always let people work on their own to begin with I think is much more successful.

Nick Skillicorn: It sounds like you are using your psychological tools and your psychological methods to figure out the sort of model for creativity. Am I right instead or sort of assuming that?

Mark Batey: That's very much the case so wherever possible. I am a psychologist, I am a scientist by background and I think you will find this Nick I know the work that you do, you are very empirically derived. You always want to make sure that things are based on the science; they are based on thorough experience, not just something that people dreamt on the back of a napkin. I do find some colleagues in the creativity space say things there might not be that much evidence behind why they suggest as a particular way of doing it

Nick Skillicorn: It sounds good as a motivational sound bite

Mark Batey: There is nothing wrong that a lot of people will be motivated and there's nothing to giggle about or laugh about stuff but I think the creative process is one that can be studied, I think it's one that can be developed, I think can be empirically derived. It can have some facts based work and evidence based work behind how you help people to be creative and innovative.

How do their brains make creative ideas that the creative thinking process is universal, doesn't matter whether they are male or female, which part of the world they come from or what industry they work in, the basic building blocks of making connections and combinations between ideas is the same and how you can support people through that process will have been studying in one way or the other well over a hundred years. So yes I do follow some hopefully simple but powerful models of how people I guess rationalize what covers a lot of information. There are a lot of books out there about creativity and innovation and many of them start off with some titles like a hundred and one ways to develop your ideas, there is nothing wrong with that but when I have read a hundred and one ways of techniques or thoughts or ideas, I am often more confused than when I started so I tend

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to go the opposite way. I try to boil things down to some really key principles and some really easy to follow kind of steps.

Nick Skillicorn: So when we are talking about models and when we are talking about things that people can do to improve and I think that's why a lot of the attendees are at this summit. What can individuals do to improve their creativity, what can teams do to improve their innovation, what can companies do to improve the results that they get from their ideas and what sort of insights do you have on that?

Mark Batey: Well, I have to be careful otherwise I am going to end up talking for the next three hours. I will try and give some snapshots. I think that the individual, what we are going to do to the individual understands your own individual creative process. I think it is understanding the starting point for creativity is not brain storming, it's normally a careful exploration and delineation of the challenge, the opportunity or the problem. Why are you being creative, what is the issue, what are you doing all this thinking for.

Before you jump into the brainstorming at least try and absorb some interesting information that will help you think differently. Speak to a customer, have a look at the problem, play with the product, use your own service, get immersed with the thing you are trying to be creative about so that you know more about it. That enables you when you move into the actual brain storming idea generation phase, you have got more stuff in your brain, technical term, more stuff stored in your brain, you can start moving around and connecting the dots in different ways to have those unusual and different ideas that hopefully some of which will be useful. So generally as much as possible, talk to people, bounce ideas of one another and then after you have generated as many options and ideas that you can and go from volume then you start to worry about evaluating them, judging them, sorting them, making some kind of sense out of them. I think one of the things that I find quite depressing, we know this, we know this, we have been teaching these kind of stuff for years and yet it fails at school level, it fails at university level, and at the cooperate level, many of these rather obvious basic human truth, we don't get taught. We taught to evaluate to evaluate things really quickly, we taught to leap to critical thinking straight away and actually we can learn our own creative process much easier by following those steps. What is going on, gather some insight, generate as many ideas as possible and evaluate lost.

As we talked about earlier in our conversation, this idea of giving yourself some time, some time to reflect, some time to allow your thoughts to grow and develop is really important. Psychologist and creativity researchers often referred to as incubation. The incubation effect is so unbelievably powerful, so much so that one of our colleague here in the UK did a recent meta analysis, like a mega studies where they put together the results of I think about 70 odd experiments and put them together, they show that when you give yourself time and you go away and do something else and you come back to your creative problem, your brain has done a fabulous job of sorting through some of the information starting to solve the problem in the background most of us don't use these incubatory processes as good as we could.

That's a little bit on the individual. I think for the team, the number one thing in terms of the leadership of the team is that the person who is running the group does not even normally lead he is just whoever at that time facilitating or pulling people together, they kind of try de-mark. When are we trying to be highly creative, when we are trying to bounce ideas around and get loads of ideas

out? When are we trying to become more serious and start thinking about innovation, implementation and application? Setting out some markers in some boundaries for the team, “we’re in the unfettered more blue thinking zone. So let’s just go for as many ideas as possible and I don’t want too much criticism and seriousness” and then explaining when is the time to start to become more serious. I think that really helps teams to understand where they are in the process and what behaviors are necessary or could be required.

The second easiest thing to do I to boost creativity in a team I think is the better thinking of the team is to maximize diversity. A lot of work I do with my client is pulling together different people and put them in a room. Most of these things are beyond free, they are free, just get in different people in a room, bouncing ideas around, be that functional diversity, age, generational, product experience, sometimes obviously inside and outside bring in outsiders to the organization including customers to help you think differently, diversity is really powerful and really important.

Last but not the least is the organizational level. That’s where it starts to get much more complicated. I am personally of the opinion that you need a systematic approach to building creativity and innovation culture. It can’t be achieved through one or two simple fix-alls or let’s just have a good recruitment process or let just have a reward system and let’s just make sure that we have some creativity and brain storming groups. All of this things on their own can be good, but I think we need to pull them all together is that we need a system that puts all of the different HR processes, the leadership behaviors, cross functional working and so on that puts all of it together with all pointing in the same direction. This isn’t why the company fails but should be one of the reasons why it should be so easy is there is no right answer, there is no one single thing as lots of things and generates tweaking. Its small adjustments and small tweaks to existing organizational processes. How we are feeding back on performance to our employees, how we actually giving them feedback about how they go about being creative or how we are encouraging the right leadership behavior or how we are encouraging the right kind of diversity in our team resourcing. What is our reward system and have we included creativity and innovation on mission or vision or values our competency framework if we still use those kinds of things. I think at the organizational level, it might look daunting and scaring because there is lots to do but the good news is that most of it is actually quite easy to do and there’s lot of little tweaks so hopefully that was some thoughts on individual team and organizational creativity.

Nick Skillicorn: That was perfect. I think the last point you are touching on now is how companies can actually figure out what’s going to make a difference for innovation in their own organization, it’s something that a lot of people will love to hear a bit more about it, is there any research out there on what sort of individual aspects and points and capabilities can make a difference for innovation

Mark Batey: There is, I am going to pretend that I am not reading off the slides right now. I just brought some notes of work I have been doing with one of my colleague Anna walker (bath spa). She is an associate professor then and we did a load of work trying to understand the key drivers of creativity and innovation culture with thousands of people across some different organizations and I am not going to read off the list pretending I can remember every single factor. I think they were 12 in total, under the first heading of collaboration. One of the things that organizations can do is encourage more and more collaboration, first of all internal collaboration. Making sure that you

What makes creative individuals and teams, according to the latest research

work across boundaries, across divisions, across geographies so we can get that diversity around the business, around the group. Then there is external collaboration, bringing in outsiders working with consultants, working with suppliers, working with customers, working with specialist, working with associations, working with external people who can help us think differently and on the last strand of collaboration is around rich networking. Often in many cases, we don't always know what the right answers are; we don't even know who knows the right answers. We probably know somebody who knows somebody, who knows somebody that will help us get the right answer, that can help us find stimulating and important information or can help open things up so that network is important. So that first key factor for organizational creativity and innovation is encouraging that internal, external and networking collaboration.

Another factor that we found for innovation and creativity culture was very strong teams, tight teams who were very cohesive. They work well together but not to the point where they are not prepared to share ideas, to argue or disagree with one another. So tight teams are prepared to be able to argue with one another if they need to. Those teams are very strongly aware of what their goal is, how and what they need to do in order to achieve the strategic goals of some kind and they really do have a target. There is this idea that highly creative teams and highly creative organization don't have constraints, they don't have goals I think its nonsense but one you often hear.

The next aspect was good access to resources probably chief among those is time, the appropriate people to build that diverse team and in some cases resources to gather experiment, try things out and try a creo type or prototype idea of your first idea to see what works and what doesn't work and obviously result is the key for that. There's openness to risk of course but allied to that openness to risk is also an acceptance of intelligent failure. I think is the idea that people taking stupid risk, well that's probably not the best way of doing things but taking risk in an intelligent way and recognizing that failure is an inherent part of the creative process and actually can look at failure as an opportunity to learn things and move forward. So often you find in Silicon Valley organization or American companies talk about mentality of failing fast and failing forward. So failure is inevitable but do it quickly and learn as you go.

We found that organizations that are particularly creative and innovative do understand that creative problem solving process I was referring to earlier, they understand the importance of accumulating and gathering insights and nailing the problem of a challenge and then moving into generative phase and try to get as many ideas and options out and then evaluating and iterations later on and they did some natural follow that creative problem solving process. Some of them even deliberately trained for it. There's a strong tendency towards autonomy, your tight team should know their goals and got access to resources, they are taking risks following that creative process and they have got the freedom and autonomy to pick interesting challenges that meet the strategic goals and freedom to try things out.

We found out that when all of these things come together, people reports and this was the number one factor, quite hard to place a finger on but the number one factor people perceiving their company genuinely valued and cared about creativity and innovation. And this is kind of all authentic approach. Not just saying we want creativity and innovation but genuinely wanting it and ensuring that there are processes and systems in place so that people can act and work in a creative and

What makes creative individuals and teams, according to the latest research

innovative way. So we found that those 12 factors also seem to be the main DNA markers as a way of a highly innovative and creative businesses.

Nick Skillicorn: That's really fascinating, I am sure that everyone's appreciated your insights there. Mark it's been wonderful having you here. If people want to find out more about your insights on creativity, where can they go to find out more?

Mark Batey: Sure, good point. I would guess a simple YouTube search will do usually quite well search Mark Batey and find on the web, I am in a number of different places where you can find my webpage around there. If you are on LinkedIn an average member very strongly involved, we have the psychology creativity LinkedIn group, a free membership group where people genuinely think, they just want to share ideas and pass stuff around. It seems to be quite an open and free space. So I will encourage people watching this, if they want to find out a bit more join the psychology and creativity LinkedIn group, get involved in the conversation.

Nick Skillicorn: Mark it's been wonderful having you here, we will get all of those links you mentioned up on the screen and in the video description, once again thank you for sharing your insights today.

Mark Batey: Pleasure Nick, have a good day

Nick Skillicorn: You too.