

# Leigh Stringer

## How your workplace and surroundings affect your creativity

### Speakers:

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

Leigh Stringer

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017, very happy to have Leigh Stringer with us today Leigh is from the architecture firm UIP and she is a work place strategist and research with a particular emphasis on things like how your workplace can affect your creativity, energy levels, team dynamics all the sorts of things. Leigh it's very good to have you with us today.

**Leigh Stringer:** Oh thanks so much for having me, my pleasure.

**Nick Skillicorn:** So for people who aren't aware of what a work place strategist is could you give us a brief background as to how you got into it, what it is and how that sort of fits into creativity.

**Leigh Stringer:** So I'm an architect by training and one of the many aspects of design, designing a building is on the front end work where need you to ask the organization they're working for that's building the building how they work how they might work more effectively, what's working now, how they want to work in the future. So workplace strategist is kind of the advance team on the architectural design world, somebody comes in understands more about the business than about individual and group work and all those sorts of things. so working many many years by helping organizations figure out how big, what shape their building should look like, I effectively have been there are all of my things for a long time figuring this out and one of the big questions comes up how do we make our space more productive, how do we make it more healthy, how do we make it more creative. Innovation is the thing you know future you know this is where all the growth is happening, one or more event what does it look like, so that is part of the reason in my search where I learnt a lot about health or being in productivity and innovation and the huge part of that.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And one of the reasons I'm so excited to have you here is you've actually got the scientific insights as to what actually affects performance and the reason that's important is a lot of people look at companies like video game publishers or Silicon Valley tech startups who've gone

farm and poles in the middle of offices and bin bags everywhere and table tennis tables and they think well if we put those things in our office they're also going to make us more creative, What's your view on the way that these I tech companies approach creativity and whether or not that's also applicable to traditional companies.

**Leigh Stringer:** Well I think that Itech companies are going to be better I would say in the beginning it was in the beginning and you know twenty years ago I know they were trying new ways for young groups of people getting together, hey wouldn't it be fun if we had a pink table and make up that part of the culture and it's from a culture perspective it's wonderful you know it's a cool fun thing but I think more and more companies like Google and Apple and others have seen that you know actually having a little place for a breather and to take a rest from staring at a computer for twelve hours a day is actually a really good thing from a productivity standpoint there's a lot of research that tells us that you know putting our mind in a relaxed state increases and appreciates creativity inn all sort of ways all kind of good things that the many people are studying these days and I think that yeah one of the most aha moments for me in the itech side was Amazon when they put in those super green rules and if you seen them do these huge green like bubble like environments and it's almost very intentionally created to be biphyllic and restored it psychologically and it's very expensive space. Amazon traditionally is not a company that spends a lot of money extraneously, so when they started doing things like ok, it's definitely more of a science backing. So one of the things that I notice also is that a lot of other organizations outside of IT are seriously looking at not just the ping pong table but certainly greenery or mindfulness studios or yoga rooms or things like that, that it's really again it's science based and there's a good reason that it's all about decreasing burnout at the same time as increasing creativity but there's all this you know so great, we will be able to talk forever about this but the great research around walking, and what that does for creativity walking in high spaces or open spaces sure helps increase creativity something about the vastness you know like you walk into a church or temple and it's big and open and wide and your mind expands, similar kind of thing happens in larger open spaces within the work environment so it's interesting to see that happening but you're seeing more walking meetings and it's behavior as much as it gives space a certain shift.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I think when everyone's asking themselves right now is can we get a quick look at the puppy

**Leigh Stringer:** So this is Pebbles, Pebbles is a Cavalier King Charles and very much a puppy still but needs some loving. Just saying for those of you who work at home or maybe at work or are working at the office that have pet there's a lot of evidence that shows that having a pet at work actually decreases your stress levels. I was talking to The Motley Full, a firm which is a financial services company here in the D.C. area and they bring in puppies on Saturdays for their employees to love and hug when they're having a really stressful day. That's amazing you know when they to come in extra they get a little bonus via a basket of puppies.

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's lovely, as much as I am Interested in hugs and puppies, I'm more interested in the science. You said there's a lot of scientific evidence around what makes spaces more facilitated to creativity, can we talk about some of the studies that you are referring to and you mentioned for example one about size of the space around you, what does that tells us about how that affects creative.

**Leigh Stringer:** So there are a couple of studies that looked at just putting people in very small rooms and having to do certain different source of tasks and I am not going to remember the scientists who did it right off but it was a good mix of people I respected and they effectively were looking at smaller and taller rules for head stamp work and both creative work and they found that creative work I think that has done it in more math and more quantitative or perhaps transactional site type work versus work that requires a lot of thinking and outside the box thinking and they found that raising the ceiling by just a couple of feet in those tiny rooms actually helped quite a bit and I think we're starting to see a lot of companies explore that as well. It's very expensive right to make tall spaces it's very expensive and we had to make expenditure, we make a space that's a taller or interesting cafeteria or a collaborative space. so there does need to be a whole rationale behind why we did just can't look cool and we're starting to see that, that there is something there and so that's kind of interesting I think also this well interest in having from a creativity perspective having enclosed and open spaces so we are all aware of the big open space where and Steve Jobs talks about this a lot with Pixar in particular he designed one set of bathroom right in the building and everybody had run he thinks you're that into each other going to the bathroom is pretty bigger in space by the way that happens and that's great that's really very supportive of those collaboration but however my research is showing me that it's really this combination of having being able to cut off from the caves and come out, being able to go into a cave and actually sit and think hard about what's next about what you have just learned and what you have just been talking about with a colleague and turning that into something that's kind of more narrow mindset, and when you look at behind all those folks who are looking at flow, he often talks about writers or people who spend a lot of time doing very creative work it's whole house you find there, it's a big house are and it's a little writers are writers hut and I find that recreating that writer's hut in one way or another or folks in the workplace is really helpful to know, again supporting that mix so you need both and they give a little.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I'm so glad you say that partly because this is the same way that I interpret the research and the way ii attend to clients about it, the lot of companies fall into the trap of thinking there's one type of design that's going to solve the problems and so they think okay either we have to choose in a fully open plan office or cubicles and both have their advantages and disadvantages but for things like creativity people need, this so much evidence now that say people need different mental states to work through problems and to in one time go through divergent thinking and think of lots of ideas and that is evidence which suggests things like open spaces help that then you actually need time and space to do something with those ideas and I think that relates back to what you were talking about it about having these more constrained areas where you are not as distracted as there are few things interrupting you and you can focus on the work and actually sit

down and do the work and refine it and that's what you need to actually turn thousands of ideas into one real golden idea.

**Leigh Stringer:** You know there's a researcher who teaches that there are diverse school exist here in Virginia who is looking at design thinking and internal margin I will tell you about this for a long time and a lot of neuron type deductive or inductive I think there's all these kinds of ways historical ways that we've been using to science more all these places have been based on history right based on historical and apple falls all apples will fall there's this kind of historical looking back in the past and projecting a future and I think one of the ways that our creative mind really needs to think outside the box, we get some problem so we need to it's not incremental change, it's pretty massive change in the areas and so Jean talks about what she calls abducted thinking which is there's something called back casting where you say let's just shoot for the moon we're in ten years we want to be here well how the heck do we get here I don't know you know just doing things on the wall there's a whole process that she and many others are really starting to develop with this idea of I think also the space state and being able to support more, more openness, more fair ideas, less looking in the past and more looking at unique creative outside the box, outside your industry kinds of thinking and planning and ideas that's really really critical. So I thought that was a very interesting term and I hadn't heard that before I talked with her but it made sense.

**Nick Skillicorn:** So the sort of projects that you do in your firm, what sort of the mood is there think about creativity specifically, is this something that companies are now asking more for or is it about the bottom line and getting as many hours of work done as possible.

**Leigh Stringer:** You know can you have the same conversation, say two things at the same time, I say people challenged the case, yes the bottom line is really important that's kind of table stakes unfortunately or fortunately so we have to use our creative vine to find more ways to insert creativity and the budgets and the constraints that we have and I think that folks it's different triggers the kind of open folks up to thinking about something more creative in their space it might be health actually helping some people who aren't well and people are saying you know what all this research about health and the needs and that's it so much and to get outside more you know when I look at our workplace as a bunch of cubicles with people sitting down inn that and not able to move for twelve hours a day, this is not healthy is it, depends on what the issue is and as much importance it is too their business but I am finding a lot of the companies that we work or health related so that's a way to have a discretion about our right well it's about our productivity our we currently talk about the day in the life they want to really create for people what does that look like I think the other trigger that comes up I guess is bottom line related but it does help folks, it does help to reshape the conversation and that is around this idea that no one's in the office anymore so we're super super mobile today whether we like to admit it or not. I spend a lot of time stalking people and I start following people around and finding how they work and how they want to work, what's working what's not working in their day and if you walk through any office anywhere there's often not as many people as there are desks right in fact about a third of the people are after I notice it in

your office that's really surprising actually and part of it we're still working our petition is up we're just doing it on the road with clients you know in a meeting somewhere and so a lot of our clients will come to us and say Well no is their office and we're rebuilding these big buildings and you know have to agree you're right. It is true people still want to have a place at the office, they still want to call it home away from home how do we do that, what does that really look like now, do we want to really want to build a bunch of for lack of a better word cubicles that no one sits in or is there a more interesting, more meaningful, more thoughtful environment that we can create and I find that there are two avenues that are working lightly. Again its bottom line driven always but I like that, I like that I mean this is business I mean come on you know at the end of the day there is kind of money coming in the door and we need to think about that as part of creating a sustainable kinds of organization. However to do it in a way that's really going to attract the best talent and make folks who work there, not make them but just encourage them to kill their very best and most engaged I think that's what we're seeing more discussion about all these Gallup polls and I don't know if you follow this in the U.K. but there's a big Gallup poll that came out lately about the state of the American workforce anyway and one of the big deals, big headlines this time around was that people want to work at home three to four days a week and that's how they feel most engaged not one day not two days but they want to be at home a lot, which I was a little shocked at or maybe not because they have and this is another thing that gets into creativity a bit as well as engagement and that is control. so the more control employees have about where when and how they work, the more not only will their stress level reduce but it also reduces heart disease which I found fascinating, a really interesting study that was done by in this huge epidemiological study of like the entire country so we thought of something and they looked at all these different job types and they found that people who had more control of their environment had less heart disease, less stress, more productive and I think also you know when you're doing creative work sometimes you just need that flexibility to be able to pick and choose where how and where you will do it, so that's a plan right that's ok and then there's really early in the morning from walking around you know outside that person should be perfectly acceptable. So companies you know that awareness, what that really looks like and how that feels, it's a big transition for us.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And let's talk a bit more about this wellness and energy management aspect and stress management aspect because I love the idea of individual being able to be creative but if there's something out there which is preventing them from getting that work done that's also going to prevent them from feeling good enough to do their best creative work, so from the way that you design buildings, what have you found, let's talk of the positive the negative, what have you really found harms wellness and energy levels in buildings like very poorly designed ones and then how do you address that by designing them to be more effective and more conducive to good health workers.

**Leigh Stringer:** So similar things, market choice ,there's only one place an individual worker can really work and kind of stuck in one area, sometimes that can't be helped if you are attached with use of equipment, for a lot of us there really is some choice that we put that in and a second maybe is the lighting if there's one thing that we can improve in our workplace I think will transform the

built environment over the next hundred years it's going to be lighting and there's all this new circadian lighting which changes during the day it really impacts our sleep levels and our energy levels and all kinds of things. if you see a circadian light versus a regular light side by side, you'd be shocked it's like we have been living in the dark for two hundred years. Since I have been working inside you know from factories on and that's really evolution on. So that's a biggie, the really really poor lighting and it's not just bright or non bright light, it's really sophistication about lights. Another is no green space, no access to green or windows, windows are you know, it's hard to fix that if you will but and there's a lot you can do to work around it to actually green your space and create a biophil like environment so one of the new things that architects are really jumping on, I was just talking to a science writer who wrote this book The Nature effects, it talks about how much we love a need to be among nature which is great but we were chatting about biophilia and how important it is to mimic nature even if you're not putting real nature in the work space or access to that very quickly because we do need a certain amount of it every day and you can do that with screens you can do it with fake plants and it necessarily don't have to be real, we can use all kinds of mind tricks to relax ourselves and that sort of thing. other ways I mentioned you know being stuck but not moving you know it's not just at the stand, you have a furniture out there which is great but also moving just moving around during the day, we used to move even nine miles every day back in the hunter gatherer days since childhood to some anthropologists who studied modern hunter gatherer and they follow around and they see well you know if I were doing a scavenging in hunting and that kind of behavior, I found out that we were moving pretty much all day. From that, you know our body is made for that too to being so still is not good and for many many many reasons happiness included and other ways let's see, so many nutrition I mean I don't know, so how many of us you know down at setting out to popcorn and pretty crappy things that we encounter and it's just so easy to grab that unhealthy food it's kind of ok to have grass puddings everyday or put that out to pick it up on a regular basis but wow this sound like a different energy level and yes just maintain that through the day.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And then finally let's take it to the next level up from just talking about individuals being creative and healthy and feeling good and productive and the fact that there's usually more than one person in an office, in a building working together, what have you learned about how groups can be more creative and innovative based on the environment that they are in.

**Leigh Stringer:** Probably it is coming up with rules of behavior, I'm going to start there because that is something that is free, it's not something that you have to spend a lot of capital dollars to re arrange your space but behavior is a big deal and you know using speaker phones in the middle of an open office environment without asking your colleagues if it's ok you know that getting a room or you know walking up behind somebody when clearly they're really focused on something and then hey could you can help me out with this stuff, it rattle through whatever you know it's coming up with Wolf and sometimes that seems a little odd that you have to come up with woes of behavior for the office but in truth a quick conversation is something like hey I am totally part of it is the ownership of the person who's really trying to be creative for the team who is really trying to be creative like hey can we reserve this room for a day or hey can we use this open area for a little

while, this wall so that we can paint stuff out there and we can take it down, I think that's really important. I think also picking up on the wall idea there's a lot of emerging evidence that shows that actually having a wall dedicated to a project or your team is really good, so now when we map things out on a wall and I think in the crime investigative you know things, where you see architects put things on the wall or are creative's and that is really important and the ability to able to kind of map out your ideas physically so finding a space or a wall you can even and sometimes will take home accelerator other sorts of boards, super inexpensive and just if we don't want to mess up the walls and just put them up against a wall and use that as a pen up space, I find that it's surprisingly important for memory recall and for managing large complex projects over time. we try to manufacture that, there is green, we see a lot of organizations have been able to put lots of screen on the wall, do the same thing but it takes a lot of technology and a lot of lower tech approaches that I think would work even more and even more interesting we need to look at, those are a couple things.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I love the fact that you mention sort of high tech this low tech because one of the things that I get frustrated by is when companies think that just throwing technology at people is going to improve their performance. the first example that comes to mind is things like electronic white board that costs I don't know a thousand times as much as a regular white boards and just allow you to get a scan at what you put up when in reality it's just a blank piece of paper or a normal white board now when everyone is going to move a phone just to get through that. is something to be said about the simple tools being just as good as some of the more higher fancy tools or are there ones that you think really make a fundamental difference.

**Leigh Stringer:** You know I think that there are some pretty amazing tools out there arising and many of them are in the Department of Defense right now and I take a look at them they haven't really been seen and hit the market yet and the government really is a wonderful place to spawn you know just another like or something like wall, you don't need a lot of resources to figure it cool I tech stuff o get the rest of the industry to kind of build on that. we have course our phones I couldn't live without it and my laptop and all that sort of thing but I think the low tech high tech specially around you mentioned the white or things like that I think that we keep trying to make our offices nice and neat and clean and perfect and perfect you know and the truth is that the organizations that I've seen are really really heavily creative and pushing that on board are not necessarily so clean and neat and perfect and it's hard for architects to steps in times because we love things perfect and white nice little red bar over here, you know we don't wear out very kind of stuff in our approach but the truth is that to really be creative, it's a little messy not a lot messy but enough so that you feel like you can experiment and so this kind of laboratory bring the laboratory into your space a little bit more I think is a really really helpful if you go to make tea and if you go to some of these places that are doing really exceptionally creative work it's pretty low tech buildings that are often using high tech devices but in a way that's allowed to be messy and I think that also ties in with high performance, some of the companies where people are just really really at their peak, I mean you can tell these people are performing great, you have looked at their numbers you know they are and they will show up in casual clothing because you never know if they might want to plank in the

middle of the hallway or use their space as an exercise for nerve fights or whatever you know there's a little bit of take away the precious. And I think there's professional and then there's you know creative and I think we can find a mix I think we can find a blend of that I think also often creative's are often a piece of a larger company so you are in a bank but you have a creative group that's within a much larger organization and you're kind of having to use their branding role then you know things like that. so maybe it's carving your own space, a calling at a lab or giving yourself permission to kind of re brand your area to be something a little different and permission to break the rules, I think that's important too.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I mean that's a wonderful insight and I hadn't thought about the fact that the way that you either prevent people from experimenting by saying everything needs to be perfectly clean that does instill this mindset of ok I need to be super careful around everything whereas if you give people a little bit of leeway around trying out new things that's always going to result in some crumpled paper every now and again or things that come as you say the white lines recommend that they be, I think that's one of the big takeaways for me allow them to express themselves and experiment with it and we are coming up to the end of the interview unfortunately, I wish we had more time but one thing I like to ask all of the experts is if you've got one recommendation of a tip or something that people can try out to enhance their ability to be creative or innovative in an office environment based on your experience and your scientific insights what would you recommend they try.

**Leigh Stringer:** I would, there are so many different ideas, maybe the best one to try that we've talked about already is this idea using green, so you can create a green wall by printing out an image, literally just kind of stack it up against the wall you can put a fake biophyl plant from right here and put it around your desk and you can put a beautiful landscape image on your computer that reminds you of some place wonderful that you might have visited that has this same bio phyllic like effect and that ability to counter relax and restore the mind is exactly what we need to get those creative juices flowing. they're like trigger that is our middle you know old world grain that gets really stressed out really quickly, anything that we can do to continually keep it , keep it out there so that we can use our executive function and our creative brain more effectively, I think it's a great tool to try.

**Nick Stringer:** Leigh it's been wonderful speaking with, if people want to find out more we're going to get all the links up on screen but can you just let them know where those links are going to take people

**Leigh Stringer:** Sure leighttringer.com and I got lots of my research, books, you can go there anytime and get these books but really I try and put the most interesting news and research there and share and share it and some new links to the original article so you can check it out for yourself.





**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, it's been wonderful speaking with you and I look forward to speaking with you again soon..

**Leigh Stringer:** My pleasure, Thank you so much..