



## How to stimulate creativity? Go live abroad

**People who live abroad are more creative; and the more time they spend away from home, the more creative they become. That's according to a recent study done by William Maddux, an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.**

Certain conditions, however, apply, says Maddux, who conducted the studies in collaboration with Adam Galinsky, a Professor of Management at Northwestern University.

For example, creativity is unlikely to spark for people travelling abroad for a short holiday. "We don't find a positive correlation with travel abroad and creativity." Maddux says it has to be at least a short stint abroad, but also adds that the quality of the experience matters as much as amount of time spent overseas.

"Not only does time matter – which can explain why living abroad matters and not travelling abroad – it's also the psychological transformation that you might go through while you're abroad."

For instance, your creative levels can spike if you fully immerse yourself in local experiences, in particular, languages. "There's a very strong, robust association between foreign language aptitude and creativity. So bi-lingual and tri-lingual people are more creative in general. And I think that the language is part of the adaptation." "So you can imagine a person who goes to live abroad for a year, but hangs out mostly with expatriates, maybe from their own country – that person is not going to derive the same kind of creative benefit as those

who try to adapt themselves to a new culture, learn the language, learn the customs and get really involved in changing who they are and how they behave."

Age matters too because, according to Maddux, younger people have greater capacity to learn languages. "If you're getting those cultural experiences at a young age, it's going to have a stronger effect on subsequent creativity."

Another of his studies reveals that even if you have long since returned from working abroad, you can tap into your creative reserves by mentally reactivating your experiences abroad.

"So if you recall and write about having lived abroad, people who do this show more subsequent creativity within the next five or 10 minutes, compared to people who recall other experiences – for example going to the supermarket, being in their hometown ... When we reactivate the experiences, it does seem to cause increased creativity."

Yet another positive correlation exists between entrepreneurship and creativity. "We're finding the same correlation between time abroad and entrepreneurial activity ... Entrepreneurs tend to have the experience of having been abroad as

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well.”

Clearly, where creativity is concerned, the benefits of living abroad far outweigh those of staying put.

Maddux’s advice to companies interested in promoting creativity is to look for people who have these enriching experiences abroad. Conversely, they should also not skimp on offering international assignments, as these seem to be key for developing significant mental processes.

And while abroad, he emphasises that adaptability is key. “It’s not just enough to spend 18 hours in the office and then go home and sleep. If you want to get these kinds of (tangible) benefits from the international experience, it will help to get out into the culture and try to adapt yourself while you’re on these international assignments.”

While Maddux agrees that living abroad is “not the be all and end all of facilitating creativity”, it is, and will continue to be a major driver.

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