IDEA WORK
LESSONS OF THE EXTRAORDINARY IN EVERYDAY CREATIVITY

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WHAT? ANOTHER BOOK ON CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION?! WELL, NO. AND YES.

Idea Work is a book about the collective practices of organizations that live from their ideas. These are powerful ideas: the book tells how a global oil company produces ideas about where to drill in order to find new oil fields; it explores how an international architecture firm manages its idea processes from the first sketches to the finished building and beyond; it investigates how business lawyers transform deep legal knowledge and experience to fit contexts and situations that are just a little different from any case they have faced before; it describes business and systems development processes as complex, collective activities that combine solid knowledge with imaginings of new demand.

These are all stories about creativity and innovation. So yes, this is a book about all these things, but seen in a new light rather than through the old established windows of unique individual attributes and proclivities. This is not a book about creativity that celebrates individuals, describes techniques and tells stories taken from the marketing industry. Nor is this a book that reduces innovation to a set of processes with decision gates controlled by advanced, copyrighted project management systems. The book describes Idea Work as collective practices that can be found in many organizations, even in organizations that we do not normally think of as creative. While these practices produce extraordinary results in many cases, they are interwoven in the fabric of everyday work. Our intention is not to downplay the role of important individuals, but we place emphasis on how organizations are able to create contexts in which they can flourish and how collective effort is required to move from brilliant ideas to final results.

The *Idea Work* project, upon which this book is based, was a large-scale, empirical research project co-sponsored by the Norwegian Research Council under the "User-driven research based innovation"-program (BIA), and led by a group of researchers at SINTEF. In this project we worked with six organizations, all of which have been leaders in their respective industries. We have tried to make sense of the various practices for working with ideas in the six organizations, asking: how do people in these organizations

generate, mould, communicate and realize ideas when at their best? What we found is that there are many patterns of work that are very similar and commonly shared across quite different industries and organizations. This book is about those patterns. We call them qualities of extraordinary idea work.

The Idea Work book is one of the products of the larger project and, as is the case with all other knowledge products, it is the result of a set of collective processes and practices created by a group of knowledgeable and creative individuals. We would especially like to mention the following persons: Tord Mortensen initiated the first idea work project with the explorers at Statoil, has been a key contributor throughout the process and is co-author of four of the chapters in the book. Grete Håkonsen was central in initiating the project, was lead researcher in one of the partner organizations and coined the phrase "Idea Work". Aina Landsverk Hagen, Gudrun Skjælåen Rudningen and Arne Lindseth Bygdås have been part of the core project team throughout the project period, as researchers in one or more of the companies, and as contributors of interviews, observations – including graphical and video material – as well as in discussions. They are also co-authors on chapters in the book. Maria Lundberg, Kjersti Bjørkeng, Bjørn Haugstad and Åsne Lund Godbolt have also made important contributions in the project both in the work with participating organizations and in discussions. We, the project group including the authors, feel a collective ownership to the ideas and concepts of Idea Work.

Persons in the companies that we write about in this book have had a profound influence on the ideas that we communicate. They were passionately interested in learning about and improving their own practices, and so they gave us, the researchers, free access to their inner workings. We interviewed managers, employees, partners and customers; we have been members of teams and observers of teams, and we have run processes in which managers, employees and researchers have sat down to reflect on results and new concepts so that they could feed the ideas back into the companies' practices. We have used approaches from ethnography, action research and participant observation and have often been deeply immersed in the life world and practices of the organizations we researched. We appreciate the engagement of the managers and owners who had the courage to learn from research, and the employees who had the curiosity, time and inclination to take part in the creation of

Writing books, of course, is nothing but idea work. As such, it is a deeply collective endeavor both in the activities being performed and the many sources, stories and voices drawn upon. So in extending a heartfelt thank you to all our partners and collaborators, we can only hope that the ideas presented will leave our shared cradle and thrive in the minds, ambitions, hopes, language and practice of our readers.

Oslo, 15.11.12, Arne Carlsen, Stewart R. Clegg and Reidar Gjersvik

IDEA WORK IS

INTERWOVEN

AFFECTIVE

MATERIAL

CONTROVERSIAL

PREPPING

The practice of carefully preparing, building, and revitalizing knowledge so as to maximize its potential for effective use in the moment of creation.

ZOOMING OUT

Stepping back from immersion in data and analysis of ideas of particulars and moving to big-picture thinking, letting go of details, and seeking the simplifying core.

CRAVING WONDER

The sensuous experience of being in a mystery, a combination of feeling startled and engaging in passionate search. Wonder underpins all imagination, empathy, and deep interest in anything beyond self.

ACTIVATING DRAMA

Calling people to adventure –into Battles, Mysteries, Missions, Cathedral building, Treasure Hunts or the needs of the human Other – in ways that recruit their utmost capabilities and desires, asking: "Why do we come to work here? What is really at stake?"

DARING TO IMAGINE

Boldly venturing forth into unknown territory through creating shared imaginings, cultivating a language of possibility, handling failure, and providing encouragement.

GETTING PHYSICAL

Moving from over-dependence on electronic media towards *materializing* and *visualizing* ideas in artifacts; *touching* ideas, *sketching* ideas, *gesticulating* around ideas, and *moving* while doing idea work.

DOUBLE RAPID PROTOTYPING

A work form that seeks to force speedy production, testing and improvement of half-worked ideas so that they are shared and bolstered at an early stage of development.

LIBERATING LAUGHTER

Processes of energizing co-creation through playfulness, puns, and humor aimed at building social ties, reducing seriousness, relaxing constraints in thinking, and encouraging original combinations of knowledge.

GENERATIVE RESISTANCE

Acknowledging doubt, friction, and criticism, not as noise to be avoided, but as levers with which to question the given and enhance imagination in everyday work.

PUNK PRODUCTION

Using audacity and direct, self-initiated action to mobilize against established ways, opening up and realizing ideas with high levels of originality and value.

IDEA WORK IS

INTERWOVEN
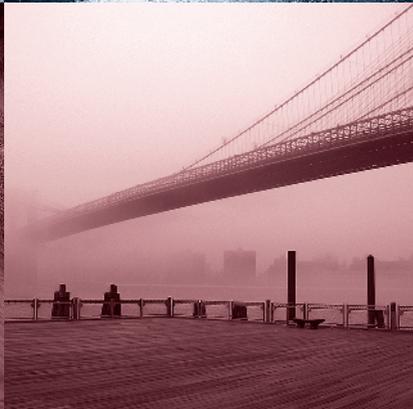
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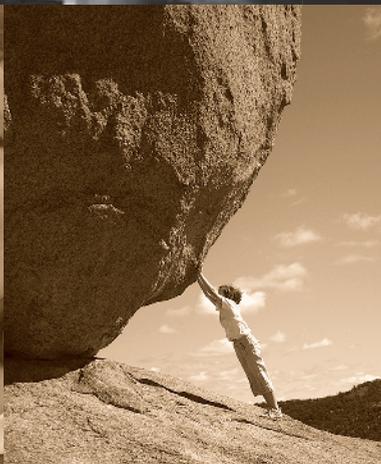
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WHY TALK ABOUT IDEA WORK, AND WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

ARNE CARLSEN, STEWART CLEGG AND REIDAR GJERSVIK

What does it take to find oil in an area where many have tried but failed? What does it take to design buildings that become award-winning, culturally symbolic landmarks? What might the best architects, oil explorers, lawyers, investigative journalists, and business developers in banking and trading analytics have in common? The answer is that they work in surprisingly similar ways when they work with ideas.

This is a book about "idea work": Activities concerned with generating, selecting, realizing, nurturing, sharing, materializing, pitching, and communicating ideas in organizations. For most organizations, idea work is simply the main basis for creating value, whether it is in everyday project work and interaction with clients or development of new products and services.

We are not interested in just any kind of idea work; our focus is on the exemplary, on those ideas that are capable of powering breakthroughs. We present the key features of extraordinary idea work. These features have been identified through a four-year research project in organizations which have demonstrated leading capabilities in their industries over time: an architectural firm, the exploration units of a major oil company, a law firm, an alliance of savings banks, a supplier of trading analytics, and a weekend magazine. These organizations share in common that much of what they do and the very basis for their competitive advantage, is tied to work on ideas: for example, ideas of where to find oil, ideas of architectural concepts, feature articles, or new cash payment systems.

The six organizations also have in common distinct qualities of idea work when at its best, despite representing widely different industries. We will present ten such qualities here. Together, these ten qualities make up a language for idea work in organizations, a language of high academic originality and practical relevance.

Academically, the concept of idea work responds to a recent stream of research that has an explicit focus on how creativity is inherent in everyday work (e.g., Murphy 2005, Hargadon and Bechky 2006, Sawyer and DeZutter 2009) and moves away from a previous research focus on individuals or laboratory settings (Sternberg and Lubart 1999, Kurtzberg and Amabile 2001). What people actually do when being creative and working with ideas tends to disappear into averages, statistics, and assumed co-variations of variables. We know far too little about the concrete processes of collective creativity. The ten qualities of idea work presented in the book make up empirically grounded descriptions of precisely such processes – descriptions that we hope will inspire further comparative and process-oriented research.

Practically, we set out to create a research-based, tested, and usable language for a kind of work that dominates many organizations but has so far received modest attention. Idea work includes but is not limited to what we normally think of as creativity. It involves not only moments of creative breakthrough but also all the major and minor activities that lead up to breakthroughs and follow from them, such as preparation and analysis, peer assistance and critique, or repeated interactions and experiments among users. With the ten described qualities of extraordinary idea work at hand, we hope people across many sectors of the economy will be inspired to try out new ways of interacting and collaborating, whether they are line managers, project managers, specialists, front line workers, or people involved in any development activity.

This is a book about practice and how we talk about practice. Idea work is simply all the things that people do together when working with ideas. Our way of getting close to practice has not been to minutely analyze isolated episodes of group interactions or to spend years in ethnographic immersion after which we, as independent researchers, then emerge to convey definitive "answers" to our research questions. Rather, while also involving such methods, our approach has been one of repeatedly involving practitioners in our analysis and of testing out preliminary findings in real work settings. We have sought to do research *with* practitioners, not *on* them. Trying to make our learning co-generative, we have thus continually posed questions such as: "Here are what we currently perceive as the qualities of idea work at its best in your organization. How does this representation look to you? Which of these qualities seem more/less important, more/less well described? How does this compare to what we saw in organization X? How can these insights be acted upon when working with concrete challenges ahead? What, then, can be learned?"

We shall say more about our research approach – but first: What did we find? What does extraordinary idea work look like?

QUALITIES OF
EXTRAORDINARY IDEA WORK

Let us start with a story. Asked about how the main idea behind the new Opera building in Oslo, Norway, was generated, Kjetil Trædal Thorsen, founder and senior partner at Snøhetta, answers with the following:

> "Much of it is about being reluctant in starting the design and not trying to design a building. We have these very long conversations. There are an incredible amount of contextual conditions that we have to talk through, again and again, ranging from function to environmental issues to the constellation of objects that are needed to materials to the situation of the building and the wider landscape. We try to integrate all these elements. There are these circles of conversation, a joint walk in references. And the purpose is to generate similar images in everyone's head before we start to draw. Architecture is about generating these joint imaginings of what could be... It is not necessary that all the people involved have the same imaginations all the time, but the basic elements of the concept need to be shared by all the people driving the projects... We also invite a larger group of people who do not work here into these conversations, for example a composer, a libretto writer, or a ballet director. Nobody decides the agenda for such a meeting. We just start talking freely about the opera, what opera is, what storytelling is, inside the building or in terms of how the actors meet the audience and vice versa."

Thorsen's account of the work behind the Norwegian Opera building may sound particular to architectural work and relevant only for that world. It is not. The long conversations at Snøhetta have many qualities that are strikingly and surprisingly similar to what oil explorers do when they come up with ideas of where there is oil to be found, or what lawyers do when they arrive at ideas for how they might win major litigation cases. Basic to all three is *prepping*. Oil explorers prep when they systematically collect and analyze seismic data, well logs, and regional data. Lawyers prep when establishing the juridical facts of a case and reviewing previous cases. All of them prep by systematically providing a group of

people with the knowledge that may generate new ideas and alternative ways of combining them: alternative case strategies, alternative conceptions for a building, or alternative prospects for where oil can be found. And all use various types of outsiders in the process – whether clients, end users, or colleagues from distant court areas or other exploration regions. Prepping involves the practice of carefully preparing and revitalizing knowledge in a way that maximizes its potential for effective use in the moment of creation. Without such preparation, great ideas will never emerge. Again, in the words of Kjetil Trædal Thorsen:

> "There may be collective aha! experiences but this never happens independently of an analysis that precedes it. Knowledge is the very basis for all. It is simply unthinkable to pull aha-moments out of thin air. You need basic knowledge about the place, about the project, about the program."

Prepping is one of ten qualities of extraordinary idea work that we present in this book: ten sets of practices by which high-value ideas are generated and realized in organizations.

Another quality of extraordinary idea work, one that underpins the long conversations of prepping, is *wonder*. Individuals who excel in idea work have in common a capacity to experience feelings of wonder in their work and to invoke wonder in others. These individuals notice things others might pass over. They see peculiarities in the normal. They dwell on the strange. They tolerate being in a state of not knowing. Wonder is the sensuous experience of being in a mystery, a combination of feeling startled and being engaged in a passionate search. It is in wonder that people stay and dwell in their long conversations, become engaged with the full repertoire of what they know, and immerse themselves in the search.

A third quality of extraordinary idea work is *generative resistance*. Great ideas are not born in blissful harmony. Ideas need to be confronted with criticism before they become great and are often born in adversity. According to Senior Architect Marianne Sætre of Snøhetta, tough problems are the main source of energy and creativity in any project. For Exploration Manager Thomas Reed, of Statoil, the hardest thing to do is to convince young people that there is still oil to be found in areas where many others
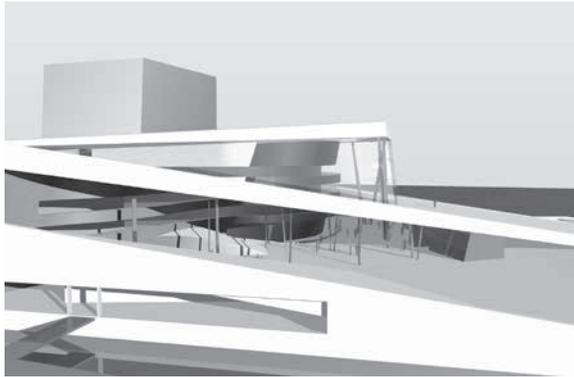
have already searched. And as Thor Ragnar Klevstuen, of SpareBank 1, says, confronting the tough challenges of handling cash payment for social clients was the generative source behind a whole portfolio of cash management services. Ideas flourish where resistance and problems are not avoided but rather confronted and made generative.

"And very early in the process, this thing about thresholds emerged, a sequence of thresholds, like the story of the movement to and into the Opera building and outside again. The type of adventure this is supposed to be comes before you think about form. The notion of thresholds also means moving from room to room and from situation to situation. None of us imagined what it might look like at this stage. But everyone agreed that there is something important in the idea of thresholds that we should explore further."

We have devoted a separate chapter of the book to each of the ten qualities of extraordinary idea work. A summary of the qualities is presented in Table 1 next page. As shown in the table of contents and associated pages, pp 8–11, these ten qualities can be grouped in four overall categories that have also determined the layout of the book: that idea work is interwoven, affective, material and controversial.[1]

Each of the ten chapters starts with one or more stories that exemplify what this particular quality of idea work looks like. We take the reader backstage in six organizations that all have proven capabilities of idea work and describe ways of working that are surprisingly similar across the different industries these organizations operate within. The ten qualities of extraordinary idea work have (with some exceptions, such as "double rapid prototyping") not been previously described in literature on innovation and creativity at work. Thus, we believe these are ways of working that will provide readers with terms and examples that may help them to understand their own work experiences and can serve as an inspiration for improving their practices.

TABLE 1 TEN QUALITIES OF EXTRAORDINARY IDEA WORK

NAME OF QUALITY	DEFINITION
Prepping	The practice of carefully preparing, building, and revitalizing knowledge so as to maximize its potential for effective use in the moment of creation.
Zooming out	Stepping back from immersion in data and analysis of ideas of particulars and moving to big-picture thinking, letting go of details, and seeking the simplifying core.
Craving wonder	The sensuous experience of being in a mystery, a combination of feeling startled and engaging in passionate search. Wonder underpins all imagination, empathy, and deep interest in anything beyond self.
Activating drama	Calling people to adventure – into Battles, Mysteries, Missions, Cathedral building, Treasure or the needs of the human Other – in ways that recruit their utmost capabilities and desires, asking: "Why do we come to work here? What is really at stake?"
Daring to imagine	Boldly venturing forth into unknown territory through creating shared imaginings, cultivating a language of possibility, handling failure, and providing encouragement.

NAME OF QUALITY	DEFINITION
Getting physical	Moving from over-dependence on electronic media towards *materializing* and *visualizing* ideas in artifacts, *touching* ideas, *sketching* ideas, *gesticulating* around ideas, and *moving* while doing idea work.
Double rapid prototyping	A work form that seeks to force speedy production, testing, and improvement of half-worked ideas so that they are shared and bolstered at an early stage of development.
Liberating laughter	Processes of energizing co-creation through playfulness, puns, and humor aimed at building social ties, reducing seriousness, relaxing constraints in thinking, and encouraging original combinations of knowledge.
Generative resistance	Acknowledging doubt, friction, and criticism, not as noise to be avoided, but as levers with which to question the given and enhance imagination in everyday work.
Punk production	Using audacity and direct, self-initiated action to mobilize against established ways, opening up and realizing ideas with high levels of originality and value.

We write of "qualities", and the use of this term is particularly deliberate on our part. We do not describe ten distinctly different work practices or methods that one can readily implement. Instead, we are talking about qualities as different aspects and patterns of the same practice. The qualities are not mutually exclusive but complementary; indeed, they are often interwoven, so that a typical story of people doing concrete idea work will often allude to several qualities at the same time.

These qualities are not singular skills: good idea work is not about doing only one thing right. Rather, it requires mastering many skills, of which some are contradictory. For example, systematic prepping and dwelling in wonder are very different qualities from rapid bursts of prototyping and zooming out; generative resistance entails very different qualities from building belief, and the intense engagement in activating drama can differ greatly from the ironic distance of liberating laughter. Idea work may mean seeking undisturbed attention, allowing the mind to soar in a way that gives free rein to imagination. It involves selectivity as well as maintaining openness; it requires passion against moments of existential pain and anguish, and calls for experience to be held up against fresh views. Truly striving for creativity entails the ability to exercise such contradictory qualities in one's practice. Related observations have been made in research on creative individuals: they tend to inhabit contrasting personality traits (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: pp. 51–76), but the actual collective practices that sustain these individuals, our focus, remains under-explored.

WHY CALL IT IDEA WORK?

The concept "idea work" provides a language of practice for talking about how professionals promote creativity in organizations (Coldevin et al. 2012). It is a language that recognizes creativity as interwoven in daily work and as something people do together. Creativity in organizations is usually defined in terms of processes that produce outcomes that are both novel and useful (Amabile 1996). It is not enough that an outcome is considered original. Only those variations of new and existing processes, products, and services that key stakeholders consider valuable are truly creative (Csikszentmihalyi 1999). Much creativity research is grounded in psychology, and, as a research field, it has had a predominant focus on individuals (Sternberg and Lubart 1999). Much of the common sense knowledge about what it means to be creative is mired in myths. There are myths about creativity as something stemming from the use of general techniques or something that takes place on away-days, and in big leaps. And there are myths of the heroic and ingenious individual (typically male) struggling in loneliness before achieving some breakthrough.

Andrew Hargadon (2003: pp. 3–32) has convincingly debunked the mythical portrayal of Thomas Edison as a singular genius inventor. The name "Edison" became associated with the achievements of the social practice of the Menlo Park Laboratory where some 15 "muckers", as the engineers called themselves, managed to combine known technologies in new ways – thus bridging small worlds and creating new ones. Edison, for all practical purposes, is more correctly the name source of a certain place and practice rather than a lone achiever. It signifies a commercialization of a collective effort and practice under a branded entrepreneurial label.

Focusing on the individual and on breakthroughs alone would be as misleading as trying to understand the success of Barcelona, the soccer club, by looking only at the star player, Lionel Messi, and at the moments when goals are scored. Many consider Messi to be the best soccer player the world has ever known. He has won numerous individual awards (for example, the Golden Ball Award in 2009, 2010, and 2011) and trophies (Champion League, 2010 and 2011). It is equally recognized that so far Messi has performed well below his top potential when playing for Argentina's national team. So, while not forgetting the importance of individuals, the point here is that star soccer players and idea work stars are always part of a larger social practice.

Ideas are not just concepts or mental impressions. Ideas are a fundamental ontological category of being – ways of being in the world. Idea work as a concept is inspired by the classical pragmatist tradition of William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey, where creativity is situated in the everyday. For Peirce (1878/1958), clear ideas require considerable work to be such that, when apprehended, they can be recognized wherever they are met and can be seen as unique. Idea work "works" successfully when the application of its product makes a significant difference in our evaluation of a proposed solution to a problem at hand, whether in philosophy or in our everyday life.

FOR THE LOVE OF IDEAS

When asked what engages him most in his work and what makes him truly come alive in his profession, senior explorer and professor in geology, Harry Doust answers with the following:

> "What gets you up in the morning – that sort of feeling? I think it is the thrill of exploration, of exploring something new, of overcoming uncertainty, a curiosity about how the natural world works. It is trying to explain something, knowing that you'll never have all the information that you need. We deal with so much uncertainty in exploration that I think none of us has huge expectations that we are going to be more than partially correct at best, but living with uncertainty allows your mind to soar, to fly with the birds. It allows you an amazing range of freedom of thinking."

Harry's answer illustrates that several of the key qualities of extraordinary idea work speak to aspects that go beyond the making of new products and services, beyond striving for competitive advantage. In a very profound sense, people come alive when they work with ideas. The quality of "craving wonder" tells us how people gain passionate interest in ideas, something beyond self; how, quite like Harry, they thrive on searching for the new and unexpected and enjoy flying with the birds. As researchers and writers we sometimes experience this wonder when we become deeply fascinated by other people's worlds, struggle with questions, or are immersed in the joy of writing. The quality of

"liberating laughter" speaks to the joy of losing ourselves in collective play with ideas, a serious play of bantering, associations, ridicule of established ways, and combinations of things few people may ordinarily think belong together. The quality of "activating drama" is about the self-adventures that idea work brings to people's lives. Imaginative ideas for the location of new oil fields, new architectural concepts, new feature articles, or how to win major litigation cases bring excitement, danger, opportunity, and purpose to people. A life totally void of idea work would be a life of boredom, stagnation, and indifference, the kind of life that the famous management engineer, F. W. Taylor, imagined for those workers whose jobs were subject to design by scientific management, the kind of work design that radically divorces mental activity from manual labor and rigidly prescribes the latter.

Great ideas are always both personal and relational. Great ideas are personal in the sense that, once aired, once launched from the realm of thought into the domain of discussion, they engage our deepest interests and launch individual and collective self-adventures where something is at stake. Participation in idea work for the Opera Building or a major oil discovery constitute experiences that people can dine out on, sources of pride that become their narrative capital. According to explorer Magnar Larsen at Statoil, who is widely considered the protagonist in the discovery of Norne, the northernmost oil discovery in the world at the time:

> "It did not exactly hurt my professional reputation as a geologist. I was invited to give my opinion about oil discoveries elsewhere [...]. The biggest event for me as a geologist was Norne. I have been part of other discoveries, but this was the peak, it had so many spillover effects. It is important for me to have been part of something that mattered. I am a political person, so the societal significance of this was of great concern to me. I remember a person who had just become my leader said: 'This is going to stay with you'. He was right."

Great ideas are relational in the sense that they need to be shared, shaped, written into by many. Ideas live the strongest when they leave the cradle and become part of other people's purposes, ambitions, and hopes. The shape of a swan was one of many ideas drawn on in the construction of the Oslo Opera building, a concept that probably only a few people realize is deeply embedded in the final structure. Another concept, of "thresholds", was more open-ended and invitational, generous in the sense that it draws people in. Again in the words of Kjetil Trædal Thorsen:

> "If the project has the generous quality to begin with, so that it opens up for your own interpretations as you go – and generosity seems to be a very important theme in architecture – then it is as if the project develops itself. This means that you have found something, collectively, the very core of something that is this project's most important development potential."

THE THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE BOOK

Current creativity research increasingly tries to understand creativity as a collective phenomenon and a form of practice. Many scholars have pointed to an evident lack of focus on collective aspects of creativity in previous research (Sternberg and Lubart 1999, Kurtzberg and Amabile 2001, Sawyer 2006). As a response to this gap, research has increasingly tried to explore collective creativity in collaborative work (Hargadon and Sutton 1997, Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian 1999, Hargadon and Bechky 2006, Mumford and Licuanan 2004, Sawyer 2006). Group collaboration has been a major focus in much of this research (Gilson and Shalley 2004), sometimes by means of interaction analysis (Murphy 2005, Sawyer and DeZutter 2009). Collective creativity has been portrayed, for example, as a relatively rare and fleeting phenomenon that occurs in moments of interaction characterized by four types of interactional behaviors: help-giving, help-seeking, reframing and reinforcing (Hargadon and Bechky 2006).

While these approaches are useful and necessary, there is still a need for research that explores creativity as unfolding in everyday work (Mumford and Licuanan 2004, Sawyer 2006). A focus on creativity in breakthrough moments, even allowing for a succession of these, does not seem sufficient. People also work on ideas when doing painstaking analysis; when they visualize preliminary understanding in sketching, mapping, or modeling; when they imagine future products and services, when they listen to a demanding client, or when they identify bias and unquestioned assumptions in previous efforts and subsequently generate entirely new ways of seeing (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman 2008). People also work with ideas when they connect analysis of particulars to broader wholes, whether disciplinary traditions, organizational purposes, or larger social struggles.

Talking about idea work rather than creativity allows one to take into account a range of efforts that may involve several work groups and specialists over time and that also span across projects. The concept of idea work allows us to consider sequences and iterations between a broad range of interdependent activities and mediating artifacts that in some way all contribute to developing, visualizing, preparing the ground for, and

realizing ideas. The focus on idea work as a collective practice is inspired by the fledgling practice-based approach in organization studies (Schatzki and Knorr Cetina 2001, Gherardi 2006, Feldman and Orlikowski 2011), where the specifics of what people do in their everyday work is seen as vital for understanding communites of practice (Wenger 1998), learning (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow 2003), knowing (Orlikowski 2000), or strategizing (Johnson, Melin, and Whittington 2003).

By introducing the term «idea work» we also aim to broaden the recognition of organizational practices considered creative. Creativity is often a term wrongfully reserved for artists and so-called creative industries. Also, the innovation literature has focused largely on the development of consumer goods, standardized services, or new high-tech solutions, rather than on creative practices, per se. In contrast to this focus, we suggest that idea work can take place more or less everywhere: in schools, banks, hospitals, consultancies, merchants, publishers, as well as university research laboratories – the list is almost endless. Thus we try to offer a language for talking about creative practice in many kinds of work and in all sectors of the economy.

We believe idea work is particularly relevant for making sense of the growing importance of project-based organizing (Lundin and Midler 1998, Sydow, Lindkvist, and DeFilippi 2004). Any project of some significance in organizations involves a certain amount of idea work, both in its conception (ideas pertaining to the challenges to be met and the problems to be solved) and completion (ideas on how to respond to unique user requests with the mix of services and capabilities one can offer).

What, then, about idea work versus knowledge work? Theories on knowing-in-practice (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow 2003, Gherardi 2000) and knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), overlap with idea work in their focus on practice and in describing processes of "amplifying knowledge created by individuals" (Nonaka and Von Krogh 2009, p. 635), an inevitable part of working with ideas. But the concept of idea work is more directly tied to output and value than to resources. The creation of knowledge in the sense of "crystallizing and connecting it to an organization's knowledge system" (Nonaka and Von Krogh 2009, p. 635) is only a secondary purpose. Furthermore, idea work is not restricted to the elitist connotation and theoretical, disciplinary knowledge often attributed to knowledge work (Rylander 2009).

THE RESEARCH
BEHIND THE BOOK

This book is the direct result of a four-year research project called Idea Work that set out to understand sources of extraordinary ideas in leading organizations. See pages 28–29 for a presentation of the participating organizations that we use as cases for the study. The organizations all have a Scandinavian home-base. All of them are considered industry leaders in some sense, have demonstrated excellence in part of their history, and three of them have recently achieved recognition as international pioneers and practice leaders in innovation. Thus, as research cases, these six organizations provide a rich base for exploring extra-ordinary idea work. People in all six organizations have taken a strong interest in participating in the inquiry, in co-creating a language for idea work and in testing the insights in real work settings. The practical incentive of being able to improve work practice and not merely "being the object of a study" has been an important driver of the research[II]. A research approach closely involving practitioners is particularly important when studying idea work with highly specialized vocabu-lary and long time cycles. Exploration for gas and oil is the extreme case here, with project cycles that can span a decade and a vocabulary that will soon leave outsiders in the dark.

In direct response to the lack of practice-based approaches to creativity at work, the key questions in the Idea Work project were simple: What drives extraordinary creativity in everyday work? How do people do it? And how do we talk about it?

We have focused on practice – what people actually do when developing ideas in their everyday work – and on positive deviant practice – what work looks like when at its best. All organizations have problems and challenges with being creative; also all have moments when they achieve the extraordinary. By focusing on the extraordinary we try to energize the organization and point to possibilities, rather than limit learning to the averages of best practices.[III]

In order to develop a language of idea work we have systematically compared practices across the six organizations. What we share is based on observation, inter-views, feedback sessions, and active experimentation in these organizations. Briefly, this project has involved over 200 interviews, dozens of feedback events and work-shops, as well as more than 400 hours of observations, the latter also enabled by two PhDs who are both in the write-up phase of their research, one in an architecture firm (Aina Landsverk Hagen) and one in an oil company (Tord Fagerheim Mortensen).[IV]

Our analysis of data followed a so-called grounded theory research approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Charmaz 2006) involving practitioners in the six organizations. Central to any grounded approach is the move from empirical observations to theoretical categories via various forms of systematic coding and comparison. One challenge in such comparisons is to arrive at a format that allows for active involvement of practitioners. To accomplish this, we developed and used a new methodology with a deck of A5 cards for each organization, combining images (on the front) and brief texts (on the reverse side) to provide thin abstractions of tentative research findings (see Carlsen, Rudningen, and Mortensen 2012 for further details). Each card presented research findings in the form of distinct qualities for idea work at its best. Based on this, our analysis involved the following steps to identify and compare patterns of successful idea work practices within and across the six organizations:

1. From interviews, observation, and interactions, we developed a deck of cards for each of the six organizations, identifying qualities of extraordinary idea work and comprising eight to 24 cards per organization.

2. Within each organization the particular deck of cards was used to inter-act with practitioners in that organization. A typical way of doing this was to present the deck of cards in feedback sessions and have practitioners respond to the interpretations through various forms of scoring, prioritization, and specification of follow-up actions. In addition, some of the insights were tested through work sessions addressing real challenges.

3. We compared the decks of cards across all six organizations asking the question: "What are the qualities of extraordinary idea work that people in the six different organizations have in common?"

The results of our analysis is the ten qualities of extraordinary idea work presented here. These are qualities that seem to be present in groups, projects, work processes and activities in which people are operating at their best. All ten qualities are not present at all times – only two or three may be observable in a single project – but all contribute in some way to the success of the organizations involved.

THE COLLABORATORS IN THIS BOOK

Ideas for architectural concepts and solutions: Snøhetta is a world-renowned architectural firm based in Oslo, Norway, and New York City. The company was established in the late 1980s with an ambition to integrate landscape architecture and architecture and started its road to fame by winning the competition for the Alexandria library. Later projects include the new Opera building in Oslo, the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York and the renovation of Times Square. In 2010, Snøhetta had approximately 120 designers working on projects in Europe, Asia, and America. Snøhetta has won a series of international awards for its designs and was listed the most innovative architectural firm by Fast Company in 2011 *(see http://www.fastcompany.com/1738920/the-10-most-innovative-companies-in-architecture)*. Snøhetta's participation in Idea Work has taken place through projects in Oslo and New York, involving videotaped observations from ongoing projects and an ethnographic study by a Ph.D. student, Aina Landsverk Hagen.

Ideas for where to find oil and gas: Statoil is an international energy company, headquartered in Stavanger, Norway, with operations in 36 countries and 20,000 employees. Operating mainly within the oil and gas industry, Statoil has ambitious worldwide exploration activities with around 800 geoscientists working to develop acreage and new prospects for where hydrocarbons can be found. In 2011, Statoil discovered more oil than any other company and was regarded as the seventh most innovative company *(see http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/mostadmired/2011/best_worst/best1.html)* in Fortune's list of most admired companies. Statoil's participation in Idea Work has been extensive, with over 100 interviews and eight workshops involving more than 300 explorers.

Ideas for development of new markets, services, and products in trading analytics: Point Carbon (as of 2010 acquired by Thompson Reuters and renamed Thompson Reuters Point Carbon) is a world-leading provider of independent news, analysis, and consulting services for global power, gas, and carbon markets. The firm has offices in Oslo (head office), Washington D.C., London, Tokyo, Beijing, Kiev, Hamburg, Zürich, and Malmö. Point Carbon was founded in 2000 and played a pioneering role in establishing the carbon market. The idea behind Point Carbon stemmed from research on environmental, energy, and resource management politics at the independent Fridtjof Nansen Institute in Norway, as well as from core competences in trading, journalism, and quantitative modeling. In Idea Work, the focus for Point Carbon has been on its portfolio of carbon market services, involving internal and external interviewing, some observation, and two workshops.

Ideas for legal strategies, solutions, and advice: Thommessen (Advokatfirmaet Thommessen AS) is a leading corporate law firm in Norway, practicing in all areas of commercial law. The firm has offices in Oslo, Bergen, and London and is also the Norwegian member of Lex Mundi, the world's largest network of independent law firms. Thommessen was established in 1856, is consistently ranked first by independent assessments, and was awarded Scandinavian Law Firm of the Year (Chambers & Partners) in 2007–2009. The firm has a total staff of 290, of which 185 are lawyers. Acknowledging the importance of client interactions in Thommessen, the focus on Idea Work there has been on further systematic learning from client relationships through internal and external interviews and a series of subsequent workshops. Reidar Gjersvik, co-editor of this book, did participant observation in his three-year role as Chief Knowledge Officer at Thommessen.

Ideas for new products and services in banking: SpareBank 1 Alliance is the main grouping of Norwegian savings banks and a leading provider of financial products and services in the Norwegian market with around 10,000 employees. The banks in the SpareBank 1 Alliance distribute the group's products and collaborate in key areas such as brands, work processes, expertise development, IT operations and system development. SpareBank 1 is known for the strong local engagement of savings banks, reflected in local ownership and industrial development. Idea Work has collaborated with the development function of SpareBank1 Alliance, including interviews, attention to the corporate systems for idea development, and workshops for generation of new ideas. The latter has also involved participation from technical suppliers and clients.

Ideas for new feature articles: A-magasinet is the weekend magazine distributed as a supplement to the leading Norwegian daily newspaper, *Aftenposten*. It is one of Norway's largest weekend magazines with an established brand, a solid and stable group of readers, and generally enjoys high recognition. The magazine features an editorial line that tones down traditional lifestyle material, aims to be of value in raising important societal concerns, and regularly includes long articles based on investigative journalism. *A-magasinet* was not formally a full participant in the Idea Work research project. Its involvement amounted to eight interviews, three brief rounds of observations, archive studies, and a workshop.

Our research is informed by narrative methods of inquiry (Mishler 1986, Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Kohler-Riessman 2008), in our way of interviewing people, analyzing experiences across contexts and presenting them here. This means that we have tried to preserve context, by having people tell stories from their work or observe whole processes, used stories in our comparisons and also that we emphasize stories with flesh and blood characters in the ten qualities of extraordinary idea work.

Notwithstanding our protocols, readers should also be aware of the limitations of our research. The depth and duration of our involvement with the six organizations varied significantly – from over a hundred interviews and five years of engagement with hydrocarbon explorers, to a mere eight interviews and a few weeks of interactions with journalists. The difference between these outliers says something about those practices that are more opaque to outsiders, with exploration being the extreme case, with its highly specialized language and long project cycles. But it also underlines that we do not believe we have a full overview of the practices of idea work in the six organizations. Nobody has such knowledge, nor would it be possible to make such a claim: practices are always in process. Thus we do not claim that the patterns we highlight are necessarily stable over time or something recognizably homogeneous. Practices change all the time and seem different to different people. Thus, our ten qualities should not be taken as universal "truths". Not being positivists we do not expect to meet universal truths in our branch of social science. Rather, these qualities are ones that people in the partner organizations recognized as meaningful, which the researchers think provide a fair description, and with which we find resonance in other social science research. The robustness of the work is enhanced by the variance across context and the repeated involvement of practitioners in making comparisons. And the stories we tell will hopefully allow readers to make comparisons with their own worlds.

TO WHOM IS THIS BOOK ADDRESSED?

The book is aimed at managers, practitioners, researchers, and students of organizations who are interested in improving their outputs and their work processes: in short, people who do idea work and people interested in what makes organizations work well. Idea work takes place in every organization where prior experience and general knowledge need to be fitted and combined to meet unique demands and circumstances.

For some professions, the importance of idea work is obvious: Architects at Snøhetta cannot enter competitions without ideas for sketching new concepts. Geologists at Statoil searching for new gas and oil cannot develop prospects without some idea as to where the treasures are concealed underground. Likewise, journalists at weekend magazines compete with other weekend magazines based on ideas for feature articles, and lawyers depend on ideas when facing tough legal battles and while advising on complex financial restructurings, mergers, and strategies. In these settings, bad ideas, or an absence of ideas, simply means that one is not able to perform: competitive bids and legal cases would be lost. Oil would not be found. Readers would leave.

For others, the role of ideas in work is subtler, or more precisely put, so interwoven with daily work that we usually do not think of the practice as idea work. A farmer needs major ideas about how to achieve the best long-term harvest from the unique features of his or her soil, about regulations, cost considerations, and market conditions; but the farmer must also generate countless smaller ideas in solving everyday problems. A sports fisherman needs ideas about which flies to use under which conditions for what kind of prey and will thrive on exchanging such ideas with others. A cabin crew attendant needs ideas on how to handle difficult situations with schedule deviances or distressed, sick, or frightened passengers. Some of these ideas are developed and acted upon in split seconds; decisions are made in the blink of an eye. Taking the time to step back and say "I will now do idea work" might not actually help at all.

Thus, we shall reserve the term idea work for work with ideas that require organizational attention and interaction over time, where one needs to consider alternatives, and where major changes or new deliverables are at stake. This is still a broad concept; idea work is part of all important development work, most project-based work, and all work with sustained end-user interactions in problem solving, such as setting up curriculums for teachers or planning the development of a farm or developing new products and services for a bank. Idea work is relevant for everyone engaged in problem solving and development work and everyone who works with projects or tasks that may differ slightly from time to time.

HOW TO READ AND USE THE BOOK

Our ambition is that this book will be used by other researchers, for master's level teaching in universities but the book is also intended for practitioners and professionals. In addition to the architects, lawyers, journalists, and other professionals that we discuss in the book, we think that students of management and innovation might benefit from a book this close to practice. The book is intended to be neither a "research-heavy" tome (although we have written such books elsewhere) nor a "pop" how-to text for one-minute managers or people with seven highly effective habits. The book aims to spur curiosity and make readers wonder about practices in their own organization and profession. It seeks to provide practical hints about how readers might approach issues of creativity and idea work in their own practice. Like us, you have probably spent more of your working life in organizations characterized by a lack rather than a surfeit of imagination. We want to reverse the imbalance.

It will be possible for the reader to read this book from many angles and use it in any number of ways. If interested in architecture or exploration, you may pay special attention to Snøhetta's or Statoil's projects. If you want to read social or organization science, you may focus on the descriptions and theory of the qualities of idea work. Other starting points may be through approaches to creative work practice (what do professionals do?), or through practical tips on how to promote a given quality in your organization, or even as a tool for further research. We envisage the book as a tool for creativity of all sorts; in particular, it can

be used as a stimulus for creativity sessions in organizations where analogies, extensions, and approximations are work-shopped, discussed, and materialized. To make this kind of usage feasible, we have engaged closely with everyday practice, borrowing examples from leading idea workers and basing our descriptions on solid research, taking the reader backstage into real situations and offering practical tips, compelling stories, and, above all, accessible, engaging, and thought-provoking insights.

WHAT ABOUT ARTISTRY?

As a way to further exemplify and expand our understanding of extra-ordinary idea work, we have included small snippets from the work of one or more great artists in all chapters. While many of these artists may be seen to represent the prototypical lonely genius that possesses qualities of artistic creativity and seemingly directly opposes of our concept of idea work, we beg to differ. In a provocative sense, one could understand individual artistry as the label for a collective practice of engagement with vital traditions of ideas. We do not aim to provide a full analysis of artistic practice. Instead of following the usual route of starting with the lonely genius and imposing lessons learned on organizations, the intention here is to play with the inverse: Is there an affinity between the patterns of collective practice that we have seen in extraordinary idea work and the work of great artists? The work of Bob Dylan will be revisited several times in these snippets, reflecting his highly acclaimed artistry, the seemingly individual nature of his work (if Dylan can be regarded to be doing collective idea work, who could not?), and our own fascination with his work.[v]

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NOTES

I. The four categories may be seen as a conceptual relative to Amabile's (1996) three-component model of creativity. Amabile differentiates between 1) creative skills or creative thinking, 2) expertise, and 3) task motivation. A full comparison is outside the scope here, but roughly we can say that the affective qualities of extraordinary idea work (daring to imagine, craving wonder, and activating drama) correspond to and extend the concept of task motivation. Likewise, the interwoven qualities of idea work (prepping and zooming out) correspond to Amabile's expertise component. The largest difference in our conception here is that we have identified a range of both controversial (generative resistance, liberating laughter, and punk production) and material (double rapid prototyping and getting physical) qualities of idea work that go beyond the notion of creative skills (which normally do not recognize issues of power) or creative thinking (which is overly cognitively oriented).

II. The practical interest from the participating organizations is important not only because it ensures engagement in interpretation of findings and co-creation of a language for idea work. Practical interest also serves to set up arenas where the emergent conceptions can be tested by, for example, designing and carrying out workshops on real challenges, workshops that are informed by the ten identified qualities of extraordinary idea work. Statoil is probably the case organization with the most direct practical utilization of the results with eight two-day workshops engaging over 300 explorers and disseminating findings to more than 800 explorers. In 2010, Statoil's chief geologist publicly attributed the increased discovery rate to the Idea Work collaboration (*A-magasinet* 2010 (10): pp. 8–18: Seriøs kreativitet [Serious Creativity]). The following year, seven impact discoveries were made, totaling a resource increase that amounted to more than any other oil company in the world. We do not claim causality here. At best, the Idea Work project has had an indirect influence on these discoveries. The point is simply to illustrate that our research has benefitted from being close to high-impact practice.

III: This is a research strategy that emphasizes learning from positive deviant cases (in contrast to learning from problems alone) and strives to understand the basis for extraordinary performances, practices, and relationships. It is a research strategy with many roots, now broadly taken up in positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2004). We have used it to systematically look for peak moments in interactions and to try to understand dynamics in situations and projects that were in some sense extraordinary. We also see it as a constructive way of interacting with people in the field in terms of establishing trust and inviting people into joint activities of reflection. Asking people about their successes energizes the conversation and may convey an attitude of "we are here to learn from and with you", rather than "we are here to learn from your failures and find out how you can improve in your work". Also, paradoxically, talking about positive deviant events seems to open the ground for also discussing failures. The interviewee is enlisted comparing the positive deviant situations and projects with the negative ones rather than overlooking the latter. A typical interview in the Idea Work research project would start by having people identify and tell stories of success projects and peak moments. Here we rely on narrative approaches to interviewing where people's experiences are put in context, where the voice of interviewees is preserved and their experiences made part of a coherent story (Mishler 1986, Kohler-Riessman 2008). Next we would try to engage interviewees in various forms of comparisons, e.g., "What is the difference between a peak moment/a success project and those that amount to little? What distinguishes an extraordinary team session/ team practice/team leadership from the mediocre ones?" A third section of interviews would deal more systematically with causalities, for example: "What could you to bring about the positive deviant experiences more often. What enables or stifles extraordinary idea work?"

IV.

	Observations	Interviews	Interaction events	Archives
SpareBank 1-alliansen	Limited: ca. 20+ hours, mainly review meetings	12 employees, eight users	Five workshops, of which one also involved suppliers	Media articles, project records, policy documents, web
Thommessen	Extensive: three years with researcher in participant obser-vation role as chief knowledge officer	10 + 8 employees, six clients	Six workshops focused on learning from clients, all with feedback sessions	Case material, internal knowledge management systems and archives, media articles, web
Point Carbon	Limited: 20+ hours, two meetings and a handful of site visits	20 employees, eight clients	Two two-day workshops with feedback sessions	Media articles, project records, policy documents, web
Snøhetta	Extensive: 200+ hours (project meetings, client meetings, site visits)	22 employees	Four feedback sessions	Media articles, project records, books, web
Statoil	Extensive: 250+ hours, (work sessions, project meetings, presentations, review meetings)	110+ employees at all levels, including the CEO	Eight two-day workshops, all including feedback sessions	Media articles, project records, internal discovery stories, regional overviews, data (logs, seismic) policy documents
A-magasinet	Limited: three meetings, five brief visits	eight employees	One feedback session	Work in progress, finished articles, web, a few policy documents

V. Bob Dylan is one of the more recognized artists of our time. Not merely a song and dance man, he is also a Nobel Prize candidate, Oscar and Pulitzer Prize winner, recipient of the president of the United States' highest award, the Medal of Freedom, as well as a dazzling producer of music and lyrics from new ideas, texts, and metaphors so strong that they have become part of our daily lives; he is one of the defining voices of our time and custodian of some of the most vital traditions in vernacular American music, someone who still manages to renew himself nightly in performance, taking risks with repertoire, arrangements, and accompanists. Stewart Clegg has had a long-standing fascination with the work of Dylan ever since he first heard him in 1962, fifty years ago at the time of writing. What was fascinating was that, in an age of forgeries and fakes, this seemed to be the real thing, albeit in masquerade. The fascination has wavered at times but has never lapsed, even as Dylan tested the loyalty of the most dedicated fans with some of his recorded idea works and movies. With Dylan as his teacher, Clegg learned to become a sociologist as much as with his more formal mentors; with Dylan he learned the importance of rhythm in writing and the cadences of composition; with Dylan he learned appreciation of art that takes us where it will, whether into the gospels, or the back roads of an East Texas populated with martyrs, Brownsville girls, and a movie starring Gregory Peck.