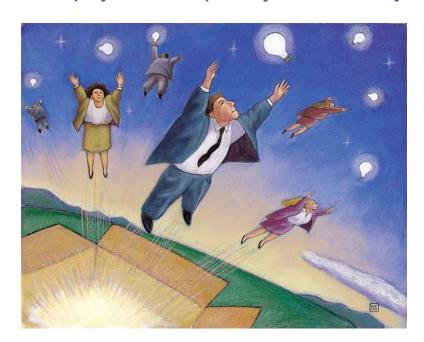# *Where* and *When*
Do People Get Their
Best Ideas?

An Inquiry into the Top Catalysts of Creativity

**Based on an Idea Champions Informal Online Poll
Conducted Sept – November, 2007**

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Where and When Do You Get Your Best Ideas?

Recently, the Idea Champions team has been reviewing its 22 years of client experience to identify the key elements of a "Culture of Innovation." During this time of reflection and inquiry we found ourselves intrigued by one, core question: *"Where and when do people get their best ideas?"* We decided to see if respondents agreed about what catalysts they ranked highest as places, times and states for best ideas. If we could find patterns in people's preferred catalysts, we'd have rough "best practices list" of favorable innovation settings, and we could be more effective in helping our clients innovate.

We decided to conduct an informal online poll. For the most part, the list of 80 "best idea catalysts" we compiled included situations that our clients usually find themselves in during the course of an average day. Some were work-related, some were not.

The choices we included ranged from solitary pastimes to social activities performed with or around others. (Some catalysts, like *traveling* and *commuting*, could be both solitary and social.) We also included many *mind states* and a variety of physical activities and stresses. Specific times of day were also included.

As we suspected might happen, the top thirty-five catalysts established themselves fairly quickly as respondents took the poll. Within our first 25 responses, we saw the same items rising to the top. In addition, as remaining responses came in, there were few shifts in how the top 35 catalysts ranked relatively. (See Appendix B, *Method*, for more).

Because of the early appearance of these the 35 top-ranked catalysts, this report focuses that "Top 35." Please keep in mind that our report covers only the salient aspects that *we* found interesting about the data. Now, with the results published, (the entire 80 item poll is noted in Appendix A), we invite *you* to share your own observations and interpretations. We trust that you and others will find new patterns, dimensions, and connections in the mosaic. Feel free to contact us privately (info@ideachampions.com), or publicly (www.ideachampions.com/weblogs), as inspired.

A. The Top 35 Catalysts for Best Ideas

Poll Rank	Item Rank	Rating	Catalyst
1	1	4.08	When you're inspired
2	2	3.64	Brainstorming with others
3	3	3.48	When you're immersed in a project
4	4	3.45	When you're happy
5	5	3.35	Collaborating with a partner
6	6	3.27	Daydreaming
7	7	3.25	Analyzing a problem
8	8	3.22	Driving
9	9	3.21	Commuting to and from work
10	10	3.19	Reading books in your field
10	11	3.19	After you've clearly defined a problem
11	12	3.18	Getting feedback from others
12	13	3.17	Doing something that feeds your soul
13	14	3.16	Talking with customers
14	15	3.12	Brainstorming alone
15	16	3.11	When you least expect it
16	17	3.10	Speaking with people outside your field
17	18	3.09	Walking
18	19	3.07	Being in nature
19	20	3.05	Late at night
20	21	3.04	Surfing the internet
21	22	3.02	Traveling
22	23	2.99	At a conference
23	24	2.98	Vacationing
23	25	2.98	Showering
24	26	2.97	Having fun
25	27	2.94	Relaxing
25	28	2.94	Working with your hands
26	29	2.89	Reading books outside your field
27	30	2.87	Early in the morning
28	31	2.85	Dreaming (at night)
29	32	2.83	Taking a break
29	33	2.83	Writing
30	34	2.78	Laying awake in bed
30	35	2.78	In the workplace

B. Social vs. Solitary Innovation and Mind States

Our poll's highest rated response, by a large margin was *"When I'm inspired."* No surprise here. Most people tend to feel inspired when great ideas occur to them. Indeed, we could have easily re-named our poll, *"Where and when do you feel most inspired?"*

For years, Idea Champions has observed the outward signs of inspiration in the sessions we facilitate for both global businesses and smaller organizations. As participants experience our innovation-sparking processes, we see intention, engagement, experimentation, laughter, collaboration, and the spontaneous flow of promising new ideas. We see passion, creativity, and humor. We also see people draw into themselves, pulling away from the group in order to think on their own. This is not necessarily shy or antisocial behavior. Thinking people have a need for solitary retreat and reflection. Indeed, there is an internal state of reflection and musing that participants, in our sessions, try to evoke, return to, and preserve. We think our poll clearly shows that people rely on both *social* and *solitary* contexts for idea creation, and that inspiration can happen either way. How well an organization supports both approaches will impact how innovative it is.

C. Social Catalysts

"Brainstorming with others" took the #2 spot, a huge vote of confidence for team ideation. *"Collaborating with a partner"* was rated #5 – not surprising, since innovating duos are quite common. Think Bill Gates and Paul Allen (Microsoft), Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (Apple), Sergey Brin and Larry Page (Google), David Filo and Jerry Yang (Yahoo), Watson and Crick (DNA), Lennon and McCartney (the Beatles), Hewlett & Packard. (NOTE: Innovating *trios* are not nearly as common as duos.)

Figure 1: Social catalysts for best ideas

2	3.64	Brainstorming with others
5	3.35	Collaborating with a partner
11	3.18	Getting feedback from others
13	3.16	Talking with customers
16	3.10	Speaking with people outside your field

Listening skills also made a strong showing among our Top 35 social catalysts. *"Talking with customers"* (#13) suggests that listening helps identify the most meaningful problems to address (problems grounded in actual customer need). *"Getting feedback from others"* (#11) suggests that any connection with an interested party is potentially helpful, whether complimentary or critical. *"Speaking with people outside your field"* (#16) implies that innovators must go outside their chosen / assigned disciplines and silos in order to seek other perspectives.

D. Solitary Catalysts

As highly rated as the five social catalysts are, there are almost twice as many *solitary* catalysts in the Top 35. Most of them are the kinds of activities that slow things down enough for a person to see what's going on in their mind. Naturally, all ideas we think of are social in some way. The ones that fascinate us the most do so because we realize that *other* human beings might appreciate them. The distinction here is that with these seeming solitary catalysts, the social part of our brains can go on the back burner – temporarily freeing us up from the inputs (and possible critiques) of others. Solitary idea catalysts provide the time and place for a person to be *independent*, not necessarily *interdependent*. Social reflexes are no longer part of the equation, no voice is saying, "But that's impossible, silly, useless."

"Walking," *"Being in nature*,*" "Showering,"* and *"Working with your hands"* are all great places to forget yourself and free-associate. *"Traveling*,*" "Commuting," "Reading*,*"* and *"Brainstorming alone"* allow the mind to encounter random triggers, theorize, and free associate. *"Being in nature"* and *"Surfing the internet"* are immersion experiences we can engage in at our own pace. Both offer a profusion of inputs where elements are linked and juxtaposed accidentally, wildly, and unpredictably. Serendipity – the combining of surprising, random and seemingly disjointed experiences – has been an essential part of human ideation for centuries. Couple this with the fact that humans are programmed to hunt and gather *purposefully* in the wild and you have creative people who enjoy hunting and gathering information in books and on the internet, trolling for serendipitous new surprises that might spark the imagination.

Figure 2: Solitary catalysts for best ideas

8	3.22	Driving (alone)
9	3.21	Commuting to and from work
10	3.19	Reading books in your field
14	3.12	Brainstorming alone
17	3.09	Walking
18	3.07	Being in nature
20	3.04	Surfing the internet
23	2.98	Showering
25	2.94	Working with your hands

E. Mind States

Mind states include moods, cerebral activities, and stress relievers. Most of these mind states imply independence of thought and a forgetting of routine demands that inhibit free-form thinking.

All creative mind states aim toward inspiration – the thrill of realizing you've broken through and created something others might appreciate, want, pay for, and use. It is this joy that drives innovation at the personal level.

Our poll results indicate that there is a tug of war between *collaboration* and *personal reverie* as a path to great ideas. The mind state catalysts, when added to the solitary catalysts in Figure 2, make up two-thirds of our Top 35. Translation? *Personal payoff* ideating dominates two to one. But are these mind states really solitary?

A few clearly are solitary (i.e. *daydreaming, dreaming, writing*). But many could be experienced in a team context. For example, you could be *relaxing, having fun, defining problems, happy, immersed,* and *inspired* <u>with</u> others. Nevertheless, we think most people are referring to personal states that transport them out of ordinary social-brain activities and self-conscious inhibitions. A heightened state of imagining and possibility, a first glimpse of what could be, often begins *privately*. It might then be shared (and often developed) with a close confidant first. Co-development of an idea may start with a mere kernel, then grow through enthusiastic dialogue with another sympathetic mind.

Below are the mind states in the Top 35 that our respondents told us keep their best ideas flowing.

Figure 3: Mind state catalysts for best ideas

1	4.08	When you're inspired
3	3.48	When you're immersed in a project
4	3.45	When you're happy
6	3.27	Daydreaming
7	3.25	Analyzing a problem
10	3.19	After you've clearly defined a problem
12	3.17	Doing something that feeds your soul
25	2.94	Relaxing
24	2.97	Having fun
28	2.85	Dreaming (at night)
29	2.83	Writing

F. Exertion and Stress

Catalysts relating to pressure, exertion, and stress ranked lower in our poll – most of them above position #50. Deadlines and results may get projects and people moving forward incrementally, but they don't seem to be favorable precursors to great ideas. Exertion and stress are associated with *coercion* and *motivation* more than they are with *inspiration*.

Few companies have evolved to the point where they create a time and place where employees are allowed to pursue the joy of discovery. Discovery must be framed and justified as "work." There are exceptions, however. At Google, employees get 20% of paid time to pursue areas of interest that inspire them. By paying each employee to journey deep into his or her uncharted personal wilderness, Google keeps its edge. 3M, too, provides 15% paid time for its people to pursue projects not sanctioned by their job role. W.L. Gore provides employees one half day a week for personal exploration.

Most organizations still fail to see the productive value of such "down time." In the name of "getting the job done," they produce more overload and stress than is healthy for a culture of innovation. The obsessive pursuit of efficiency is often framed, spun, and sold as "innovation." We think this is a misrepresentation. Great ideas do not issue from efficiency tweaks. A constant drum roll of incremental quality improvement can be another way to keep workers heads down. It rarely spurs the creation of truly imaginative and disruptive ideas, or leads to next generation products.

The amount of "best ideas" generated by aspiring innovators doesn't get better when team commitment is measured in ergs of actual sweat. In the past, companies often turned to strenuous activities to build and motivate their teams. Rafting trips and ropes courses can work well to bond teams instinctually. But in this poll, we found all activities requiring physical exertion scored low as idea catalysts.

Figure 4: Pressure: exertion and stress activities and best ideas

35	2.69	When you really need a result
37	2.62	Thinking hard about something
51	2.54	Trying to meet a deadline
54	2.39	Any repetitive physical activity
58	2.16	Gardening
59	2.14	Jogging or running
65	1.97	Riding a bicycle
66	1.94	Swimming
69	1.87	Playing a sport
71	1.78	Mowing the lawn
75	1.52	Having sex

G. Motion and Stillness

Activities that put people in motion scored higher than activities requiring stillness. *Traveling, driving,* and *commuting* all place us in motion with countless other strangers. Observing the world from the window of a car, train, or plane stirs a lot of thoughts. The feeling of going somewhere on our own provides solitary time for letting the world in, letting its elements free associate in our minds. When we're traveling we're not at work, we're not at home. We're in our own personal, observational space.

Figure 5: In motion / transit

8	3.22	Driving
9	3.21	Commuting to and from work
17	3.09	Walking
21	3.02	Traveling

The "states of stillness" in Figure 6 were mostly "bubbling under" the top 35. Although being still makes reverie and free association possible, a person might just as easily be bored, restless, or worried during these times. Although likely precursors to the appearance of great ideas, these are not as common or reliable as those in the top 35.

Figure 6: Being still

30	2.78	Laying awake in bed
32	2.73	Just before sleep
33	2.72	Just upon waking
37	2.62	Sitting at your desk
38	2.61	Waking up in the middle of the night
52	2.53	Meditating
64	2.07	Praying

Deep meditation, for those familiar with the practice, is about emptying the mind, stopping its chatter, and turning off thought. Those who meditate seriously don't sit with a note pad to record what they think about. In fact, they are trying *not* to think. We found it uncanny how three catalysts, fundamentally similar to each other, tied for the same position: *"Meditating," "Doing nothing"* and *"Doing anything mindless."* These all tied for #52 at 2.53 each. *"Praying"* is a focused form of thought, a spiritual conversation that is also not about ideating. Keep in mind, however, that people may be receptive to some very interesting ideas immediately after a prayer or meditation session is finished.

H. Times of Day

During what times of the day do best ideas happen? Our poll results reveal that they often sneak up on people in moments of mental unwinding, in stillness and receptivity. The three that made the top 35? *"When you least expect it,"* (#15) *"Late at night"* (#19) and *"Early in the morning."* (#27)

What people expect (i.e. deadlines, goals, efficiency, ROI) seems to have little influence on the flow of our respondent's best ideas. Good ideas *come when they come*. Their time of arrival cannot be controlled or put on a company schedule.

Times of day people can claim for solitary reflection or musing – early in the morning or late at night – seem to be conducive to top quality ideas. For instance, many writers, in order to ensure exclusive time with their inner voice, get up before the rest of their household to catch their ideas fresh. For the same reason, others might work late, after everyone has gone to bed.

Figure 7: Times of Day for best ideas

15	3.11	When you least expect it
19	3.05	Late at night
27	2.87	Early in the morning
30	2.78	Laying awake in bed
32	2.73	Just before sleep
33	2.72	Just upon waking
38	2.61	Waking up in the middle of the night

Your Comments?

It is our hope that this report sheds some light on your understanding of the conditions and catalysts most likely to help you and those around you maintain the highest levels of originality, creativity, and inspiration. What follows are some further reflections, conclusions, and recommendations for your consideration. If you have any further insights sparked by our poll results, please share them with us at the email below and we will do our best to include them in our future blog postings about this topic. Thanks!

Tim Moore, Mitch Ditkoff
IDEA CHAMPIONS

Send your insights to info@ideachampions.com

COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MINDSTATES

1. Two of the top four catalysts for best ideas are associated with a positive mood or mindset (i.e. *inspired* and *happy*.)

2. *"Daydreaming"* (#6) is one of the top catalysts for best ideas. And yet most companies frown on employees who daydream or don't appear to be "working." Einstein called his daydreams "thought experiments" and daydreamed frequently. Why don't companies allow more time for daydreaming? Indeed, why don't companies create *daydreaming spaces* conducive to blue sky thinking? People need to periodically get out of their left-brain and into the right-brain in order to tap the fountain of best ideas.

3. The third highest rated catalyst for best ideas is *"When I'm immersed in a project,"* but very few companies allow their employees to immerse. Quite the contrary. They usually overload people with projects and meetings and demands and emails and reports and changing priorities until there is no immersion time left**.** How about *idea sabbaticals* or *more free time* like Google and 3M offer employees?

4. Problem solving can be a major catalyst for generating new ideas. (*"Analyzing a problem"* ranked #7; *"After you've clearly defined a problem"* tied #10.) Nailing down the problem you're *really* solving can be a breakthrough by itself.

PLACES

5. *"In the workplace"* is not a top catalyst for best ideas. It scored an item rank of #35 (disregarding ties), behind *daydreaming, driving, walking, being in nature, late at night, surfing the internet, vacationing, showering, having fun, relaxing, dreaming,* and *taking a break.*

6. *"Sitting at my desk,"* a place where many business people spend a good deal of time*,* rated very low (item # 44 of 80). Given the amount of time business people spend at their desk, it's surprising that more companies don't offer their employees a variety of ways to think out of the box when at their workstations. Computer-based creativity aids, stimulants and idea management tools are a good way to keep desk-bound minds nimble. When security allows, laptop computers with easy docking and a larger monitor at the desk gives a sense of permeability between life, colleagues and cubicle.

7. Companies committed to nurturing a best ideas culture need to get co-workers together in upbeat environments that are designed and/or facilitated to spark new thinking. Why are so many business meetings sit-downs at a conference table (the big desk)? Status positions at the meeting table usually send messages that suppress ideation. Our poll shows that *movement* is powerful catalyst for new ideas (i.e. *walking, driving, traveling, vacationing*). It pays to mix things up and move people around more. Offer a variety of spaces and activities that keep "meetings" as flat and peer-based as possible.

8. *"Commuting to and from work"* (#9) ranked higher than the following catalysts most often considered by to be an essential catalysts of innovation:

    • *"After you've clearly defined a problem"* (#10)
    • *"Getting feedback from others"* (#11)
    • *"Talking with customers or clients"* (#13)
    • *"Speaking with people outside your field"* (#16)

    We think this might be because commuting is usually a high input, high observation time. (Commuting involves being in motion, out in the world and among people.) Commute time can also be daydreaming time. Always keep an audio recorder or notebook handy when you fly and commute.

PEOPLE

9. Two of the top five catalysts have to do with *being in relationship.* (*"Brainstorming with others"* and *"Collaborating with a partner"*).

10. We get our best ideas *both* alone *and* when we are with others. The highest-rated social responses (see below) bode well for companies looking to develop "cultures of innovation," but cultures need to also respect those who ideate better alone.

11. Organizations need ways to encourage and support dyadic "buddy systems" – opportunities for pairs of people to explore new possibilities together. Social psychologists have shown that trust and safety is highest in one-on-one relationships, which is to say that blue sky thinking is less likely to be trampled by your ideating buddy than by a committee. Good ideas can make it past infancy when they grow inside a conversation before they reach the conference table.

12. Dyads need time and opportunity to form. Organization can help by making sure two partners have time to bond and develop their dialectic style. Organizations would also be well-served to make sure potential dyadic collaborators aren't triangulated into competing with each other for a bosses favor, or pulled away from their special bond by other projects or teams that require their participation.

If two compatible idea people are onto something, or enjoy working together, let them continue their collaborative brainstorming and idea development efforts! After an idea gestation period, dyads will tend to look for people and resources to develop their ideas. That's when a company needs to help them get an expanded project team together. Entire breakout companies or NewCo's can start this way.

13. Many companies discourage on-site friendships to keep people in a "work-related" mode of operation. This "out of the halls and back to class" approach may actually squelch innovation, collaboration, and appreciation in an organizational culture. Conversely, it's useful to note that many companies that encourage partnership and exploratory fun in the workplace have excelled: 3M, Southwest Airlines, Virgin Airways, Google.

14. *Pressure* does not seem to be a strong catalyst for original thinking. "*When I really need a result*" and "*Thinking really hard about something*" ranked #35 and #37 respectively. Managers who keep pressuring their direct reports for breakthrough ideas or loading people up with lots of last minute demands may be doing a disservice. And while it's true that some people thrive under pressure, its questionable if their output under pressure is all that *creative*. Teresa Amabile's research at Harvard bears this out. See a summary at http://tinyurl.com/4xla45

15. An organization has not become a high performing culture of innovation if the workforce is split into *innovators* and *drones*. A company can achieve incremental improvements to the bottom line simply by giving input power to the "paperclip people" who encounter the little daily problems. Even in the mundane tasks of a company, great ideas can take root. Support people see the emperor's new clothes. Not only can they identify wasted motion and delays; they are often in closer touch with the voice of the customer. Sales support personnel can see many of the problems that sales directors can't. Administrative assistants and floor managers need to be encouraged to think creatively and then acknowledged when they do.

16. If an organization tends to shame, humiliate, or suppress ideators, innovative individuals will tend to isolate and stop seeking partners. To relieve the distress born of an innovation-averse organizational culture, they will tend to retreat to their own internal mind states. Although it is possible to stay creative in this retracted mind state, the chances of the ideas birthed in this state being *communicated* to others declines dramatically. It's painful to voice ideas and have them rejected out of hand. So workers do what is *required*, not what is *inspired*. They simply shut up and collect their paycheck. Workers stop even *noticing* the creative ideas they have.

Appendix A: Poll results: "Where and when do you get your best ideas?"

Poll Rank	Item Rank	Rating	Catalyst
1	1	4.08	When you're inspired
2	2	3.64	Brainstorming with others
3	3	3.48	When you're immersed in a project
4	4	3.45	When you're happy
5	5	3.35	Collaborating with a partner
6	6	3.27	Daydreaming
7	7	3.25	Analyzing a problem
8	8	3.22	Driving
9	9	3.21	Commuting to and from work
10	10	3.19	Reading books in your field
10	11	3.19	After you've clearly defined a problem
11	12	3.18	Getting feedback from others
12	13	3.17	Doing something that feeds your soul
13	14	3.16	Talking with customers
14	15	3.12	Brainstorming alone
15	16	3.11	When you least expect it
16	17	3.10	Speaking with people outside your field
17	18	3.09	Walking
18	19	3.07	Being in nature
19	20	3.05	Late at night
20	21	3.04	Surfing the internet
21	22	3.02	Traveling
22	23	2.99	At a conference
23	24	2.98	Vacationing
23	25	2.98	Showering
24	26	2.97	Having fun
25	27	2.94	Relaxing
25	28	2.94	Working with your hands
26	29	2.89	Reading books outside your field
27	30	2.87	Early in the morning
28	31	2.85	Dreaming (at night)
29	32	2.83	Taking a break
29	33	2.83	Writing
30	34	2.78	Laying awake in bed
30	35	2.78	In the workplace
31	36	2.75	Creating art
32	37	2.73	Just before sleep
33	38	2.72	Just upon waking

33	39	2.72	Exercising
34	40	2.71	Using a creative thinking technique
35	41	2.69	When you really need a result
35	42	2.69	On a plane
36	43	2.65	Organizing things
37	44	2.62	Sitting at your desk
37	45	2.62	Thinking hard about something
38	46	2.61	Waking up in the middle of the night
39	47	2.59	Journaling
40	48	2.58	Hanging out with friends
41	49	2.55	Listening to music
42	50	2.54	Trying to meet a deadline
43	51	2.53	Doing nothing
43	52	2.53	Meditating
43	53	2.53	Doing anything mindless
44	54	2.42	Joking with friends
45	55	2.39	Taking a bath
45	56	2.39	Preparing for a task
45	57	2.39	Any repetitive physical activity
46	58	2.33	In the bathroom
47	59	2.26	In the kitchen
48	60	2.22	On a train
49	61	2.16	Gardening
50	62	2.14	Jogging or running
51	63	2.13	Just after exercising
52	64	2.11	At a concert
53	65	2.10	Listening to the radio
54	66	2.08	On the toilet
55	67	2.07	Praying
56	68	1.97	Riding a bicycle
57	69	1.94	Swimming
58	70	1.93	Brushing your teeth
59	71	1.89	Drinking anything with alcohol
60	72	1.87	Playing a sport
61	73	1.84	When you're sad
62	74	1.78	Mowing the lawn
63	75	1.75	Shaving
64	76	1.72	Procrastinating
65	77	1.68	In a bar
66	78	1.52	Having sex
67	79	1.47	Smoking tobacco
68	80	NA	Other

Appendix B: Method

We emailed links to our online *best ideas poll* to a cross-section of clients, friends, and colleagues who, in turn, forwarded the poll to others. We also linked to the poll from our www.ideachampions.com homepage and blog – making it available to website visitors interested in this topic. Some forwarded our poll to their networks.

The poll asked respondents to check off how often they have "best ideas" in each of the 80 given situations, which we called "catalysts." They could choose five gradated responses, ranging from "Almost always" to "Rarely." They were allowed to skip over items they had no opinion about.

Our poll was "self-selecting" insofar as only people with a willingness to respond to an 80-question poll were sampled. We figured respondents with that much patience have a stake in the subject; ideation matters to them. We did not solicit other details from the respondents – their gender, income, age, religion, politics, or astrological sign. We only know how many completed the poll (163).

We realized that some people would judge our polling technique to be undisciplined. We were prepared to live with that. It was an informal poll. Our purpose was to get a general sense of where and when people get their best ideas without segmenting or pre-screening respondents.

We believed our informal poll would provide us with meaningful insights, which it did. When the top 35 choices out of 80 started to stabilize after only around 25 responses, and ranking shifted little after 36 responses, we knew most respondents agreed that certain catalysts were more conducive to their best ideating.

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