Creativity at a distance

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Abstract: More and more meetings in working life are conducted remotely via digital media. How are creative meetings affected by participants being at a distance? Some experiment suggests group creativity to improve with remote work, other show challenges. How is it in real practice? Ten well performing leaders working from home have been interviewed. They reported several challenges. Some have been found in earlier research, the preparation phase is harder and the tools for remote communication aren’t yet good and simple enough for practitioners. But some might be new discoveries, the long time needed for creative meetings being too tiresome for the remote situation, and participants becoming disturbed by irrelevant activities in the home context. Most of the interviewed managers see a hybrid as the future, where some work will be performed from home and some at a shared workplace. Creative meetings are suggested to be performed with physical closeness.

Keywords: Creativity; group creativity; remote meetings, autonomy, integration, digital meetings, innovation management, workplace meetings.

1 Problem

Creative meetings are often an essential part of the innovation process. More and more meetings in working life are conducted remotely via digital media. How are creative meetings affected by participants being at a distance?

2 Current understanding

Creativity in groups depends heavily on the interaction between group members who need to share their ideas and thereby both stimulate creative thoughts in others and make it possible to build on each other's ideas. Buisine & Guegan (2019) find that the literature shows virtual tools to support interaction to have a positive impact on creativity, but question if these tools are usable by practitioners. Their research shows that innovation experts' perception of the potential benefits of virtual environments decreased after a test.
Thus, they state that there is a lack of empirical research in real world projects and contexts (Buisine & Guegan, 2019).

Do remote meetings benefit or disadvantage the group's creativity? “You might assume that major changes in how we work are taking a large toll on business creativity, in light of the loss of more spontaneous face-to-face connections and interactions. … I believe that the shift to remote work actually has the potential to improve group creativity and ideation, despite diminished in-person communication.” (Thompson, 2021, p. 42).

Some experiments support this, for example, show that fluency and originality were significantly improved at the team level working in virtual environment and that that it offered an atmosphere of freedom that disinhibited the participants with a high risk-taking propensity, divergent thinking, and mental flexibility abilities (Bourgeois-Bougri, Richard, Burkhardt, Frantz, & Lu, 2020). While other experiments find challenges, for example, regarding the preparation phase in creative process, where the face-to-face group showed a better flow than the remote (Kristensson & Norlander, 2003).

A creative meeting is defined as a real-time collaboration between several people to produce ideas that are novel as well as useful. Creativity is about divergence, searching or going off in various directions, and convergence to arrive at one conclusion or answer that is regarded as unique (Guilford, 1956). The core of a creative meeting can be described as consisting of this duality. First divergence, where the goal is to produce as many relevant ideas as possible. Then, a collective reflection about the ideas leading up to convergence and formulation of a few concepts that respond to the challenge given.

The potential for divergence is formed by antecedents such as job-relevant diversity, creative self-efficacy, and scouting for new information (Hülsheger, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009). Examples of antecedents important for the other part of the duality, convergence, are shared mental models (Santos, Uitdewilligen, & Passos, 2015) and a communicated clear and exciting vision (Hoegl, Gibbert, & Mazursky, 2008). Above the duality, the process is central for the outcome of a creative meeting, including for example the extent to which group members share information, ideas, knowledge, and experiences with each other (Hülsheger et al., 2009) and the collective reflection (Somech, 2006).

3 Research question

What are the consequences if participants of a creative meeting in real work-life meet remotely?

4 Research design

Survey data were collected from mid-April 2021 up to and including June 1, 2021. The survey asked questions about, among other things, the organizational and social work environment, mental well-being, motivation and level of performance. The questionnaire responses were collected electronically via Survey Monkey.
Table 1. Participating organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of organisation</th>
<th>Questionnaire sent to</th>
<th>Number of answers</th>
<th>Whereof managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction company</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute for quality</td>
<td>Link sent to over 10 000 members.</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail company</td>
<td>To all employees, about 9 000.</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two managers from each organisation with the highest values on 16 selection questions were selected for interviews. The selection questions were about quality in own work, commitment to work, information environment and social support.

Table 2. Description of participating managers, based on questionnaire data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name alias</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Number of subordinates</th>
<th>Average value on selection variables, scale 1-5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Bank</td>
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<td>3,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>Bank</td>
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<td>3,9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
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<td>40-44</td>
<td>Construction company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>Construction company</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4,0</td>
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<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Institute for quality development</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4,2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lea</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>Institute for quality development</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fernanda</td>
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<td>Hugo</td>
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<td>Municipality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Retail company</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4,4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55-59</td>
<td>Retail company</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4,7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An hour-long interview was conducted with each about their leadership with themes such as information flow, team building, psychosocial climate and the workplace’s ability to innovate. The interviews were conducted in June 2021 at distance using Teams with camera.

The analyses of the interviews are still preliminary.
5 Findings

The statements from the managers were structured by three categories: divergence, convergence, and the creative process.

Divergence

Several facts point to an increased divergence. To work from home is stated to increase individual creativity. It is possible to find occasions when time is perceived as unimportant, and there is no disturbance from colleagues who wants to talk.

Ethan: (About working with creative tasks remotely) Then you get much more peace, you can sit down, you can do it whenever you want. Yes, you have much more flexible thinking there. And then, then you get more done. Compared to when someone comes and knocks on your shoulder and says, "Can we do it like this!"

Most co-workers have increased their autonomy, that is, their competence, motivation, and possibility to act independently without support from their manager. Most competence development is already digital.

Oliver: Now we run (education) digitally and this applies to both external and internal who are educators… The usual 'to go on a course' … it is always good to get out of your regular environment, ie meet elsewhere. … But… we have run a lot of training now and fairly nice things with external and it has worked very, very well. And precisely that you can record, because there is always someone who may have something that hinders and cannot participate, then you can go in and look afterwards.

All managers are working to increase the employee autonomy during distance work.

Chloe: And that you work with your own leadership, whether you are a manager or an employee. The goal is to have a chance to become more responsible. And with that comes that it is more fun to work, at least for those we want. It should be fun to work. You do not want to be an obedient dog. I want cats. It's a little more: take your own initiatives and want something.

Ethan: Distributed mandate and a responsibility to the groups, and see me as a coach instead of a leader or manager… They run their areas. They are so competent to do so.

Nathan: What I can see now after this long time is that they have become more active themselves and solve things within the projects. It's a little trickier to come to me, because I'm not there. When I sat next to them, they might as well ask. Now they find out the answer by themselves. … They know now, they also knew before, where they could look for the answer, but it was always easier to come to me, because I might be sitting next to them or something. Now they are looking for the answer and have learned where they are. In that way, things have changed.
Further, there are more time and possibilities for information scouting through external contacts. However, information scouting internally by chit-chatting with colleagues is less frequent.

Julia: You do not hear much around you and cannot ask each other questions. So those who are … younger … are dependent on those who have worked longer and need to ask a lot of questions. … You have to be active and book these meetings and ask questions. They lose that opportunity right now when they sit at home, many have said so themselves.

And the social part of conferences has disappeared.

Chloe: It has completely disappeared, that social part. It can be like a lecture, but it gets very dry and boring. … A conference that we are used to is called The map days which lasts 2.5 days, that's everything from meeting old students and eating a nice dinner one evening. … That mixture means that you have the strength to be at a conference for 2.5 days. I can't stand it digital, sit and listen for so long. So those pieces, the social in the industry, which we, also the employees, are used to get. It does not exist now.

Convergence

The possibilities for convergence are threatened when everyone works from home. Co-workers work more all alone or within their narrow project or subject area. The contact with other colleagues and between departments are likely to diminish. Some managers make this an explicit task for the subordinates.

Chloe: The key is to work with the employees and that everyone should take responsibility for their relationships, with the work and especially with the colleagues at work.

All managers are working with several different measures to make it possible for common understanding and shared mental models to develop and to communicate the tasks and visions so that everyone understands them in a similar way. More frequent meetings and new kinds of meetings are designed.

There is an increased need for arranging meetings for the whole organisation, since information flow between departments often is challenge when working at distance.

Amelia: We notice that cooperation between the departments has become tougher. We usually see each other at least once a month in different groups and have different exchanges of experience and such. And now we have not had anything like that at all in over a year and it's a little unlubricated. It becomes a bit less of respect and understanding for each other's everyday life.

Most managers arrange distant departments meetings weekly or monthly using Zoom or Teams. Some managers use mail and chat for most of the information flow and reserve department for dialogues about more complicated and controversial questions. Especially
new is the need to also organise the social ingredients of meetings. Most managers started with this in the beginning of the pandemic, but in some cases the pure social activities have decreased over time.

Ethan: (About check-in every Monday morning) It’s about what happened over the weekend, what you did. It's more social. And then it's like this. "Yes, but what points do I have this week now, I have this, this, this and I'm hard to reach on Wednesday because I'm going to the dentist in the morning." To share, almost more social than work.

Nathan: Once every three weeks we have had a digital AW, only socially then. On Fridays we put it after working hours just to meet and so on. And then, most people have small children, and then the small children are usually there. And you sit in some nice place in the garden and things like that. Then it's not a job talk, so to speak.

A couple of the managers are working with a co-workership ideal and arrange meetings to build up the competences and the culture needed for this.

Cloe: I have worked with… co-workership exercises, to get to know yourself. … We have exercises every month, at least (despite the pandemic), but now we do it in small groups and then joint sharing and that you get to reflect a little before, yourself. We want to bring about a transformation. … We … have almost no information points on the department meetings anymore, but it is almost only group exercises with sharing afterwards. Instead, I send out an email, when it starts to be some stuff to inform about.

Lea: I think it is part of the co-workership that you care about your colleagues. We have worked a lot on this, that we are a team that will solve the task together.

Team meetings including people that work together with the same work task or in a project are natural occurring without the involvement of the manager. To integrate newly employed is another problem the managers talk about.

Lea: (About newly employed) You get your sponsor in the office and you get your sponsor in the professional role itself. Then we always put in some secret friends, and it is also to integrate a little better when you are at a distance.

All managers talk a lot about one-to-one meetings with subordinates. Often they use a structure to ensure that they meet each employee every week or at least every month, but at the same time they want this meeting to appear as unstructured and spontaneous. Most managers use walk-the-talk as one technique for one-to-one meetings. One reason for this is that it is a way to meet outside, which is preferred during a pandemic. But the managers have also realised several advantages with this technique.

Amelia: When you sit like this as you and I then it becomes so intense. If you walk, then you may not look straight at each other, but you can fix your gaze somewhere. It will be in a different way, I would say. It does not get as charged as it does when you sit opposite each other, which becomes more formal as well. Thus, it's easier to ask sensitive questions or so during a walk.
Several managers use walk-the-talk were the subordinates take a walk and talk with each other in phone pairwise as a part of the department meeting.

Most managers talk about the problem of that there are so many meetings.

Oliver: It is very easy to call meetings and there is a downside to this "Yes, let us have a Team meeting", that it will be very, very meeting intensive. So that can be said to be a general challenge for the company.

Ethan and Hugo have introduced fixed start and end times for meetings, such as five minutes to and five past full hours, which guarantees that you get a break between them.

**Process**

There are several challenges in holding creative meetings remotely via digital tools:

All managers say that it takes more time to prepare meetings. The meeting must be planned in detail and more controlled by the agenda because it is harder to develop the meeting in progress.

Lea: If you hold the meeting yourself, you have to prepare it a few days before, preferably a week or so before. And especially as you should send a very clear agenda so that everyone knows: What is the purpose of the meeting, what is the purpose of each point? Who has the point? What do you have to prepare for? What is the purpose of me inviting you to the meeting?

Most managers underline the importance of finding ways to make the subordinates active during department meetings.

Oliver: It is the leader's responsibility to feel that, "Here we have a guy or girl who is passionate about this and is a little more knowledgeable or wants to know more", and then it's important to catch them. And I think this can be detected well in these individual reconciliations "Yes, she has ideas and thoughts about what we can do better and differently." And that you really listen in there and not just dismiss.

Julia talks about the importance of being a role model when it comes to openness during meetings. Chloe is talking a lot about how to use group sessions in meetings to ensure active participation from everyone, to make it possible to talk more freely about delicate issues and to increase knowledge exchange in the department.

Chloe: *(About group division at digital meetings.)* Sometimes we divide and then it is usually up to the question that is asked. It may be best that you talk to your own function. Or that you may want to distribute the new employees so that you have groups where you get to know as many as possible. But most of the time we have random division, so you just say how many groups and then people come out to their groups. There's something nice about that random thing as well. That everyone knows that no one has considered it.
However, it is so easy to call to a distance meeting, planning meetings in real life typically requires more effort with practicalities such as booking a room, scheduling the meeting, and deciding who should be invited and may need to travel to get to the meeting. Consequently, it is more often that the call is less well thought through, and categories of participants are missing, so important information must be added afterwards, which can be resource demanding.

There are limitations of the different ways one can communicate. Most managers miss meetings in real life with richer possibilities to communicate via body language and over hearing.

Nathan: Communication becomes a little more difficult when you sit 6-7 people in front of a screen, so it will not be as spontaneous questions, but it will be a little more controlled, is my experience. It will not be that, well, it will not only be that you throw out an issue, but it will be very much more agenda driven, I would say.

The managers use several different instructions and tools to support communication during distance meetings. For example, most managers make it mandatory to have the camera on, sharing of documents is common, so is breakout rooms, and digital whiteboards, notes, chats, and different voting/interaction tools such as Mentimeter is often used. One manager uses word clouds to make summaries of group discussions. The possibility to record meetings is sometimes used.

The digital tools are a challenge; when participants have different digital competencies, this can impair their ability to participate meaningfully in creative meetings.

Fernanda: I tried to get everyone to speak. In the beginning … a couple in the group were very unfamiliar. We use Teams to communicate. They did not know the buttons. You know, all this 'Doesn't have the sound on' and all those bits. However, it was very quick to get to it. So that I felt that it took about a month before everyone was on the track there.

Oliver says that it took about 1,5 years for people to develop good competence in remote meetings and the tools to use. Still, several managers think it is much more limited than the possibility of interacting around a real whiteboard, showing things physically and take part with your body in real life.

Hugo: I think the biggest challenge is the meetings with a mixture of digital and physical. Being as inclusive to those who are in the room as those who are in the digital room is quite tricky and it requires good sound, good picture, good connection, not too much lag. …. If you run a group work and then you should have the digital physical person in a group and the others are physically in place. It requires some preparation practically. Some stand with flipcharts and post its. How do we do with the person at a distance then?

Another challenge is that the interaction in a remote meeting needs to be more controlled than in real life.
Hugo: In the digital meeting, it is clearer who is holding the meeting. In the physical meeting, everyone helps in a different way. You become a little more conductor in the digital meeting you sort of address more clearly than in the physical meeting, because there it can be whole sea storms, and everyone talk to each other. There will be a different interaction than is possible in the digital.

If there is more than a couple of participants there must be some way to ensure that only one person speaks at a time. Some managers use raise your hand to get the floor, others name the one who is to have the floor.

Fernanda: It can easily get very involved in an issue and then you talk in each other’s mouth. And we do not want that, because we are interested in hearing what everyone has to say. There we come to the conclusion, after a while, that we must work with show of hands. Otherwise, there will be only a noise.

This takes away a lot of the kind of interaction that one wants to achieve in a creative meeting, including the spontaneity and possibility to together develop an idea in an intense flow of responses to each other.

Julia: You sit and sort of wait your turn or just sit and listen, then much more is demanded of me in the digital meeting, that you keep the commitment going, that it kind of feels like you get something out of it. … And of course, it's harder to hold a meeting digitally so that it feels meaningful all the time.

A creative meeting takes time. First it takes some time just to start a distance meeting and get everyone’s connections and tools to work. Chloe says that 20 minutes is the shortest possible time for a distance meeting. In a creative meeting there are several steps with different tasks that build on each other so that one loses quality if dividing it up over several days. Moreover, it takes time each time to start, for the participants to warm up, connect, and reach the desired mood. In actual physical meetings, it is expected that the meeting will run over an entire day. The informal interaction or own incubation time during breaks are also essential parts of the meeting. However, it is very tiresome to have long remote meetings, to spend more than a couple of hours looking into a screen. A maximum of 45 minutes for each subject and three hours for the complete meeting is suggested by the managers for remote meetings.

Lea: We have such meetings at a distance now when you have to sit a little longer and discuss a little deeper … then, now we put in a lot of these like … “If you have a cartoon character, who would you be then? And why then?” Or “If you were going to get a tattoo, where would you put it? And which would you choose?” So, a little like this… Yes, but a little more fun things to say, where you are a little outside the box.

When the participant works from home, it is not too uncommon for them to be disturbed now and then by hearing their kids, the dishwasher, or other things. Once their mindfulness is interrupted in this way, it can be hard to return to the creative process.

Nathan: Sit at home is very well, but I, for example, have three small children. When they come home from preschool. They do not come in and disturb me,
because I have an office here, but I hear them in the house. I hear when someone get hurt, and it becomes easy – so, it is very easy to end up – to jump out of this level of concentration. In fact, I would say. It's harder to keep it at home, when at work … I do not hear my children. I do not know what they are doing, or I do not hear the dishwasher beeping clearly. I do it here at home in a different way, so I would probably say that is the biggest reason why I more rarely end up in flow when I am at home.

When the managers are asked to conclude the consequences of remote meetings for group creativity all of them are negative. They report that smaller groups that know each other well can have a decent quality of creativity. The problem in this case is, firstly, the decreased frequency of spontaneous meetings in the hallways when the things on top of your mind spill over to colleagues. Secondly the reduced social happiness, Chloe says “Three missed laughs per week, how does it matter?” Simpler tasks can be just as effectively managed in distance meetings, but more complicated issues where you are dependent on each other is harder. Some concluding statements from the managers:

Chloe: I think the smaller meetings are pretty creative now. If it's like only four in the meeting so that you see everyone pretty well, facial expressions and so on, then you can probably succeed pretty well, that you build on each other’s crazy ideas as well. But I think we lose a lot of creativity that you come up with at the coffee machine “By the way, Ulla-Bella, how was that with that.” like, “Yes, just that” and then like “Yes, that!” The creative that comes from meeting each other. And that does not have to be so planned as well. “Now we’ll have a creative meeting and we’ll talk about this.” And sure, it was a creative meeting, but it did not include what I came up with afterwards, when I went to get the coffee or when I was on the mug as well. I can not take it further then, because then they are in another meeting. I can not see - yes, but now Anna is sitting alone, then just say it "You, I came up with this, that...." I think we have lost 1.5 years on that.

Fernanda: (About their development group) These are people who can easily brainstorm in an issue, regardless of whether you sit together in the room or if you do a digital… They are also employees who are very good and have quite a lot of tools for, or have had to develop tools, to hold workshops digitally, to use whiteboards etc. Develop the technologies that are available, but digitally during the last year that has been. I think there are no problems with that digital brainstorming and being creative, even though it happens digitally. But they all say that it is easier when you can see each other physically.

Ethan: (About creativity in distance meetings) We may reach, if you would estimate, that you reach 70-80% of the efficiency in it, and that is perhaps good enough. But to get the last part to the top, I actually think it takes the kind of meetings where we actually meet.

Nathan: That these creative meetings when we need a high level of action, on these occasions we will need to meet physically. I have not met anyone who says that "no, but we have, if not more creative meetings via Teams." But I think that everyone experiences this, both in my group and in the groups I participate in, when there are meetings like this, that we do not really get all the way.
6 Contribution

This empirical research in real world shows several challenges with remote creative meetings. Some have been found in earlier research, like that the preparation phase is harder and that the tools for remote communication aren’t yet good and simple enough for practitioners. But some are as far as we know new discoveries, like the problem with the long time needed for creative meetings being too tiresome for the remote situation, and the problem when participants become disturbed by irrelevant activities in the home context.

7 Practical implication

Most of the interviewed managers see a hybrid as the future, where some work will be performed from home and some at a shared workplace. Creative meetings are suggested to be performed with physical closeness.

References


