Creativity needs space and time to flourish, says **Dan Pontefract**. Being too busy harms this. Too often it gets lost in *status quo* thinking. We have to make the time to rethink how we think

Time to think again

1945

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Sweden's Astrid Lindgren was a literary giant who changed the game of authoring. Through the introduction of an anti-authoritarian adventurer, Pippi Longstocking, Lindgren has educated many young children to think differently.

That's the good news. But this thinking differently mindset is becoming woefully inadequate (or hidden) in many of today's stagnant organisations. It is something leaders would be mindful to rectify if they are looking to unleash open thinking in support of new innovations and improved results.

When Lindgren brought Longstocking to life in 1945 with equal parts cleverness, noisiness, independence and creativity, she encouraged young readers to think contrarily. Longstocking was a heroine of exploration. She sought out adventure and freedom. Back in the day, more than 70 years ago, it was radical prose. In fact, Lindgren was vilified by many in the literature world. We might even suggest that through Pippi Longstocking Lindgren was the original Dora the Explorer.

One of the key points that Longstocking had going for her was time. Unlike many of today's organisational leaders and employees she was not being exploited for her time. Longstocking was not consumed by mundane actions or repetitive tasks. Remaining in the *status quo* was not her thing either. In fact, there was no *status quo*. Lindgren ensured her heroine remained unshackled to the mundane.

Longstocking was also never browbeaten by a constant need to look or be busy. She was constantly able to creatively conjure up new plots, ideas and ways to be mischievous. She was a girl exploring but she explored while remaining in charge of her time, using it to her advantage on many adventurous occasions.

When we become too busy in our lives and at work – unable to pause, reflect and invoke creativity – a civil war erupts in our brains. More often than not, exploitation wins out over exploration. We expunge our inner Pippi Longstocking. The humdrum anchor easily drops to the ocean floor and the ramifications can be far-reaching for both personal development and organisational success.

The question we ought to be asking ourselves is whether or not a lack of creative thinking is due in part to our penchant to fall into a busyness trap, exploiting our time to remain steadfast in the *status quo*. Do we become blind to exploring the unknown? In order to fuel creativity – personally and organisationally – we need to ask the hard question: why we are failing to be more like Pippi Longstocking?

Baby steps going backwards

Back when we were babies, every day was an experiment in exploration. The journeys seemed endless. We explored our crib, the floor and then the stairs as we learned to crawl. In a few months the kitchen drawers became places where interesting mouth-bound gadgets were plentiful.

As we began to walk there was more to explore, be it the velvety sand at the beach, the soft grass strewn across the park, or the icy snow found in a field. It was endless exploration. We felt it. We unconsciously unleashed Longstocking's cleverness, noisiness, independence and creativity. We were alive.

We did so because there was the luxury of time. Aside from a schedule that consisted of naps, meals and snack time, no-one was telling us to complete a task by day's end. There were no superiors badgering us to "do more with less". Our every minute was not being accounted for by overtaxing schedules, inane meetings or rushed deadlines. What's more—and arguably most important—we had not developed "*status quo* thinking". Adventures built upon adventures and we liked it. There was no such thing as "business as usual". We were free to think creatively and were unafraid to do so. Cognitive biases simply did not exist.

If we fast-forward to the world of work we now know there is conflict between our desire to be explorers and the reality of being exploited for and by time. Researchers, however, have discovered that our default desire of thinking is to be creative. Like when we were a toddler, we yearn to explore and discover new lands. In essence, we long to be like Pippi Longstocking.

But when our minds are overburdened with tasks or we have to put up with a high mental

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load, we consistently and quite effectively deliver banality. When we become too busy, we choose the known and predictable. Ultimately we dull down and desensitise our own selves. If we exhaust our mental load any chance for increased creativity diminishes.

If the roles we occupy at work become stressful and overly tiresome, the end result is that we are likely producing something rather boring. We revert to what we have always done in the past. This is *status quo* thinking". As researchers have pointed out: "The mind's natural tendency is to explore and to favour novelty but when occupied it looks for the most familiar and inevitably least interesting solution".

Making time for computer animation

Take, for example, the story of John Lasseter, currently Chief Creative Officer at Walt Disney Company and Pixar Animation Studios. It is an interesting title to occupy, one that arguably cost Walt Disney over $7 billion to create.

Lasseter is the brilliant mind behind Pixar, the company that has given the world wonderful films such as *Wall-E*, *Finding Nemo*, *Cars* and *Toy Story*. Before Pixar found its success – and before it was gobbled up by Disney – Lasseter worked there in the early 1980s as an animator. He was constantly thinking about the future of film animation. He was always unleashing his inner Pippi Longstocking.

As legend has it, Lasseter began thinking about the future of Disney as a company, too. He felt the decades-old approach of hand-drawn animation for its films was about to be replaced by computers. He pitched his bosses – and his bosses' bosses – the new-fangled invention of computer-animated films.

While Lasseter's prescient hunch was correct, Disney executives ultimately failed to think differently. They ignored Lasseter's prophetic vision – not giving the idea the time to incubate or materialise – and Disney ended up firing him from the company. Disney remained locked in their *status quo* thinking, unable to truly rethink what its future might look like.

It strikes me that Disney executives were either too busy to think differently or their brains were too exhausted to rethink its existing film-producing strategy. Were Disney executives exploring or exploiting their time? The verdict came, perhaps, by the ignominy of Lasseter's termination.

Years later after spinning off Pixar from Lucasfilm (where he originally landed subsequent to being fired from Disney) Lasseter ended up back at Disney. How? Disney recognised its error and paid $7.4 billion to acquire Pixar. It then made Lasseter its Chief Creative Officer.

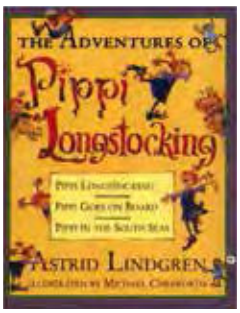
Just imagine the additional revenues and profits for Disney if its leaders had created the time to properly think about Lasseter's original proposal decades prior. Imagine if they had explored the power of open thinking versus being exploited by its own *status quo* thinking. Imagine if they did not have to hand over $7.4 billion to re-acquire Lasseter and the entire Pixar team and film library?

Giving time to think

Pippi Longstocking had oodles of time to be creative. The culture that Lasseter helped to create at Pixar is one steeped with open thinking. Pixar is a Pippi Longstocking playground. What if more leaders devoted more time to allowing creative thought to occur?

A study done with orangutans proved that those held in captivity – with time on their hands, not worried about predators, distractions or having to search for food – were more creative and possessed a higher inclination to explore than orangutans from the wild.

The study pitted both sets of orangutans in a habitat where, among other tests, a new toy



$7.4bn

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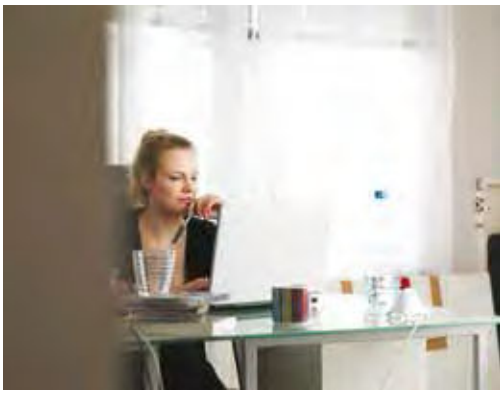

8,760

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was introduced. In one example, orangutans previously held in captivity approached the toy immediately yet even after several months of testing the wild orangutans would not go near it. As the researchers noted: "If you ask me, opportunity is the mother of invention".

Put differently, if our minds are constantly distracted and exploited by time and task pressures, none of us will be willing to touch the new toy. In fact, our minds will be so preoccupied with other things we won't even pay attention to it nor will we think up fresh new ideas. Arguably Longstocking, Lasseter and Pixar are examples of bucking such a scenario. They make the time to explore creativity. They are not exploited by time.

Bill Gates, former chairman and CEO of Microsoft, recognised the need to spend time away from the pressures of operational tasks and running a business. He introduced "Think Week" where twice annually he would sequester himself for a week of reading, thinking, listening and letting the art of the possible permeate his brain. It was his planned time to think creatively.

Every day, each of us is equipped with 1,440 minutes. We all possess 168 hours a week and 8,760 hours a year to utilise to our advantage. If we do not earmark a significant portion of time to be creative—to be open thinkers—there is little chance to erase a *status quo* mindset. My advice is to unleash your inner Pippi Longstocking and be more like John Lasseter, Pixar or Bill Gates if you truly want to become an explorer, not an exploiter, of time.

If you want to cure *status quo* thinking, you have to rethink how you think. Make the time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Pontefract is author of The Purpose Effect and Flat Army and is Chief Envisioner at TELUS.