

Creative types and psyches

Interview Louise Lawton

Dr Marc Wilson, senior lecturer and deputy head of the School of Psychology at Victoria University, holds a mirror to our creative souls to show what makes us tick, why certain people are attracted to the creative industries – and which personalities that are most likely to survive!

Q. Is there a general type of person who is attracted to study and work in the creative industries?

A. The short answer is 'creative people'! Over more than 100 years of investigation, most personality researchers would agree that there are basically five families of personality traits – these are commonly referred to as the Big 5: extraversion (how outgoing you are), agreeableness (how interested in, and engaged with, people you are), emotional stability (how calm you are), conscientiousness (how tidy and organised you are), and intellectual openness (how open to intellectual challenge and stimulation you are). Clearly the last of these sounds is the most relevant to creativity – people who enjoy thinking about and engaging in new challenges tend to be more creative. People also tend to be successfully creative when the tasks they're working on are personally relevant and intrinsically motivating – they are an end in their own right rather than just a means to an end.

Q. Can you go as far as to break down to the personalities more suited to the various disciplines, such as graphic design, advertising, product design (and inventors), interior architecture and design? And is there a specific type of personality who is most likely to do well creatively?

A. Even though, as a basic rule

of thumb, intellectually open personalities are more likely to be attracted to this suite of disciplines, that doesn't mean it's all that's needed to be successful. In fact, the best single personality predictor of occupational success (across occupations) is conscientiousness. It stands to reason that even the greatest creative genius is going to find success difficult if they're disorganised! This is where delegation can become really important – setting up organisational structures and partnerships so that the work does get done. Similarly, any task that requires interacting with people is going to benefit from interpersonal skills, and those come from being willing to interact with (extraversion) and interest in people (agreeableness). Again, think of the creative genius – how useful is that person's skill if they can't or won't communicate with the client? Is the end-product even what the client wants?

Q. How about handling or thriving on the pressures of the industry?

A. Golly! That's a broad question – researchers make entire careers out of just looking at stress and workplace survival! There are two basic parts to the equation of handling pressure – the organisation and the individual. People differ in their ability to handle stress in terms of how they experience it, and how they handle it. Consider the following example – Occupational Overuse Syndrome. The people most likely to suffer from OOS are perfectionists who work in settings where the standards they are expected to meet are ambiguous or missing entirely. In fact, that's also the type of setting where burnout might also be most likely – perfectionist

(conscientious) creative types, you have been warned!

Q. What traits or features would someone hold to make them more likely to rise through to management, or to teach design?

A. Often it is the people who are best at a job who find themselves in the position of manager (or teacher). Unfortunately, that often means less opportunity to do the job. This can be soul-destroying for people who love what they do. The key to management or teaching success is an intrinsic interest in what those roles will allow in relation to the actual (in this case, creative) task. Both management and teaching allow a person to influence the context of their work, by managing others or passing on one's skills and passion. Research tends to show that the best teachers are the ones who are most knowledgeable and skilled in their own work.

Q. What about a type of person that is best suited to take a wide berth from a role in the creative industry and consider something else?

A. There is a popular stereotype of the 'creative type' (think dope-smoking hippy non-conformist), but there is a kernel of truth to it. Creativity thrives when rules are flexible (or even seen as there to be broken) so... if you're the sort of person who feels most comfortable with concrete guidelines on what is expected and how to achieve success, then you may not thrive in the creative industry. At the same time, the attributes that make a person unsuitable for one thing will make them more appropriate for others. Find your own niche. **pd**

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