

What is?

A CREATIVITY RETREAT CENTRE

Creativity Retreat Centres (CRCs) are workspaces where employees can retreat to in order to engage in various types of activities such as problem solving, planning, and strategic decision-making. The aim of CRCs is to provide an environment in which these activities can be conducted in a fun, safe, dynamic, and fast way. Their purpose is to encourage employees to think creatively and come up with new innovations.

Why are Creativity Retreat Centres important?

Innovations have long been recognised by both academics and practitioners alike as being vital organisational assets that need to be nourished and nurtured by organisations in order to succeed. Yet, engaging in innovation alongside heavy workloads may be hard to accomplish and employees and their bosses may give priority to meeting immediate work demands which may then leave them with little time to engage in innovation. Creating innovations can be complex, demanding, time consuming and resource intensive, so retreating from the workplace for a period of time offers employees an opportunity to be totally focused on innovation. Thus CRCs can provide a more productive way of generating new ideas than relying on their emerging in normal working time.

What are the main features of Creativity Retreat Centres?

As a recent phenomenon, there is a relative paucity of research on CRCs. Therefore, there are no guidelines for what makes an ideal Creativity Retreat Centre. However, many of the UK's leading CRCs share common features such as:

- computer supported idea generation tools (e-brainstorming software)
- walls covered with whiteboards
- unconventional architectural designs (e.g., rooms with curved walls, futuristic looking rooms)
- expert facilitators
- idea elicitation tools (pictures, thematic images, lego style toys, video clips)
- virtual technologies
- PCs/laptops
- information gateways (internet access).

The process

By and large, the process of going through a CRC may vary according to the physical layout of the centre as well as the needs and objectives of the organisation. As an example, the CRC at the centre of an evaluation study conducted at IWP has a process whereby the majority of visitors go through:

1. an immersive theatre (with 150-degree screen) to watch short dramatised film scenarios;
2. a technology showcase room, where they see a range of potential technological advances; and
3. a creativity laboratory that has whiteboards, small round tables, laptops, e-brainstorming software and data projection equipments to assist in group discussions.

However, the process in this CRC is flexible and can be adapted according to the needs of the visiting organisation. For instance, visiting groups may choose to go through both the immersive theatre and the creativity lab or they may even choose to spend the whole period of their visit in the creativity lab. Whatever the process may be, expert facilitators are present to guide groups through the process and to facilitate their discussions.

What can CRCs be used for?

It is hard to pin down a concise list of applications that CRCs can be used for. However, the following are examples of what CRCs have been used for:

- scenario planning
- team building
- products and services development
- policymaking
- partnership building
- strategic business planning
- focus groups
- competence and skills building
- exploring new research avenues.

How do CRCs affect innovation?

Research carried out at IWP examined the impact of an example CRC on creativity by comparing the outputs and reactions of groups working in the CRC to groups working in the workplace using traditional brainstorming methods (i.e., flip charts, post-it notes). To assess the effectiveness of the CRC, three evaluation criteria were employed:

Quantity of ideas

CRCs users not only rated the number of ideas highly but they also generated a far greater number of ideas than their workplace counterparts.

Quality of ideas

The overall quality of ideas was rated highly by users of the CRC. Furthermore, an analysis of a product that was developed jointly by groups working in the CRC and groups working in the workplace revealed that the majority of ideas relating to the product came from groups working in the CRC.

Reactions

Overall, users were highly satisfied with the CRC and supported the conceptual idea behind it and the need for time-out from the workplace to enable them to think out-of-the-box. In addition, they gauged that the centre saved them a considerable amount of time. Generating an ample amount of ideas (all recorded electronically), distilling these ideas, and finally producing a set of action plans to take them forward in a matter of a few hours was perceived to be extremely useful by the majority of users. The shortcomings that were mainly reported by some users were related to minor aspects of the physical layout.

What makes an effective CRC?

The research conducted at IWP identified three main features that were perceived by users to be of most value. These were:

- a combination of traditional (e.g., flip charts, whiteboards) and electronic idea generation tools in order to capture as many ideas as possible
- expert facilitators who facilitate groups through the creativity process and know how to utilise both traditional and electronic idea-generation tools to get the best out of people
- an environment that stimulates creativity so as to clear people's minds and to allow them to focus on the task in hand.

Retreating to CRCs should help employees produce more ideas of higher quality than they may through their normal work processes. The effects may however extend beyond the ideas produced in the centre to not simply produce one-off changes. Indeed, the exercises that employees will have gone through at the CSR are designed to increase their overall creativity and performance, as well as their ability to participate in other innovation activities such as idea capturing schemes (*see What is an Idea Capture Scheme?*). Research into these wider effects, however, remains to be done. It should be stressed though that CRCs do not perform miracles. Their effectiveness hinges on peoples' motivations, proactivity, interpersonal skills, and openness to new experiences.

Examples of UK Creativity Retreat Centres

- **futurfocus@dti** (DTI): In-house government sponsored facility serving public and private sectors
(<http://www.dti.gov.uk/futurefocus/>)
- **The Lab** (Royal Mail): In-house private sponsored facility that serves Royal Mail and can also be hired externally
(<http://www.consignia.com/thelab/welcome/default1.asp>)
- **Creativity Room** (Rolls-Royce): Small in-house room serving Rolls Royce staff.
- **iLab** (Partnership of 5 universities in East Anglia): Serving academia
(<http://www.uea.ac.uk/lhi/welcome.htm>)

For further details contact:

Wissam Magadley
w.magadley@sheffield.ac.uk

Kamal Birdi
k.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk

Institute of Work Psychology
& ESRC Centre for Organisation and Innovation
University of Sheffield
Sheffield
S10 2TN
England

Tel No.: +44 (0) 114 222 3258

