



You don't have to be an entrepreneur to be entrepreneurial: The unique role of imaginativeness in new venture ideation

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Abstract Bestsellers like *The Lean Startup* and *Business Model Generation* have suggested that ideation—the generation and selection of ideas—is important to new venture creation; yet, little empirical research on the topic has been conducted. Using a creative problem solving approach, we developed and tested a new scale that found imaginativeness predicts new venture ideation over and above the effects of the usual suspects of attitude, knowledge, and evaluation. Imaginativeness is an ideational skill that combines task-relevant knowledge in three distinct domains—creative, social, and practical—with the latent ability of imagination. In this article, we explain why a new scale was needed, why imaginativeness appears to be especially useful to individuals who lack entrepreneurial experience, and how imaginativeness enables just about anyone to generate and select new venture ideas with the proficiency of a habitual entrepreneur.

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1. Entrepreneurs and new venture ideation

Coming up with a million-dollar idea is difficult, much less several of them. That is why we stand in awe of people like Joy Mangano, inventor of the Miracle Mop, founder of Ingenious Designs, and

inspiration for the movie *Joy* starring Jennifer Lawrence. Like an entrepreneurial cliché, Mangano used her own savings and investments from family and friends in 1990 to develop her first invention, the Miracle Mop, a self-wringing plastic mop with a head made from a continuous loop of 300 feet of cotton that could easily be wrung out without getting the user's hands wet. After selling 18,000 mops in less than half an hour on QVC, Mangano incorporated her business and eventually sold it to the parent company of the Home Shopping Network

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in 1999. By 2000, Mangano's company was selling \$10 million worth of Miracle Mops a year. As impressive as that is, however, it pales in comparison to the fact that the Miracle Mop is but one of over 100 patents held by Joy Mangano. When asked to explain her secret for generating so many successful new product ideas, Mangano simply states (Konig, 2001):

I think my products have been successful because they have mass appeal . . . I'm just like everybody else out there. I'm a mom, I work, I have a house to clean, things to organize. We all have certain needs, and I address them.

It is hard to look at individuals like Joy Mangano and not believe that they have something the rest of us do not. Successful entrepreneurs, like Mangano, simply appear to possess an entrepreneurial imagination that eludes most. Yet, anyone who leads a business—regardless of whether they founded it, helped build it, or have just begun to assume responsibility for it—knows that new ideas are essential to its continued relevance in an ever-changing, competitive landscape. Ideas are the lifeblood of innovation, and innovation is necessary for the creation of new ventures by individuals both within and outside of existing firms. Therefore, it is no surprise that the term *entrepreneurial* commonly is used to describe individuals who are innovative or creative in a commercial setting. Indeed, most people think that entrepreneurs are especially skilled at coming up with ideas for new businesses, but whether this is true and why is far from clear.

Explanations of new venture ideation—the generation and selection of new venture ideas—are relatively new in academic literature, but prior research has emphasized the role of knowledge (Shane, 2000), experience (Davidsson & Honig, 2003), and motivation (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006) in opportunity identification and entrepreneurial action. In addition, these same predictors have been identified as important for creative problem solving. For instance, mathematician and creativity researcher Ruth Noller proposed that creativity is a function of attitude, knowledge, imagination, and evaluation (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011), wherein attitude loosely refers to the notion that creativity increases with effort. Creativity also is expected to increase with knowledge, which encompasses general human capital of education, and with evaluation, which refers to the judgment that accompanies the specific human capital of experience.

The world, however, is full of highly motivated, educated, and experienced adults who no one would credit with being creative. Why? Because

they lack imagination. Without imagination, the recipe for creativity lacks its secret sauce: the catalytic element that makes new connections and combinations possible. Conversely, ask any 5th grade teacher whether his/her students lack imagination and they will scoff. Then, inquire as to whether any of the students' novel ideas are useful, and you will likely receive the same reaction. Why? Because children often lack the knowledge and evaluation skills to screen good ideas from the wild hares. Thus, creative problem solving—like that exercised in new venture ideation—requires all four ingredients: effort, knowledge, imagination, and evaluation. Of these four ingredients, however, only imagination has yet to receive substantial scholarly attention. We sought to examine whether entrepreneurs are better than others at generating good ideas for new ventures; and if so, why? Are they more imaginative or do they merely possess the knowledge, experience, or motivation that others lack?

2. Criteria for developing an imaginativeness scale

Fortunately, measures of motivation (effort), general human capital (knowledge), and specific human capital (evaluation) have long lined the pages of research in both creativity and entrepreneurship and have been used in myriad ways to examine new venture creation. The same cannot be said of imagination, a latent ability that manifests as an ideational skill relevant to a specific task such as new venture creation. Therefore, to tackle the questions of whether entrepreneurs outperform the general population at the creative process of new venture ideation and whether any possible differences can be attributed to imagination, we had to create a scale of ideational skill that was capable of measuring the imaginativeness of both entrepreneurs and the general population.

This new scale needed to measure more than the imaginativeness that people often ascribe to individuals with high levels of creativity or to individuals with highly creative styles (Kirton, 1976). *Creative imaginativeness* is what comes to mind when people hear terms such as 'creative' or 'innovative.' Imaginativeness is domain specific and can be developed with deliberate practice. For example, individuals can enhance their creative imaginativeness by going for quantity, deferring judgment, going for novelty, thinking laterally, and using a host of other creativity-enhancing tools (Brown, 2009; De Bono, 2015). These actions are

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