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LOL: Big 5 Creativity Conditions – Sustained Attention (Creativity, volume 3)

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Our ongoing dive into creativity is based on this premise: [creativity is hugely important to investment success](#), and it does not get its due attention. The last LOL covered [the Big 5 Necessary Conditions for Creativity](#). Now we turn our attention to, well...attention. As in, the first of the Big 5: sustained attention.

Sustained Attention

What the heck is *sustained attention*? We mean the ability to remain focused on a single activity and for long periods of time. It also means being able to refocus if we are distracted or interrupted. Of course, that never happens...yeah, right.

There are components to assuring sustained attention. Knowing these means we can control the conditions needed for creativity. With the right conditions, we increase the chances of uncovering something unique, something valuable. A flash, an inspiration, an insight. Eureka!

These additional elements of sustained attention are:

- Working memory bandwidth
- Mental silence and time
- No interruptions and no multi-tasking

Working Memory Bandwidth

Neuroscience demonstrates that creativity is greatly facilitated by being able to:

[combine our current experiences and our need to solve a problem with the vast knowledge we have accumulated over the years](#).

These ideas duke it out for the title of “best idea.” This thinking requires a place to sort it all out. That place is our working memory. Turns out that this part of mental functioning is also devilishly difficult to expand or improve. A useful tool in this regard is [meditation, which has been shown to be a powerful way to expand working memory](#). (FCG may be the longest-standing advocate for meditation, having written “[Why Every Investor Should Meditate](#)” nearly 20 years ago!

In other words, if creativity requires lots of working memory and it is close to fixed in capability, then we need to do our best not to waste it. Here’s how.

Mental Silence and Time

For optimal creativity, we need long periods of contemplative time and mental silence. These powerhouse creativity conditions reduce the tax on our working-memory that is crucial to generating new ideas.

Mental silence and time contribute to working memory, and also [they allow our unconscious to sort, consider, and ultimately bubble up deep insights](#). Have you ever found yourself in a relaxed state of mind when the answer

to a problem you had been considering suddenly appears in consciousness? Probably. Einstein said his best ideas came when shaving. Other luminaries have cited time in nature, driving, and showering as incubators for “ah-ha” moments. Rarely do these breakthroughs come with clenched fists, furrowed brows, and tight deadlines.

Breakthroughs are the natural result of giving your mind mental silence and time. Ét voila, creative fruit! Again, incubation precedes many scientific discoveries: Newton’s Laws, Einstein’s Special Relativity, and Mendeleev’s Period Table. So, Shhh!

In the investment world, mental silence and time provide a needed edge. We may discover new and better models that improve our fundamental work. Wealth managers may construct better investment plans for our clients. And on and on.

No Interruptions and No Multi-Tasking

OK, you may say, “I get it, sustained attention helps. But, my daily reality is more like *Grand Central Station*.” Namely, UNSustained attention. Yup, you are right and here’s the evidence.

In the U.S. [95% of the population reports daily media multi-tasking](#) and they also report [checking their smart devices around 150 times per day](#), or every 6 minutes that they are awake. Egads. [Adults believe they can successfully juggle 6-7 tasks at once](#) (!), with [those that believe they are most successful at task switching being the worst](#). Yikes. Can you say, “Sabotaging creativity”?

Interruptions are common to professional life. Researchers found that [employees are interrupted 4.28 times per hour by e-mail and 3.21 times per hour by instant messages](#). We ignore those interruptions, right? Sadly, we do not. That same study found that 41% of us respond to that e-mail immediately, and 71% to the instant message. They also found that when choosing to deal with the interruption we spend, on average, 10 minutes with the task and that it then takes an additional 10-15 minutes—gasp—to return to the original task. Where did that hour go? Where did my attention go?

While reading our article, how many times have you looked at something else? Be honest. Perhaps reading this article WAS the interruption!

Summing Up

While competitive forces are accelerating, requiring more and more creativity, we are choosing to live in a world that is anti-creative. Ouch! But there is hope. One thing we can immediately do to empower our creativity is to eliminate the bad habits that hurt our sustained attention. Our next LOL discusses the importance of subject matter expertise—knowing and immersing yourself in the topic—for improving creativity. Until then.