

Yes, you can timesheet the fuzball

 By [Sarah Britten](#)

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"Great ideas don't keep office hours," as the ad for Standard Corporate and Merchant Bank used to say. It flighted at around the time I arrived at Hunts some time in the Precambrian, but the insight is just as valid today. Great ideas really don't keep office hours, which causes havoc with timesheets. (Accountants really don't get the creative process - try including "Thinking" as a category in Chase - but that's a discussion for another day.)

Relying on good ideas

In an industry that relies so heavily on good ideas in order to sell to the client first time, get the cost to income ratio right, win awards and generally live happily ever after, everybody has their own notions of the best way to generate them. Often this involves sitting in airless boardrooms with a notepad and a whiteboard marker chucking stuff out and hoping some of it sticks.

Many ad people probably have ghastly flashbacks to grueling sessions of staring into space willing ideas into being - something, anything - and ending up with a few anorexic scribbles and an ECD in a foul mood.

But a lot of the research coming out now - real, peer-reviewed scientific stuff of the kind even loyal *New Scientist* subscriber Andrew Human would approve of - suggests something we suspected all along: brainstorming is not a very good way of coming up with ideas, [being drunk and tired is great for creativity](#), and daydreaming is actually a highly productive way to think. (Partly this is because, according to a Swedish [study](#), creative people are on the same continuum as schizophrenics: they don't filter as much as the accountants do).

Brainstorming encourages groupthink

Brainstorming never actually was especially productive; you can read about its invention in a [piece by Jonah Lehrer](#), who writes about developments in this field and is about to release a book on creativity.

Simply put, brainstorming encourages groupthink and fails to filter out the rubbish. A better way to work is to send individuals off to work through a problem on their own before regrouping, or structure an office environment - as Steve Jobs did at Pixar - to facilitate chance encounters and random conversations. Though [groups can be more intelligent](#) than any of their individual members, they're not the best way to produce good work.

Introverts for one are no good at working together in groups; they're much more effective beaver away on their own behind closed doors as 2012 TED speaker [Susan Cain argues in her book, *Quiet*](#).

Get creative

"Nobody ever had a good idea sitting behind a desk" was a mantra I used to include on my email signature, mainly to justify why I was out of the office, thinking. But it's true: I've never had a good idea sitting at a desk. Running on the treadmill, yes, driving, yes, standing in the shower or even wandering absentmindedly through a shopping mall. But never in an office, and for once this isn't a hunch: the science bears out what I and many others have experienced. Read: [How To Be Creative](#) by Jonah Lehrer.

You're more likely to have an epiphany while you stand around waiting for your turn to use the microwave.

"The creative process will never be easy, no matter how much we learn about it," Lehrer writes. "Our inventions will always be shadowed by uncertainty, by the serendipity of brain cells making a new connection."

I used to look at the creatives standing around playing pool while I hurried back to my desk and yet another PowerPoint deck and think "lazy buggers". But now I know better. The time they spend apparently doing nothing is actually time being used productively. So go forth, and timesheet the fuzball. You all have the perfect excuse.

ABOUT SARAH BRITTEN

Dr Sarah Britten has 21 years of experience across various clients and multiple strategic disciplines, including social media and shopper. Her client experience includes Nedbank, Investec, FNB, Bothongo Group, Sanofi, Colgate Palmolive, Aspen, Adcock Ingram, Kraft Heinz, Citroën and Land Rover.

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