

Volcano ash airport gridlock may help travelers rediscover creative genius, says psychologist

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The dark clouds of volcanic ash that have closed airports and stranded travelers for days on end may have a silver lining, suggests an expert on human creativity from Washington University in St. Louis.

Like it or note, stranded travelers around the globe are suddenly finding themselves with a lot of unscheduled time on their hands, and idle time is a key ingredient to becoming more creative in your personal and professional lives, says R. Keith Sawyer, PhD, an associate professor of education and of [psychology](#), both in Arts & Sciences at Washington University.

"Idle time allows people to think of their problems in new ways," says Sawyer, author of *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, a seminal overview of the history of creativity and of research into traits that highly creative people all share. "People talk about the 'aha' moment emerging when you are doing something else."

The bottom line, says Sawyer, is that being creative in your work and personal life takes time, and more often than not, busy people simply do not find the time to examine their lives with fresh eyes, to really contemplate the big picture realities of challenges they face.

"Creative people work hard but they also work smart," Sawyer adds.

"There is a certain way they structure their work habits. They structure their day so they alternate between hard work and time off. Researchers call it idle time.

Sawyer thinks much of the difference between highly creative people and the rest of us is hard work and work habits.

"No one is born highly creative," Sawyer explains. "Psychologists studying creativity have discovered that it is based on cognitive processes we all share. Creativity is not the result of some magic brain region that some people have and others don't. You have to work hard to be a more creative person. You have to be diligent."

Creative people also tend to have multiple related long-term projects going on at the same time. "When they are working on one thing and they get stuck, they shift to another project. That creates potential for unexpected connections between the projects."

Creative people also take breaks to do something radically different from their current project. "They might read a book, play a board game or take a walk. These are times where distant analogies can happen — meaning something on the board game might provide an idea regarding the current project. Something in a book might connect two ideas together. A walk might allow for viewing of new concepts."

When Sawyer talks to corporations about creativity, he always emphasizes the importance of making employees take all of their vacation time.

"Many people don't take their vacation and they end up rolling over all of their off time. If I were a senior manager, I would make everyone take all of their vacation time," Sawyer says. "Time away from work is essential for recharging the batteries, so to speak, and to help people

think more creatively on the job. People need freedom in their schedule for idle time."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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