

SMALL TOWN BIG DREAMS

**An insight into how the COVID-19
pandemic has affected the creative
industries & how to stay positive
during times of uncertainty**

A research project by Small Town Big Dreams in conjunction with Belfast Design Week 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact across the globe across all industries. As a creative business focused organisation we wanted to understand how other creatives have been affected by the pandemic as well as how they have coped with the situation that has been forced upon us.

We hope this publication will help creatives find a better understanding of how others are coping with the changes to help you navigate confidently through these times of uncertainty.

While difficult for many, we hope our insights help inspire a new way of creativity as we move into the future.

Researcher
Dr Brian Dixon, *Ulster University*

If there's an activity you used to love but have since left by the way side, it may be time to pick it back up again.

You might surprise yourself.

Scale of Impact

Different creatives have been affected in different ways. Where do you sit on our scale?

FLYIN' IT

These folks may be rare but a few creatives have found that the pandemic has helped them change direction for the better, whether by finding new audiences for their work via social media or successfully launching completely new initiatives like online teaching. Examples vary but include some crafters and therapists who focus on applying creative methods in their work.

If you fall into this group you probably don't need to check our 'ways of coping' and 'ways of hoping' below, but do anyways!

DOING WELL ENOUGH

For some creatives, things are going quite well. Those falling to this group have been able to continue working as before, (apart from a few inevitable blips). For them, there has been no real slow down and they are possibly even a little busier than before. It may also be the case that they discovered or 'rediscovered' creative outlets that they had overlooked or let lie dominant. Examples here include architects, artists and illustrators.

If you fall into this group you may benefit from checking out our 'ways of coping' but you probably don't need our 'ways of hoping' below. Have a wee look at both though. You never know.

DOING THE SAME

Though they may be rare, for some creatives things are more or less as they were with some minor adjustments. Examples here will include organisations that have already established a successful remote working culture such as games design and IT companies.

If you fall into this group you'd probably get something out our 'ways of coping' if not our 'ways of hoping' below, but sure have a look at both anyways.

DOING A BIT WORSE

For some, the pandemic has meant that, while they may be able to continue working, their work has been badly impacted by the pandemic. Many of the group we spoke to fall into this category. It is likely that their industry relies somewhat on events and face-to-face interaction. They may have found ways around the restrictions but things aren't as they were before. Examples range from photographers, to videographers, to arts organisations.

If you fall into this group you probably would get something out of our 'ways of coping' and 'ways of hoping' below. Do have a look!

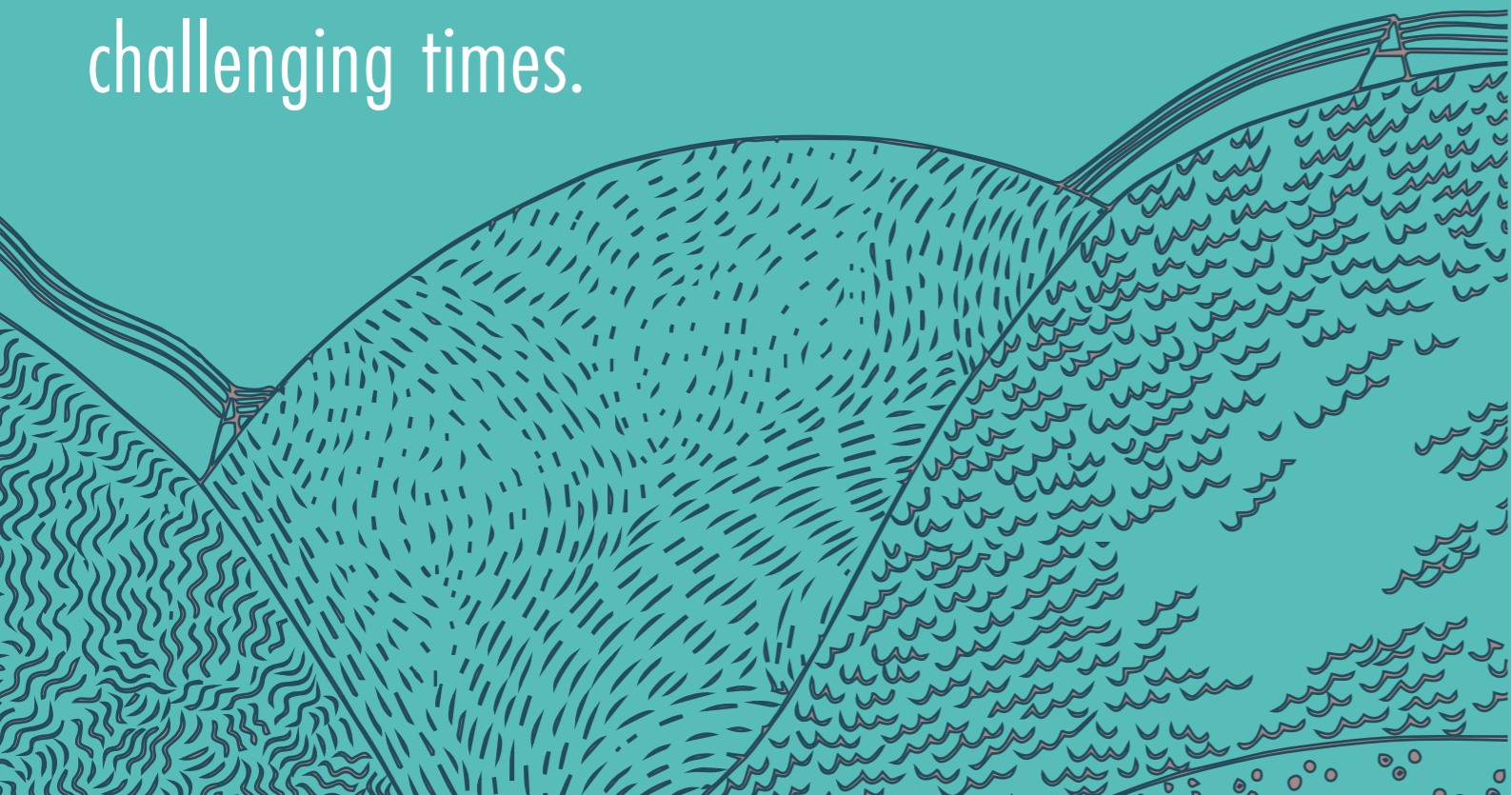
COMPLETELY DEVESTATED

For some, things have gone really badly and their entire industry has shut down with no obvious end in sight. Examples include those in the film and music industries where face-to-face interaction is nearly essential.

If you fall into this group you should check out our 'ways of coping' and 'ways of hoping' below. We can't promise any solutions but you never know, there, may be a wee nugget in there that helps. Stay strong!



Lockdown and arrival of the pandemic have been difficult for everyone. As you can see on our scale, some are suffering worse than others. No matter where you sit, it's important to find 'ways of coping' both with the restrictions and the general uncertainty. Here are some tips that our local creatives have found helpful as they've tried to navigate these challenging times.



FIND A WAY TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR LOCAL AREA ALL OVER AGAIN

Lockdown has limited our range more than we ever imagined possible. Many of the creatives we spoke to noted how they had developed a strong new relationship with where they live—regularly going for walks along familiar, much-loved routes or discovering places they hadn't known had existed. Some were learning to pay attention more and finding new sources of inspiration in the ordinary. If we're stuck somewhere we might as well try to find ways of enjoying it.

GET YOUR ROUTINE ON!

It may seem like an incredibly dull suggestion and certainly isn't something that will work for everyone but some of our creatives found that having a degree of routine to their day was very helpful. Though, admittedly, the strictness of these routines varied. Some people liked doing particular things at particular times—going for a walk at a certain time, making dinner at a certain time. Some even got dressed as if they were going into a professional setting! Others approached routine more open-endedly but did make sure to do certain positive things regularly, saying this helped with productivity. It seems that finding your ideal rhythm and sticking to it can be a good thing—who would have thought!

DISCOVER A PASSION

Many people have used the time of lockdown to engage in activities they may never have even considered exploring otherwise. One of our creatives took up writing a daily poem. Another took up sea swimming, something which they had never done before. These activities have helped our creatives 'get through' lockdown, both emotionally and physically. Who knows, for some, this may mark the start of a lifelong passion, changing both how they see themselves and how they view the world.

LEARN TO UNPLUG

This brave new world of being almost 100-percent online for everything, i.e., work and our social lives, means that we may forget to unplug. But for our general health regularly stepping offline is essential. Some of our creatives noted how they sometimes left their phone at home when they went for a walk so as to avoid checking email. Others, a married couple who are also business partners, noted that they had agreed not to talk about work over dinner. The point is that if we make the effort to unplug every so often we will be able to return to our online existence refreshed and recharged.

REDISCOVER A PASSION

Some creatives had open diaries for the first time in years. Not knowing what to do they revisited old passions that had lain dormant for far too long. Some picked up on long-abandoned art practices, others returned to music. If there's an activity you used to love but have since left by the way side, it may be time to pick it back up again. You might surprise yourself.

GET SOCIAL (WITH DISTANCE)

We may not be able to visit and meet up with our friends and family in the way we used to. Guidelines are continuing to change and are sometimes confusing. Our creatives did mention how much they valued maintaining social links. Whether that was talking to other creatives online or finding ways of meeting with friends that work within the guidelines. The important point is make sure we're staying connected to friends and family and doing so safely. It may take a bit of effort but if we take the time to link up with those we care about we'll all be the better for it.

Things are difficult now but they will get better. No matter where you sit on our scale and how much you've been impacted by the current crisis, it's important to remain resilient and find 'ways of hoping' and looking to the future with some positivity. These are some insights that we've drawn from our local creatives which point to the possibility of something like better times ahead.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN BE YOUR NEW BEST FRIEND

It won't work for everyone but social media has been a lifeline for some creatives. The public are spending more time online and are actively seeking novel products and services. As a result, the role of social media has expanded and become even more important than it was before (if that was even possible). Many of our creatives mentioned how offering positive messaging and engaging with their audiences had led to increased followers and sales. Even if this doesn't happen, there's still the opportunity to see how others are representing themselves and telling their stories online. More than ever, this matters. More than ever, we have to 'get social'.

NEW NETWORKS ARE OPENING UP

During lockdown, the role of geography in our lives was completely disrupted. On the one hand, our movements have been severely restricted. When normally we might travel hundreds of miles in any given month we were limited to our immediate neighbourhoods. On the other hand, attending an industry get together in Brisbane or Vancouver is no longer off the cards, in the way it would have been before (even if the time differences remain a killer). As a result, new online communities are forming, people are able to make wider national and international connections than would have happened otherwise. Just think, you can attend a conference in New York from the comfort of your Belfast kitchen and you don't have to speak up to ask a question—you

can just write it in the chat. We feel there's loads of exciting possibility here for networking in wholly new ways. Don't forget to take advantage of these exciting opportunities that are suddenly available to us through the world-wide-web (as it was once called).

NOW IS A TIME TO RE-EVALUATE WHAT YOU DO

For some, the pandemic has meant that, for the first time in a long time, they have time to think. For some of our creatives, this has been a very welcome opportunity to reflect on what matters, what they value and how they want things to work in the future. One group mentioned that they had used the time to draw up a list of rules they will operate going forward. These were fairly open-ended but seem to offer a useful framework for managing the work-life balance and stress in general. It may help to have a go at seeing if you can identify a new way of operating post-pandemic, aiming to 'build back different'.

THE RIGHT WEBSITE CAN OPEN UP NEW REVENUE STREAMS

Again, you may not have a 'product' to sell but for those who do, many have used lockdown to establish a strong online presence through a robust ecommerce website, allowing them to sell directly to their customers for the first time. Many seem to be doing well. For some this has cut out the middle man (i.e., stockists and retailers). For others, online has come to sit side by side with a 'bricks and mortar' store. As with social media, the public are going online like never before and you want to be there to greet them.

THERE MAY BE UNSEEN OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CRISIS

Understandably, we tend to focus on the negatives during times like this. After all, whether its rising case numbers or unemployment figures, it's not hard to find bad news if we go looking for it. Some of our creatives were however able to identify the potential for positive developments on the horizon. One illustrator noted that there had been a huge rise in digital work during the pandemic. One marketing professional noted that while, down the line, in-house creative budgets may get cut this would open the door to more freelance work. These are, of course, industry-specific examples but they point to the fact that if we look hard enough there will always be a hopeful opening somewhere, even if it's only the suggestion of a possibility, it may lead to our next lucky break.

NOW IS A TIME TO REINVENT YOURSELF

For some lockdown and the pandemic has made them reconsider what it is they offer in terms of products and services. Some have found that new niche markets have emerged for particular goods (e.g., cards with supportive and comforting messages). Others have taken somewhat bolder steps and decided to use the time to develop an offering that they had previously been unable to give any time or attention to. In one case, someone developed special online classes. We recommend you take a moment to step back and ask yourself: Is there something I could do that's different? It could come to define you for some time to come.

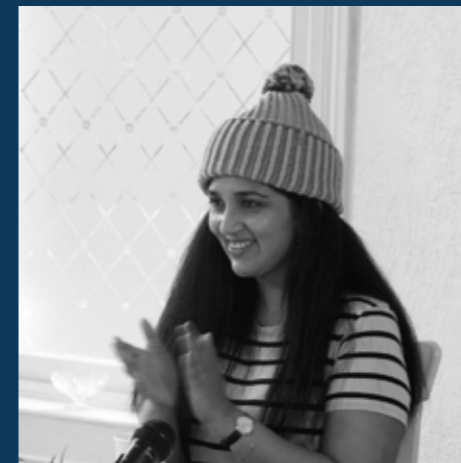
We hope that our insights and tips have given you a fresh and positive mind-set as you continue to navigate you and your business through the COVID-19 pandemic.

We know that times are difficult, and for some more than others, but we encourage you to really try these steps and use these times of uncertainty to come back more invigorated the before.

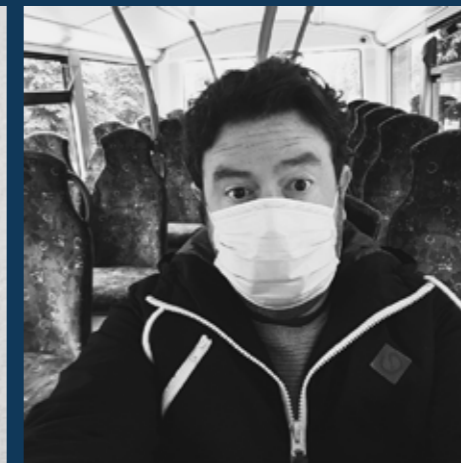
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**THERE MAY
BE UNSEEN
OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE CRISIS.**

DON'T GIVE UP.