

A workshop background with tools on a wall and a workbench. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white circle.

We Are All Creators Now

And We Are Creating
a New Indie Capitalism
Bruce Nussbaum

You hear it all the time, especially when you travel. What does America make these days? Besides maybe weapons, do you make anything at all?

You may have balked at such criticism before. After all, wasn't your iPad designed in Cupertino? Isn't it better to outsource manufacturing and concentrate on services? Haven't economists and business school professors been telling us it's a competitive advantage to get out of the business of making and into the business of thinking, analyzing, strategizing and trading?

But lately you've begun to question that wisdom. You've read the news—headlines like “Wall Street and the big banks take 40% of all corporate profits in America.” You've asked yourself, how could nearly half of all the profits of all the companies in the country have gone to banks? How come people who trade “financial instruments” take home multi-million dollar bonuses when so much of the rest of the country is out of work? The millionaires, the billionaires, just buy and sell. They are traders, neither makers nor builders. And they are the richest people in the country. Maybe, you've begun to think, the critics have a point.

And finally you come clean. You look at your clothes, your cell phones, your tablets, your toys, your TVs and your—everything! And you see that nearly all are made in China or somewhere in Asia, and you think maybe they're right. Our corporations have outsourced everything. What does America make anymore?

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I'll tell you what we're making. We are building a new kind of capitalism from the ground up. The construction site is located far below the radar of the mainstream press. Our policymakers in Washington don't have a clue that a new foundation is being laid down, brick by brick. And our competitors have grown so familiar with navigating their way through the crumbling edifice of crony capitalism that they can't see what's emerging from the rubble—yet. But look to the edges of our economy, look to the new models and practices being developed by our young, look to energy of our entrepreneurs, and look to the subtle shifts of our most progressive corporations and you can see something emerging. You can see the rise of Indie Capitalism.

This is a Manifesto for all those creators who are making Indie Capitalism a reality. It's for those who recognize that creation is central to creativity and that creativity is central to economic value, growth and jobs. It's for you because you have been creating for a while now—even if you don't realize it. Some create things quietly. Many make things secretly. Some of you never stopped playing the way you did when you were a child—only now you've brought the joyful process into your work. A lot do it without even calling it “creativity.”

I know creating hasn't been easy. For starters, there are a lot of ideas about creativity out there, many of them myths. People think you are either creative or not. Not true. Everyone can learn to increase their creative capacity and make creativity routine. People think you can't measure creativity. Not true. Just look at shows like *Dancing With The Stars* and *Project Runway*; look at the Olympics or any field in which expert judges weigh in on the offerings and performances of creative professionals. People think that creativity is only about painting and music and literature and film. Not true. Creativity is thriving in fields as varied as engineering, science, sports, healthcare, education, and even warfare. People think creativity has no place in business. Not true. Creativity is what generates the greatest profits and those of you who have made new products or started new companies understand this.

Creativity also generates a different kind of profit—one that can't be split up, traded or swapped.

You like creating because it makes you feel real—authentic, grounded—and it allows you to build your own future your own way. And that’s a good thing because we live in (to borrow an acronym from the US military) a “VUCA” world. It’s Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, and Ambiguous. It’s changing all the time and the only way for you to succeed in a VUCA world is to create your own future. You have to be brave.

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Bravery in a VUCA world means looking for opportunity in unlikely places and amassing as many skills and as much knowledge as you possibly can. Many of you have been double-majoring in college and jumping from job to job after graduation because you know that no one knows exactly what the future needs just yet. You may have been going to Maker Faires showing off the cool stuff you—or your kids—made. Or you’ve been designing your own shoes and T-shirts online, taking amazing photos on Instagram and putting together photo albums to share

with your friends. You've dived deep into DIY and now you're aching for a 3D printer to play with and make stuff at home.

And for those of you putting in hours at your desk working in the “knowledge economy” and wondering if is this all there is... well, the answer is NO! There is so much more. The uncertainty and change around us provides incredible opportunity if we seize it. In 1942, economist Joseph Schumpeter popularized the notion of creative destruction, arguing that entrepreneurial activity was crucial to innovation. The financial capitalism that we all know today has very little to do with many of the early visions of capitalism, where creativity and economic value went hand in hand and uncertainty was as unavoidable aspect of innovation. These early thinkers knew that the death of businesses and industries that were no longer working was key as newer, better businesses rose to take their place.

Today, newer, better businesses are often the ones you're building in your basement or garage in your spare time—not for the money, but for the love. They're the ventures springing up in established corporations when people from different silos, or from different businesses or industries altogether, pool together knowledge and resources to create a product that neither could have dreamed up on their own.

The people driving Indie Capitalism possess a Creative Intelligence that is not born, but rather cultivated by engaging in the following five creative competencies:

1. Knowledge Mining. The knowledge at the foundation of Creative Intelligence is not the kind that can be found on standardized tests. Entrepreneurs, creative thinkers, and artists are in touch with what's truly meaningful to people—beginning with themselves. They understand that what matters to one generation or demographic may mean little to another. They don't focus on “unmet needs” when it comes to developing new ideas; they use their own experiences and aspirations as starting points. When their own experience isn't enough, they partner with people who are more embedded in a culture than they are. And they connect. Creators know how to cast for ideas, digging into the past and bringing together information from different fields in new and surprising ways.

2. Framing. We all have a story, and understanding what it is and how we present it to others can be critical. We make sense of the world through our narratives—and if we change them, if we reframe our narratives, we can open ourselves to new options and opportunities. Reframe our health care or education systems and you begin to create new and better ways of enabling people to become healthier, and to learn more quickly and deeply.

There are three kinds of Framing: Narrative Framing, which is how we interpret the world; Engagement Framing, which is how we interact with each other; and What-If Framing, how we imagine the future. Understanding how to frame and reframe our understandings about our businesses and our lives is a powerful way to drive disruptive creativity.

3. Playing. It's not just for children. Playing is a complex behavior that drives the creation of life-changing technologies and companies. Creativity can be found in many types of “playground” spaces where people give themselves permission to puzzle out challenges, make up new rules and discover different ways of winning. Playing can often be a better alternative to problem-solving, especially when you don't really know the problem, much less the right solution.

Games are an amazing way to change behavior and get things done, from altering eating habits to getting kids to learn math and history. Playing games and learning how to design games teaches people how to build complex social systems and work within them.

4. Making. For decades, we have been thinking about creativity and design as mental agility, and we have been rewarding people who are good at it. Management consultants, hedge fund traders, and corporate strategists have the highest incomes today. But we're learning to make things once again and you can see evidence of this trend everywhere, from Maker Faires dotting the country to the revival of Made-in-the-USA products. We are learning new ways to

make, from crowdsourcing designed T-shirts to crowdfunding watches, films and games on Kickstarter. Digital fabrication has given us the tools to make at home again, and platforms like Behance are giving us a low-cost, distributed opportunity.

5. Pivoting. We've become used to the notion that creativity is separate from the actual making of things. But truly creative people don't just stop at the idea, they make the pivot to production. What new things have changed our lives in recent years? Google, Facebook, ZipCar, Wikipedia, and Instagram and all came from founders who scaled their creative ideas and pivoted into making them happen. Today's most creative individuals see their work as a calling. They cultivate their charisma and engage an audience in a social movement to make the new.

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The five competencies of Creative Intelligence aren't simply best practices for organizations to transform themselves; they are tools that can help you transform yourself to lead a more reflexive, creative life. They're for people who aren't just interested in becoming more creative, but who want to create things that change our lives. They will not only help you amplify your

creativity, but understanding them will help you better navigate a rapidly changing world and construct a place for yourself in it.

We are learning these competencies to create and, in the process, we are creating Indie Capitalism. We are making an entirely new economic system for ourselves that is more meaningful, richer, and better than what we have now. You know if you've ever been a patron on Kickstarter, one of two million people who pledged nearly \$320 million in 2012 to fund 18,000 projects (including 10% of the Sundance entrees). You know this because you want to start your own company rather than work for a big one. Or you're in a big company and want to become more innovative and agile.

This alternative economic system is not about a lot of things we've come to equate with capitalism. It's not about profiting without sharing. It's not about trading without making. "Winner-take-all" doesn't work here.

You already know what Indie Capitalism IS about.

Indie Capitalism is post-global. It's an economy driven by people who want local values to determine their lives, who want to eat locally grown food, who want their neighbors and friends to have jobs, and who want to make things themselves. Thanks to new technologies like 3-D printing, online platforms like ebay and Etsy, innovative funding models like Kickstarter, as well

as falling energy prices and rising labor costs overseas, this is now possible. Smart American corporations are beginning to catch on and are bringing their production back home.

Indie Capitalism is more participative and less transactional than financial capitalism. It's a model that takes into account that people want to be both makers and consumers, designers and producers. We want to participate in the entire process of creation and capitalism. We don't simply want to "experience." We want to play an active role in making our own experiences.

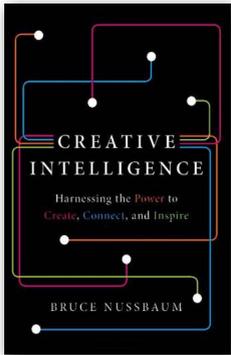
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Indie Capitalism requires a new Creative Arts education system that equips people with the tools of making and discovering. We're learning not just from traditional colleges and universities, but from General Assembly incubator classes, Etsy entrepreneur advice, Apple One-to-One sessions, YouTube videos, MOOCs and friends today. It's disaggregated learning by doing, and John Dewey would be proud of us.

Indie Capitalism is being driven by entrepreneurs and startups that know how to scale, along with those few dynamic corporations that can be nimble and innovative. We are learning that most innovation and job growth comes from the small not the big, the brave not the risk-averse, the original thinker not the efficiency expert. We embrace that notion. We want to live it.

The world thinks we don't make anything. Some Americans think we can't make anything anymore. So let's prove them—and ourselves—wrong. Here's the challenge to all makers and would-be makers: We have the tools, we have platforms, we have the need, and we have the skills. The question is: **Do we have the desire to be creators? Do we have the hunger to build our own lives—our own destiny?** 🏠

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Bruce Nussbaum, former assistant managing editor for *BusinessWeek*, is professor of innovation and design at Parsons School of Design and an award-winning writer. He is founder of the Innovation & Design online channel, and *IN: Inside Innovation*, a quarterly innovation magazine, and blogs at *Fast Company* and *Harvard Business Review*. Nussbaum is responsible for starting *BusinessWeek*'s coverage of the annual International Design Excellence Award and the World's Most Innovative Companies survey. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He taught third-grade science in the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer.

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