

Early Lesson: Flexibility Leads To Creativity At Work

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What do Larry Page, Sergei Brin, Jeff Bezos and Jimmy Wales have in common? The founders of Google ([GOOG](#)), Amazon ([AMZN](#)) and Wikipedia spent their early learning years in Montessori schools.

Learning experts say those formative years at Montessori — a private organization whose tuition runs from \$7,000 for full-day preschool to \$12,000 for grade 6 — were key to their wildly successful careers.

"The greater freedom afforded to children in these nontraditional, learner-centered educational philosophies ensures that their natural instincts to explore and create are not constantly being suppressed," Bhaskar Krishnamachari, a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Southern California and blogger of [An Academic's Freedom](#), told IBD. "The more freedom they experience as children, the more in-tune and connected grown-ups can be with their naturally inventive and exploratory instincts."

Is it too late for adults to benefit from a learning method mostly used with children? No, said Krishnamachari: "I think it's not so much a matter of offering additional school-like training as it is a matter of how the workplace environment is set up, to allow play, interaction, autonomy, and encourage a sense of personal ownership."

- **Stimulate senses.** Montessori children learn grammar via colored shapes representing nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The idea is that we all learn differently, so the materials used in teaching children and adults must stimulate their eyes, ears and hands. "There are many different ways people learn: some auditory, some visual and some are tactile learners," said Dayani Nawagamuwa, founder of Hill Point Montessori in West Hills, Calif. "If materials are presented to stimulate all senses, adults are able to absorb better as they focus with interest."

- **Self-direct.** Montessori students research subjects and write reports in their own way, Nawagamuwa said: "They are thinking outside the box. This way of education will motivate students to think creatively and invent."

For adults in the workplace, Krishnamachari said employers should seek ways to offer greater flexibility: "Empower employees at all levels to have a greater say in what they do and how they go about doing it (so long as they can make a convincing case to their colleagues that they are doing something meaningful and useful)."

- **Loosen up.** At free schools like Summerhill in England and Sudbury Valley in Massachusetts, play is encouraged to boost creativity.

Laid back is also the order of the day at Google and Facebook ([FB](#)) headquarters. Krishnamachari applauds this sense of playfulness: "Workplace environments that are relaxed and informal and allow employees opportunities to show their personal side ... are likely to foster greater creativity."

- **Open dialogue.** Montessori children are encouraged to speak their mind and make logical, convincing arguments. They are taught early on that their opinions count and deserve respect. Try that at work, says Krishnamachari said: "Brainstorming sessions in which ideas are solicited without fear of judgment from peers and superiors are one way to unleash and leverage employee creativity."

- **Learn from mistakes.** By pushing tests, traditional education cultivates a fear of failure, Krishnamachari said: "In contrast, learner-centered educational approaches try to ensure that mistakes are not seen as penalties to be avoided but rather as opportunities for growth . . . (likelier) to result in fearless, self-motivated individuals who can make bold and innovative discoveries."