

Serendipity is more than a 'happy accident', researchers say

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Serendipity – a mysterious phenomenon often thought of as a 'happy accident' - is being investigated by a team of UCL researchers in order to design interactive systems that harness its power.

By collecting and analysing people's 'serendipity stories', researchers at UCL Interaction Centre and their partners hope to design an interactive system that makes us more prepared for recognising serendipity when it happens and, crucially, supports us in acting on it.

In order to understand serendipity better, the team asked 39 academics and creative professionals to tell them their memorable examples of serendipity, either from their work or everyday lives.

The 'serendipity stories' told by their interviewees include a student being offered an internship at a journalism lab because someone from the lab noticed their enthusiastic journalism-related tweets, an experimental chef getting the idea create a sea-salt-cured [mackerel](#) dish when watching his daughter collect stones on the beach and an architecture student watching a BBC documentary on honey bees and getting the idea of using the hexagonal shape of [honeycomb](#) to create a novel building design.

Dr Stephann Makri, UCL Interaction Centre, and a researcher on the project said: "By looking for patterns in peoples' memorable examples of serendipity, we've found that it is more than just a 'happy accident'. It also involves insight – an 'aha' moment of realisation."

This led the team to propose a new definition of the phenomenon based on their findings: serendipity is when unexpected circumstances and an insightful 'aha' moment leads to a valuable and unanticipated outcome.

The researchers suggests that we can reflect on our potentially serendipitous experiences by asking ourselves three questions:

- 1) How unexpected was the experience?
- 2) How much insight was involved?
- 3) How valuable was or do you expect the experience to be?

Dr Makri added: "The people we interviewed benefited from their serendipitous experiences, not only by enhancing their knowledge, but also by saving time – serendipity propelled the [interviewees](#) forwards at a faster pace than they would have traveled otherwise. Everybody can benefit from serendipity if they remain receptive to it and ready to act on it when it happens."

The team are now working on a mobile app aimed at creating opportunities for people to experience serendipity. The researchers highlight, however, that developing digital tools to support serendipity is not an easy task.

"The notion of 'designing for serendipity' is an oxymoron because once we try to 'engineer' it into a system, users may no longer perceive the experience as serendipitous," said Dr Makri. "Designers of interactive systems shouldn't try to offer 'serendipity on a plate.' Instead, they should design tools that create opportunities for users to have experiences they might perceive as serendipitous. This is what we're aiming to do in this project."

Dr Makri's work, co-authored with Professor Ann Blandford, titled 'Coming Across Information Serendipitously', has recently been published as two companion articles in the [Journal](#) of *Documentation*.

Provided by University College London

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