STEP UP YOUR DIGITAL GAME
LESSONS FROM IN-HOUSE CREATIVE TEAMS

AIGA the professional association for design
TCG® THE CREATIVE GROUP
A Robert Half Company
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Today, companies need to innovate to survive. Traditional advertising and marketing channels are losing their influence on consumers. Dynamic, user-friendly apps have raised the bar for what people expect from digital experiences. Retailers face stiff competition from online giants like Amazon. And many brick and mortars fear Silicon Valley-style disruption is right around the corner.

For these and many other reasons, technology is now integral to every part of a business, and creative and marketing teams are playing a bigger role in leveraging it. They’re stepping up to take part in the entire digital customer journey — from developing relevant online ads and targeted email and social media campaigns with customized content to building websites, mobile apps and other sales enablement tools.

Working on such a wide range of digital initiatives is unquestionably a tall order, and we at The Creative Group wanted to find out how creative and marketing teams are rising to the challenge. To do so, we partnered with AIGA, the professional association for design, and Graphic Design USA to conduct a survey of nearly 600 industry practitioners with hiring authority. Leaders weighed in on issues affecting their day-to-day operations, such as organizational structure, agency relationships, innovation and staffing.

To learn how forward-thinking companies are approaching digital initiatives, we also tapped creative leaders at A+E Networks, Microsoft, IBM Watson and other organizations. They told us how their teams are breaking digital ground by implementing new business practices. Even if you don’t have the resources of these big-name brands, you can still scale and adapt many of their strategies to the needs of your organization. Read on to find inspiring case studies, along with highlights and key takeaways from our survey.
HOW GE STEPS UP
PARTNERING ACROSS AND OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

Given the wide range of digital transformation initiatives underway in businesses today, we began our research by trying to answer a basic question, “What is digital, exactly?” As it turns out, the better question might have been, “What isn’t digital?”

Andy Goldberg, chief creative officer at General Electric Co. (GE), has a definite opinion. “Everything has a digital component because that’s the day and age we live in,” he says. “You can’t silo digital.” Goldberg believes doing so can create “tension” between departments, like marketing and digital, if they’re separate entities. A siloed view also makes it tougher to create integrated campaigns that cross both traditional and digital platforms.

To address this reality, Goldberg’s team of 10 embraces cross-departmental collaboration and works to break down any silos within the organization. As a group, they’re responsible for telling big-picture stories about GE that strengthen its reputation as a “digital industrial company” through online videos, TV commercials, live events, social media and other channels. To do this, they constantly partner with internal and external parties.

Goldberg’s group reaches out to the marketing and communications teams in each business division, such as GE Aviation and GE Power, to find GE’s most compelling stories. These groups are closely connected to GE’s products and initiatives, as well as the company’s more than 300,000 employees. Subject-matter experts on Goldberg’s team, who focus on areas such as creative direction and social media, then set the strategic vision for individual projects using the input from the groups mentioned above.

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HELP FROM THE OUTSIDE

Do you partner with external agencies on digital marketing projects?*

64% Yes
37% No

What work do you typically assign to external agencies?

TOP RESPONSES FROM CREATIVES
1. Video production and photography
2. Web design and production
3. Mobile design and development
4. Information architecture and web development
5. Digital marketing strategy

TOP RESPONSES FROM MARKETERS
1. Search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM)
2. Media planning and buying
3. Market research and analysis
4. Digital marketing strategy
5. Marketing automation

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority. *Responses do not total 100 percent due to rounding.
To execute those initiatives, they partner with agencies like BBDO, Giant Spoon and VaynerMedia. That approach gives GE access to a wide range of skill sets and keeps the global giant’s marketing fresh in the ever-changing digital landscape. “You often find the biggest insights from people who are not in your walled garden,” Goldberg says. “Collaborating with agencies can also help you avoid a ‘rinse-and-repeat’ approach to work.”

**CLIENT-AGENCY RELATIONSHIP HURDLES**

Creative and marketing professionals shared their biggest challenges when working with agencies. Here’s a snapshot of their responses, along with ideas for overcoming them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHALLENGE</th>
<th>SOLUTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They don’t understand our brand or customer.</td>
<td>Take the time to document brand guidelines that cover everything from logos and fonts to customer personas. Include “do’s and don’ts” to avoid common brand usage mistakes. Share the information with agencies and freelancers, and offer to clarify any information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope creep is inevitable.</td>
<td>Develop a one-page creative brief for projects you’re handing off to people outside your company. Outline the goals, timeline, deliverables and budget, as well as what assets you’ll supply (such as images or copy) versus what the agency is responsible for providing (design or programming, for example).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal and external creative teams aren’t in sync.</td>
<td>Schedule a kickoff meeting for project leads and individual contributors from both parties. Review the creative brief, offer to answer questions and bounce around ideas, if time permits. That sets a collaborative tone and helps ensure everyone is on the same page.</td>
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Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority
ORGANIZING TEAMS FOR SPEED, AGILITY AND CHANGE

Some creative teams are taking a page straight out of the Silicon Valley playbook to overhaul how they are organized and operate. That page is titled “Agile.”

The Agile framework has long been a popular project management approach among software development groups, but it’s still a new concept to many creatives.

Bob Calvano, who has Agile experience, advocated for the model to be introduced to A+E Networks when he joined the company as vice president of design. A+E Networks’ designers shifted from working on one brand (for example, History.com) to becoming part of a centralized design team on the digital side of the business.

Each day, the 14 designers who report to Calvano work as part of small, Agile-focused teams that include product owners, developers and quality assurance professionals. Together, they’re building iOS and Android apps, as well as a suite of video-on-demand offerings for devices like Roku, Apple TV and Fire TV — all to deliver A+E Networks’ content in new ways.

These project-focused teams allow for increased interaction between functions, such as design and development. As a result, the company can build and launch better products faster. But the work doesn’t end there. Calvano’s designers collaborate with cross-disciplinary teams to gather real-world feedback — from customers and user data — to iterate new versions of products. This process ensures that A+E Networks is always planning with an eye toward the future rather than playing catchup.

“‘It’s a perpetual evolution over here,’” says Bob Calvano, vice president of design at A+E Networks. “The digital industry changes so fast that you need a team mindset that’s very open to change and transition.”

WHAT IS AGILE?

Agile is a philosophy that comes from software development. It emphasizes a set of core principles, such as self-organizing. An Agile work process often involves cross-disciplinary teams, ongoing collaboration and continuous delivery.

Want to learn more about Agile? Here are a few resources:

• Agile 101 offers an overview of Agile, including a short history and key concepts, from Agile Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing Agile development principles and practices.

• Stack Overflow is an online community for software developers and features active discussions about Agile. Type “agile” in the search box or post a question to start learning.

• Agile Project Management: A Complete Beginner’s Guide to Agile Project Management is a good first book for understanding core Agile principles and how to apply them to digital projects.
HOW MICROSOFT STEPS UP
MAKING INNOVATION A MUST

How do you help your creative team keep an innovative mindset when they’re under daily deadline pressure? If you’re Joe Hallock, principal design manager at Microsoft, you make it a part of the job.

Hallock heads up a team of 10 interaction, user experience (UX) and visual designers within the company’s Windows and Devices organization. His approach is to structure the team’s workload so that they stay busy and productive but still have time to explore innovative ideas. Hallock does this by having the group tackle projects with three time frames in mind: the next few weeks, the next six months and the next three years. Each time frame requires team members to use a different creative muscle.

The first time frame applies to projects the team is currently working to finalize. Designers focus on making last-minute feature improvements, fixing accessibility and localization issues, and ensuring that visual fit and finish meet the team’s high-quality bar.

When the team takes a six-month outlook, projects are at a much earlier stage. “The designs here build on our previous work while exercising the company’s vision for the future,” explains Hallock. At this point, the design team is starting new work on an existing product. They begin by building a series of storyboards, design mock-ups and short video vignettes that illustrate a broad vision for the product’s next release. There’s heavy emphasis on concepts versus details.

Finally, there’s a three-year milestone — and this is where innovation really happens. Unlike the first two time frames, it’s an exercise rather than a real project, but one that’s based on a real-world scenario. “Innovation is more rewarding — and a lot more fun — when we design for real customer problems,” Hallock says. The team imagines how one of the company’s products might look three years in the future, but they won’t move right into building it.

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BARRIERS TO DIGITAL ADOPTION

Creative and marketing professionals revealed their biggest challenges in collaborating with each other and the IT department to bring digital ideas to life. Many of the responses highlight why it’s so hard to make strides in the right direction:

• “People [at the company] talk about wanting innovation, but truly innovative ideas are considered awkward, or ‘not what we should do now.’”
• “IT infrastructure cannot always support innovative initiatives.”
• “There’s a lack of knowledge regarding new technology trends and how to implement or support them.”
• “People discuss what can’t be done, rather than what can.”
• “The biggest hurdle is budgeting enough resources to new projects.”

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority
Think of the third stage as a big-picture brainstorming activity with a question, a deliverable and a deadline. The team might produce a video, for example, illustrating how Microsoft’s wide portfolio of hardware, software and services weave through someone’s personal and professional day.

Keeping these three time frames constantly in mind requires Hallock’s team to use different parts of the brain while managing and planning for current, near-term and future business requirements.

3 TIPS TO AVOID BECOMING A WORKAHOLIC

If you’re one of the many creative professionals logging more than 50 hours a week, what can you do to find a better work-life balance? Try these three tips:

1. **Set boundaries.** If you don’t want to find yourself in the “live to work” group, you must create clear boundaries. That may mean leaving the office by 6 p.m. every day, blocking time to exercise during your lunch break or simply making sure to “unplug” from work on weekends.

2. **Delegate, delegate, delegate.** Even if you’re a team of one, you don’t have to go it alone. Ask colleagues in other departments (with their managers’ permission) for help proofing digital ads or running analytics reports — even if it means you must provide some training. Or, find out if you can get support from a freelancer.

3. **Set time goals.** Identify the most important tasks on your to-do list, then set a timer for 90 minutes and strive to turn out a specific deliverable, like a webpage design or social media visual, during that designated time frame.

TOO OVERWORKED TO INNOVATE

Inventing something new means carving out time to explore. But the creative and marketing professionals who responded to our survey report that they are already working overtime:

- Work 50+ hours a week
- 31%
- Think they work more hours than colleagues in other departments
- 47%

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority
HOW IBM WATSON STEPS UP
AVOIDING A DEADLY DIGITAL HIRING SIN

The biggest mistake you can make when hiring people to support digital initiatives: believing in unicorns or purple squirrels — that is, ideal employees who simply don’t exist in real life.

“It’s extremely rare to find people who are good at everything,” says Carol J. Smith, senior design manager at IBM Watson. “Being good at everything from research to visual design to coding isn’t realistic. You might find someone who can talk about those things, but being accomplished at them is unlikely.”

Instead, Smith says she focuses on finding “T-shaped” individuals. That might be someone who has deep expertise in interaction design, for example, but who can also execute on research and user experience.

At IBM Watson, Smith oversees a team of design researchers, interaction designers and visual designers who each bring a different skill set to the table. Each day, they work on small, cross-disciplinary teams that may include front-end developers, back-end developers and project managers. These teams cover the wide skill set needed to build digital products for IBM.

Not tackling something quite so complex? It’s still a good idea to set realistic expectations for the deliverables and skill set of each team member. You probably shouldn’t expect your web designer to be an analytics guru or SEO expert, for example. Instead, plan your work around your resources and talents. Then, fill in the gaps with permanent or freelance talent as your budget allows.

“Top digital candidates are in high demand and often field multiple job offers,” says Diane Domeyer, executive director of The Creative Group. “Once you find a good candidate, make your best offer immediately, so you don’t lose out to another company.”

SPEED COUNTS

Research by Robert Half, parent company of The Creative Group, underscores why it’s important for employers to move fast:

- **69%** of job seekers lose interest in a company if they don’t hear back within two weeks after the initial interview.
- **39%** say a hiring process lasting 7–14 days is too long.

Source: Robert Half survey of more than 1,000 U.S. adults currently employed in professional environments.
# CAN I GET A HAND?

70% of creatives said their teams are understaffed

64% of marketers said their teams are understaffed

If you could add new team members, in what areas would you hire?

## TOP RESPONSES FROM CREATIVES
1. Web design and production
2. Print design and production
3. Project management
4. Video production and photography
5. Creative and art direction

## TOP RESPONSES FROM MARKETERS
1. Digital marketing strategy
2. SEO and SEM
3. Marketing data analytics (tie)
4. Content development and management (tie)
5. Social media (tie)

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority

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# GOOD TALENT IS HARD TO FIND

71% of creative and marketing professionals say it’s challenging to find talent with up-to-date digital skills

What are the technical skills most lacking on your team?

## TOP RESPONSES FROM CREATIVES
1. Web design and production
2. Print design and production
3. Project management
4. Video production and photography
5. Creative and art direction

## TOP RESPONSES FROM MARKETERS
1. Data science, data analysis and A/B testing
2. Web and UX design
3. Content creation and content marketing
4. SEO, SEM and pay-per-click (PPC) marketing

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority
There’s no way around it: To develop and launch digital initiatives, companies must engage professionals with a range of technical skills. But where do you turn when you need to find people with those abilities? And how do you ensure new and current team members play well with the tech-centric talent who are essential to executing digital initiatives successfully?

Approaches vary widely. Many creative and marketing professionals told us they struggle to collaborate with their IT colleagues. Bigger companies may have a separate development or technology team. But no matter which banner they work under, technical professionals often don’t speak the same language as colleagues outside their department.

It’s a challenge J. Dontrese Brown, chief creative officer of J. Dontrese Creative, knows well. When he worked as a creative leader at Capital One, his team developed a better user experience for a bank location app. His group collaborated with marketing on creative strategy and a digital group (composed of developers and UX and product development professionals) that would execute the design concepts.

“We’d love the design, marketing would love the design, but then the digital team would say, ‘It doesn’t work,’” Brown recalls.

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To bridge the communication gap, he hired someone with a digital-first mindset who could think through issues, such as coming up with a design that works for mobile and desktop, and then could talk through technical details with the digital team.

In other cases, creative and marketing leaders want to add more professionals with hard skills — for example, those who specialize in launching email marketing campaigns or analyzing data. “There’s strong demand for professionals who can improve customer experiences and create measurable ROI, like UX designers, digital strategists and e-commerce marketing managers,” says Diane Domeyer, executive director of The Creative Group. “Companies are paying competitively when they identify digital-savvy professionals who are a good fit for their organization.”

MODERN DIGITAL ROLES

What new job titles have you added to your team in the past two years?

• Augmented reality (AR) manager
• Business intelligence engineer
• Digital analyst
• Digital engagement manager
• Emerging media coordinator

Source: The Creative Group survey of nearly 600 creative and marketing professionals with hiring authority
There’s a lot of pressure to keep up and get ahead of competitors in today’s digital world. Yet, in this crucible of staffing digital initiatives, there are also tremendous opportunities. Applying even one or two strategies to your business can lead to your next digital win.

As you evaluate and develop your digital strategy, also consider the benefits of connecting with a specialized staffing firm. The Creative Group can serve as a complete staffing solution for all the personnel resources you need for an array of digital projects on a project or full-time basis. And, through our Creative Managed Services group, we can connect you with resources and project management for strategic initiatives like web and mobile design and development, UX, and content systems design and migration.

Remember that change is the only constant. Your ability to accept that fact — and face it with a flexible management strategy — just might be the biggest secret to stepping up your digital game.

To learn more about tackling digital challenges, view our “Guide to Digital Marketing Strategies & Staffing.”

### 5 TIPS FOR BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

1. Collaborate with internal departments and external agencies.
2. Develop Agile, cross-functional teams that can move rapidly.
3. Prioritize creativity by structuring time for innovation into team members’ schedules.
4. Hire “T-shaped” individuals who have deep expertise in a single area and can collaborate across disciplines.
5. Encourage ongoing communication among creative, marketing and IT.
EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS

We’d like to acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to this project:

J. Dontrese Brown, Chief Creative Officer, J. Dontrese Creative
Bob Calvano, Vice President of Design, A+E Networks
Diane Domeyer, Executive Director, The Creative Group
Andy Goldberg, Chief Creative Officer, General Electric Co.
Joe Hallock, Principal Design Manager, Microsoft
Carol J. Smith, Senior Design Manager, IBM Watson

ABOUT THE CREATIVE GROUP

The Creative Group (TCG) is a leader among creative and marketing staffing agencies. We specialize in connecting interactive, design, marketing, advertising and public relations talent with the best companies. As a division of Robert Half, TCG offers flexible solutions to meet companies’ freelance, direct-placement, consulting and project employment needs. For more information, please call 855.972.6906 or visit creativegroup.com.

ABOUT AIGA

AIGA, the professional association for design, advances design as a professional craft, strategic advantage and vital cultural force. As the largest community of design advocates, AIGA brings together practitioners, enthusiasts and patrons to amplify the voice of design and create the vision for a collective future. AIGA defines global standards and ethical practices, guides design education, inspires designers and the public, enhances professional development, and makes powerful tools and resources accessible to all. Learn more at aiga.org.

ABOUT GRAPHIC DESIGN USA

Since 1963, Graphic Design USA (GDUSA) has been the news and information source for graphic designers and other creative professionals. Today, it reports on design news, people, projects, trends, technology, products and services in print and online. The magazine is free in print and digital editions to creative professionals within the United States. Learn more at gdusa.com.